



Service as a **Strategy**

Promoting Democracy

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Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP) is a non-profit social change organization that supports the development of innovative, high-quality youth civic engagement policies and programs both in the US and around the world. Founded in 2001, ICP is dedicated to creating opportunities for young people to change their communities for the better and build essential skills for future success. Funded through a multi-year grant from the Ford Foundation, we partner with individuals and organizations around the globe to stimulate innovation around two civic engagement strategies: national youth service and service-learning. At ICP, we believe that well-structured youth service programs can provide innovative solutions to social and environmental issues, while helping young people develop skills for future employment and active citizenship. For more information, visit www.icicp.org.

In his commencement address at Calvin College, President Bush spoke about service and democracy. Central to his speech was the idea that when we become active in our communities, we move beyond our narrow interests and acquire the "habits of heart" that are so vital to a free society. President Bush called upon the next generation of leaders to enrich their lives and build a more hopeful future for our world by forming associations dedicated to serving others. In short, the President was talking about the power of service as a strategy to accomplish societal good.¹

For a democracy to thrive, a nation's youth must be prepared and willing to take their place as active, principled adult citizens. From voting to engaging in political discourse, to understanding how political

"We must understand that it is by becoming active in our communities that we move beyond our narrow interests... To make a difference in this world, you must be involved."

*President George W Bush
21 May 2005
Calvin College
Commencement Address*

systems operate, each successive generation must have the tools necessary to properly shape and participate in civil society and government. By providing opportunities for young people to actively address community needs in a structured format, youth service is an effective way for young people to develop these tools. The participatory aspect of service contributes to a heightened understanding of the forces that shape governments and societies, leading to greater transparency, accountability, and improved governance. Empowering young people to play an active role in community development allows democracy to evolve according to the needs and traditions of diverse political cultures. Because it is a collective activity, service has the power to transcend traditional social divides, foster bonds of trust, and develop an ethic of working for the common good. Many consider the resulting social capital crucial to a healthy democracy.² Robert Putnam offered, "All our societies need more social capital...and in my view the single most promising area of initiative is youth service."³

The United States government has invested significantly in youth service as an important

strategy for strengthening democracy at home. Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP) has prepared this document to illustrate how youth service programs are an underutilized, but equally effective vehicle for shifting transitional democracies toward healthy democratic functioning abroad.

Creating the opportunities and infrastructure for programs and policies to engage young people requires a commitment of resources over time, but should be an essential component of any effort to build healthy democracies.

SERVICE AS A STRATEGY FOR BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

Service has a long tradition in the United States. It was almost a century ago that philosopher William James spoke of service as "the moral equivalent of war."⁴ Since that speech in 1906, presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush have proposed that Americans serve both here and abroad to improve conditions for individuals and communities in need of support. They recognized that service makes better citizens and that government – in conjunction with community-based institutions – has a role to play in solving our most intractable problems.

In 1933, President Roosevelt spoke to Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) members in Warm Springs, Georgia and told them that "You are rendering a real service, not only to this community but to this part of the State and the whole State...more important, however, than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work."⁵ President Kennedy's Peace Corps proposal outlined many of the principles embodied in subsequent government funded service programs:

In establishing our Peace Corps we intend to make full use of the resources and talents of private institutions and groups. Universities, voluntary agencies, labor unions and industry will be asked to share in this effort ... making it clear that the responsibility for peace is the responsibility of our entire society.⁶

In his State of the Union Address after September 11, 2001, President Bush called on every young person in America "to commit at least two years—4,000

hours over the rest of your lifetime—to the service of your neighbors and your nation.”⁷ The AmeriCorps program has grown to 75,000 members in FY04—an increase of 50 percent. These AmeriCorps members are helping to recruit and train more than one million community volunteers who will provide tangible benefits to over 10 million Americans in all 50 states. A cost-benefit analysis of AmeriCorps estimates that for every US \$1 spent, the country receives between US \$1.60 and US \$2.60 in return.⁸

From tutoring and mentoring youth to building affordable housing and cleaning parks and streams, federally-funded service programs are addressing important community needs while increasing civic activity at the same time by encouraging participants “to see themselves as problem-solvers, not problems; to become leaders, not just followers; and to take personal responsibility.”⁹ A recent longitudinal study found that participation in AmeriCorps resulted in statistically significant positive impacts on members’ connection to community, knowledge about problems facing their community, participation in community-based activities, and personal growth through service.¹⁰ When talking about service-learning, a particular type of service that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings noted, “Studies have shown that students who participate in these programs demonstrate increased civic and social responsibility and improved academic achievement.”¹¹ A new study on the impact of service-learning on high school students’ civic engagement found that students involved in service-learning are significantly more likely to say they intend to vote.¹²

INVESTING IN YOUTH AND SERVICE AROUND THE WORLD

The United States government has recognized that service is an appropriate tool for youth development, community development, and civic engagement at home. It is an equally appropriate strategy for building healthy democracies abroad. In many developing countries where three-quarters of the population are under the age of 30 with limited access to employment or education and training opportunities, youth service has proven to be a critical intervention.¹³

Although the concept of ‘youth as resources’ is increasingly acknowledged, the

practice of actively engaging youth as full partners in the nation-building process has not yet become an integral component of United States’ efforts to build democracy abroad. We need to recognize young people not simply as the leaders of tomorrow, but also as the leaders of today, playing important roles at local, national, and global levels. In parts of the world where hunger and diseases such as HIV/AIDS are decimating the adult population, teenagers are heading households. In times of conflict, young people are playing heroic roles to bring about democratic change, as in the case of South Africa.

At the same time, there is increasing concern about the status of young people in countries transitioning to democracy. For many of these youth, limited access to employment or education translates into disempowerment and often results in an increased sense of fatalism and weakened initiative. Without positive outlets, destructive behaviors such as drug use, risky sexual behavior, and gang violence all too often fill the void. In parts of the world that are unfamiliar with democratic practice, youth become particularly susceptible to recruitment into militant organizations and sometimes even become martyrs for their causes.

Youth service offers constructive alternatives to destructive behaviors by helping young people to see themselves as positive resources for change. By providing young people with opportunities to participate in community development and accomplishing tangible and quantifiable results, youth service can play an important role in shifting transitional democracies toward healthy democratic functioning with appropriate attention to cultural norms. What better way is there to ensure a country’s future than to engage its youth in activities that contribute to the public good? Imagine young volunteers working hand-in-hand with and for people of all backgrounds addressing community needs and investing in the development of their nation. Such integrative service has been shown to increase civic activity and heighten understanding of the forces which shape governments and societies.

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Youth service:

- ◆ Is an effective way to develop the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to build strong communities and democratic and participatory cultures.
- ◆ Provides opportunities for young people to play an active role in addressing a wide range of critical community needs.
- ◆ Leads to greater transparency, accountability, and improved governance by empowering young people to play a participatory role in the democracy building process.
- ◆ Transcends traditional social divides, fosters bonds of trust, and develops an ethic of working for the greater good.
- ◆ Provides constructive alternatives to risky options, such as recruitment into militant organizations.
- ◆ Accommodates a wide range of existing skills and levels of education in community service activities (i.e. from clean-up to tutoring).
- ◆ Can be embedded in civil society and fall under the auspices of nongovernmental or religious organizations, or be tied to government, depending on local traditions.
- ◆ Allows democracy to evolve according to the needs and traditions of diverse political cultures.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

The examples below illustrate how the ingenuity, passion, and creativity of ordinary young people around the world can breathe new life into participatory democracy.

In the **West Bank and Gaza Strip**, small clusters of young people are coming together to think about how they can help address problems in their communities through the Popular Achievement program. In one refugee camp where trash removal had stopped, the teenagers chose to hold a clean-up day and lobby the local leadership to install garbage cans in the streets. In another West Bank town, the youth built a library — constructing shelves from donated scrap lumber, collecting books from various civil society organizations, and plying the conscience of a local landowner for space.

“The youth are leading a democratic transformation within our society”

*Tareq el-Bakri
Popular Achievement
Palestine*

Popular Achievement trains youth “coaches” who work with youth aged 14-17 in 22 locales in the West Bank and 21 in the Gaza Strip. In their weekly meetings, they discuss civics, citizenship, and individual efficacy. Eventually, each group of students is asked to choose a community need and determine a

way to address it. They learn to work together in groups, exercise leadership skills, cultivate an ethic of service, and gain experience working with local leadership bodies. Popular Achievement encourages young people to practice being citizens.

Importantly, Popular Achievement has created an opportunity for young men to engage in productive civic activities and for young women to pursue interests outside of the home. The program also helps to emphasize similarities between Palestinian and Israeli young people. The goal of Popular Achievement is to give these young people the confidence and analytical tools they need right now and practice so that they will be able to use them in the future. “The program is very well received because it allows youth to take power when many feel powerless in the face of occupation and local authority systems,” says Program Coordinator Tareq el-Bakri, “The youth are leading a democratic transformation within our society.”¹⁴

In **Pakistan**, where 70 percent of the population is under the age of 29, the Pakistan National Youth Service (PNYS) program is the only program that recognizes young people as major partners in development and engages them in nation-building efforts. Young men and women in the Punjab province have established a theatre group for educational outreach, are working to improve the literacy rates of more than 1,500 women at 50 adult literacy centers in partnership with the district government of Kasur and UNICEF, and have established a youth-led cen-

ter for orphaned children in Green Town Lahore. The PNYS is at an experimental stage, but could potentially be the basis for a nationwide program to develop positive attitudes and an increased sense of unity through shared experiences.¹⁵

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has experienced dramatic changes in recent years. Ethnic conflict, the collapse of a socialist regime, and the split of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia splintered the nation. Today, BiH faces economic stagnation and a severely disrupted social structure. Many young people in BiH feel marginalized, excluded, and ill-prepared to participate in community life. According to the 2003 UN Agencies Report on Youth, 95 percent of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina believe they have little or no influence on political events in their country.¹⁶

In such dire circumstances, service helps catalyze positive changes. OSMIJEH, the Association for Psychosocial Help and Development of Voluntary Work, has mobilized over 6,000 youth that include all members of society. Muslims, Serbs, Croats, and other ethnic groups work side-by-side; local people interact with refugees and displaced people. Young volunteers help reconstruct rural villages, tutor in elementary schools, and care for disabled children and isolated elderly. Youth run radio programs, help with translation, and organize public events, elections, seminars and conferences.¹⁷

Through service programs in BiH, young people work with diverse groups in different settings to address needs that the young government alone cannot. Their increased interaction with all members of society fosters bonds of trust and helps to reconnect divided peoples. Through their services, volunteers develop new skills, learn about the functioning of various institutions, and become more aware of needs in other communities. Perhaps most importantly, service programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina help to combat feelings of hopelessness by providing young people with opportunities to become actively involved in the re-building of their country. By feeling that they can contribute, young people are empowered to do more. Through active participation they grow into responsible citizens.

In **South Africa**, youth service is helping to create a stable environment for democracy by combating HIV/AIDS. Home to the highest number of people living with HIV in the world, the fact that 60% of new HIV infections in South Africa occur in

young people aged 17 to 25 creates the opportunity to substantially curtail the epidemic within a relatively short period of time. To address this need, Nelson Mandela announced the establishment of a national youth service program in February 2002. Known as groundBREAKERS, this program is an important component of loveLife, the leading national HIV prevention program for South African youth. 1,700 18-25 year old groundBREAKERS give one year of service in exchange for personal and professional development. They mobilize and educate youth about HIV/AIDS in geographically isolated regions of the country, link public health clinics and community centers, and participate in other outreach programs. Together with 5,000 children age 12-17 they run motivational programs, promote fitness and healthy sexuality, conduct sports and other activities of interest to young people, and facilitate radio production and broadcasting. Richard Holbrooke, President of the Global Business Council on HIV/AIDS, praised the South African initiative saying, "We need innovative ap-

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*Robert Putnam
Professor of Public Policy
Harvard University*

proaches that target young people directly—that speak their language—and makes safer sex behavior second nature. loveLife is one of the few examples of good practice in the world today."¹⁸

Most post-communist societies struggle with civic apathy, corruption, low social capital, and mistrust.¹⁹ In **Romania**, a recent survey by the Research Institute of Romania revealed that around 50 percent of the population believes that one becomes successful by stealing and breaking the law, 29 percent through personal connections, and 11 percent through luck or fate. Fewer than 10 percent believed that hard work or personal merit were the most important factor.

The Kaizen youth service model is a program designed specifically to help Romania and post-communist youth become actively engaged in the life of their community while developing the competencies necessary for living in a democratic society at the same time. Kaizen, Japanese for "continuous improvement," strives to impart positive

values and develop marketable skills through monthly service projects (ranging from simple trash clean-ups to public education campaigns about corruption), weekly group meetings, and relational learning that focus on honesty and openness.

The Kaizen youth service program worked with Dr. Gabriel Badescu, one of South Eastern Europe's leading social capital scholars, to track participants and develop performance metrics. At the beginning of the program, 9.1 percent of participants indicated that they trusted other people. After one year of Kaizen activity, 45.5 percent of program participants indicated increased levels of trust. One teacher at a local high-school indicated, "I don't have to watch the Kaizen kids. They just don't cheat!"

Democratic change at the highest levels is important, yet insufficient without a strong base of grassroots support for those measures. The participatory aspect of the Kaizen youth service program contributes to a better understanding of the forces which shape governments and is leading to greater transparency, accountability, and improved governance. Thirty-two Kaizen clubs are being launched in Romania in the coming years and the program is being considered for national replication.²⁰

In **The Gambia**, the objectives of the Gambia National Youth Service Scheme include imparting the knowledge, skills, and values that "promote national unity." A response to the recent failures of youth development programs in the country, this state-run program is providing alternatives to unemployment and negative behaviors for youth aged 13-30, which represent 47% of the population. These youth are running an internet cafe and counseling center, participating in agricultural projects in the Sapu and Nyaniberreh regions, and running public awareness campaigns to combat HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. Through these projects, youth are being mobilized and empowered to play an active role in addressing issues affecting their society while developing the skills and values necessary for participating in a healthy democracy.²¹

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, youth around the world have demonstrated the passion and the energy to trigger social movements. It is essential to provide constructive opportunities to engage them. Experience demonstrates that young people in every part of the world are eager to participate in activities that improve their communities and their own lives. What is missing is not motivation and interest from young people, but rather structured opportunities that help young people to develop the skills, knowledge and values necessary to build strong communities and democratic and participatory cultures.

Youth service offers an effective way to engage young people in the process of democracy building while developing citizenship skills and addressing important issues in the community at the same time. In the West Bank, Pakistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, South Africa, Romania, the Gambia, and in other countries around the world, young people are already involved in promising experiments that are breathing new life into participatory democracy. Youth service alone will not bring about democratic reform, but it should be an essential component of any effort to build pluralistic and democratic societies.

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