

NOTES YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



Youth Service: A Strategy for Youth and National Development

All too often youth policies and interventions are designed to deliver services *to* young people, failing to view youth *themselves* as important assets in delivering services to others. **Youth service programs empower young people to play an active role in development while gaining the experience, knowledge, and values necessary for employment and active citizenship.**

Around the world, service programs are enabling young people to build sustainable housing, fight HIV/AIDS, and improve literacy rates through tutoring programs. These efforts challenge portrayals of youth as victims of poverty or problems to society and place them instead at the forefront of promoting development in their communities.



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Today's youth (15–24) constitute the largest cohort ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Nearly 90% live in developing countries and the challenges they face—low quality education, lack of marketable skills, high rates of unemployment, crime, early pregnancy, social exclusion, and the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS infections—are costly to themselves and to society at large. Client demand for policy advice on how to tap the enormous potential of youth is large and growing. This series aims to share research findings and lessons from the field to address these important cross-sectoral topics.

Defining Youth Service

Youth service encompasses a continuum of activities that offer young men and women opportunities to participate in civic life in ways that are intended to benefit themselves and their communities. The range of programs spans from **formal or national service**, consisting of an organized period of substantial engagement, where young people are contributing to their local, national, or world community, in exchange for minimal or no monetary contribution to the participant¹ to **informal service**, which is often the result of an ethic of service to others that is passed on through families, schools, civic organizations and popular culture. More formalized types of service usually take place through the efforts of government programs, employers, nonprofit organizations, and other civil society organizations that see a role for volunteers in achieving their missions. Research suggests that these more organized service programs provide the most benefit to both participants and the community.²

In the most common national service model, young people in their late teens and twenties spend a year working full-time to meet local communities' needs. But within that broad model, details vary considerably from country to country.³ The government might manage programs centrally and provide civil service options as an alternative to military service (Kenya, France, Hungary, Brazil 1967–89); the national government might determine criteria and funding and deliver services through non-governmental organizations (U.S., Hungary, U.K.); or the government might develop national service programs sponsored by various government departments (South Africa, Mexico, Nigeria). Programs also differ in terms of mandatory versus voluntary participation, length of service, and levels of compensation and benefits provided to participants.

An Investment with Many Returns

Youth service can be an effective youth intervention strategy *and* development strategy, providing important returns to the individual and the community, not to mention the important externalities that benefit society as a whole. A review of selected programs in OECD and developing countries provides evidence to this effect:

Returns to the Individual

Service 'employment' experience, even if unpaid, allows young people to gain the knowledge and skills that will facilitate their transition into paid employment.

"All our societies need more social capital . . . and in my view the single most promising area of initiative is youth service."

—Robert Putnam, Harvard University

Whether learning skills through on-the-job training that will serve them in their future career, or simply acclimating to a workplace environment, service can help young people for the workforce. As such, these programs not only serve goals for increasing youth employment, but enhance the overall **employability** of youth. Rigorous impact evaluations of the *US Service and Conservation Corps*—aimed primarily at disadvantaged youth (16–24) looking for a second chance to succeed in life—found that program participants in a 15-month follow up were much more likely to have worked for pay, had worked more hours, and were less likely to be arrested, vis-à-vis the control group.⁴ The *Umsobomvu Youth Fund in South Africa* finances a national service program with the explicit goal of providing youth with service opportunities across a range of sectors to enable young people to develop their skills in order to access employment or generate income.⁵

Youth service provides constructive alternatives to risky behavior, and can provide a mechanism for reintegrating marginalized youth. Out-of-school and unemployed youth are at much greater risk of behaviors that are harmful to themselves and their communities, including crime, gang activities, social unrest, adolescent pregnancy, risky sex, drug and alcohol use. Youth service programs provide a structured environment in which to learn and work, while contributing to important development objectives at a relatively low cost to government or other service providers. A recently completed study⁶ in the US found that service programs were the only intervention among many surveyed that had a measurable impact on reducing teens' pregnancy risk, even if the programs were not focused on sex education. This held true for multiple racial/ethnic groups, in rural and urban settings, and in both middle and high schools.

Participation in service programs empowers young people to become active citizens in addressing a wide range of critical community needs. The recognition of having something to contribute greatly affects their self-esteem and helps youth discount the future more heavily. The



experience of giving to one's community can unleash a virtuous cycle of engagement in activities that strengthen communities and foster a commitment to public service. The *Popular Achievement*³ program in the West Bank and Gaza creates opportunities for young people to engage in productive activities. In one refugee camp, the teenagers held regular clean-up days, and lobbied local leadership to install garbage cans in the streets. In another West Bank town, youth built a library—constructing shelves from donated scrap lumber, collecting books from various civil society organizations, and convincing a local landowner to donate library space. A longitudinal study of *Americorps*⁷ found that participation in the program resulted in statistically significant positive impacts on: i) a participants' connection to their community; ii) knowledge about challenges facing their community; and iii) participation in community-based activities such as attending public meetings and writing to newspapers. The same study also showed that program graduates were significantly more likely to enter public service careers in teaching, public safety, social work, and full-time military service.

Returns to the Community

Lasting change best occurs when communities support youth and youth contribute to their communities. Service programs can be an important—and cost-effective—tool for developing countries with limited budgets and staff in addressing a wide range of development priorities. Project examples include:

- **Combating HIV/AIDS.** In South Africa, the *groundBREAKERS* service program is engaging more than 1,000 unemployed youth aged 18 to 25 in one year of service to link public health clinics and community centers. The groundBREAKERS have also mobilized more than 5,000 mostly out-of-school and unemployed children, or 'mpintshis' (a township slang word for 'friend, 'mate' or 'helper') aged 12 to 17 to educate peers about the risks of HIV/AIDS.⁸
- **Building sustainable housing.** Since 1994, more than 47,000 low-income youth in the United States, South Africa, Serbia, Mexico, and Canada have built houses for homeless and low-income families through the *Youth-Build* program, while studying to complete secondary school, learning to be leaders in their communities, and getting support to make positive change.⁹ In Mexico, *Jovenes Constructores* is operating a similar program.
- **Improving literacy rates.** The *Pakistan National Youth Service* (PNYS) program recently launched a literacy

campaign for educating women in remote, rural areas. PNYS has established 50 female adult literacy centers in both Rawalpindi and Kasur and are educating more than 1500 women per year.¹⁰

- **Protecting the environment.** The *Palawan Conservation Corps* (PCC) in the Philippines has been serving remote communities while simultaneously preserving critical ecosystems on the island. Youth-led projects, involving out-of-school youth, work to reforest areas around communities where erosion and flooding affect livelihoods and food security. Most recently, the planting of a 10,000 square-foot native plant nursery has greatly enhanced the PCC's ability to restore the local wild areas. In Kenya, the *Slums Information Development and Resource Centers* (SIDAREC) is a youth development program that is serving an estimated 500,000 people in the slums of Nairobi. Among other projects, SIDAREC is enabling young people to establish a waste management and recycling center in Pumwani.¹¹

Youth Service: Beyond Human and Physical Capital Objectives

Transcending traditional social divides and fostering bonds of trust. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Association for Psychosocial Help and Development of Voluntary Work, or *OSMIJEH*, has mobilized over 6,000 youth that include all members of society. Muslim, Serbian, and Croatian work side-by-side to tutor, reconstruct villages, care for disabled children, and organize public events through an organized service program. The increased interaction with all members of society fosters bonds of trust and helps to reconnect divided peoples.

Nation-Building. Nigeria created its national service program, the *National Youth Service Corps* (NYSC) after gaining its independence with two principal goals in mind – forging national cohesion and identity among multiple tribal groups, and harnessing young people's skills to contribute to national development. A one-year compulsory program for all Nigerian university and polytechnic graduates, the program requires that corps members work away from their home areas and with other tribal groups. Approximately 710,000 young Nigerians served in the program between 1973 and 1999.

Improved governance. By connecting young people to their communities and encouraging them to play a participatory role, service contributes to a better understanding of the forces which shape government and can play an important role in reducing corruption and promoting democracy.

Source: Alessi, B. (2004) *Service as a Strategy for Children and Youth. Innovations in Civic Participation*; Enemu, F. (2000) *Youth Mobilization for Nation-Building: the Case of the National Youth Service Corps in Nigeria*, paper prepared for the Ford Foundation Worldwide Workshop on Youth Involvement as a Strategy for Social, Economic, and Democratic Development.



- **Building infrastructure.** Service activities undertaken by young participants over a period of 12–15 months in a pilot of South Africa’s *Umsobomvu Youth Fund* program included the labor intensive construction of a road with culverts and drifts necessary to control run-off. Participants also worked on the construction of a multi-purpose center, and the repair of infrastructure in a conservation area.

Returns to Society: Positive Externalities

The examples presented in the previous section provide direct benefits to local communities, but they also serve national priorities and generate significant positive externalities. Most governments are struggling with how to implement effective policies and interventions to address the myriad challenges facing young people today, particularly the poor and marginalized who are generally out of school and out of work. From high levels of unemployment to increasing rates of crime and violence, from adolescent pregnancy to the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS

infections, these challenges represent enormous economic and social costs to society. The values, attitudes and skills acquired by this generation will influence the course of events and shape the future in fundamental ways.

Youth service provides an effective means to address these challenges while meeting national objectives such as improving human capital, reducing unemployment, and providing cost-effective human resources to underserved communities. Yet, the benefits extend far beyond the obvious human and physical capital objectives. These range from reducing the economic and social cost of risky behavior to nation-building and transcending traditional social divides (see box on previous page).

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 them develop the skills, knowledge and values necessary to become productive members of society.

Recommended reading

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4. Jastrzab, J., Masker, J., Blomquist, J., & Orr, L. (1996). *Impacts of Service: Final Report on the Evaluation of American Conservation and Youth Corps*. Abt Associates.
5. Foley, P. (2003) “Youth Service for Employment: The Umsobomvu Youth Fund initiative in South Africa” from *Service Enquiry: Service in the 21st Century*. First edition.
6. Manlove, J., Franzetta, K., McKinney, K., Papillo, A., Terry-Humen, E. (2004). *A Good Time: After-School Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy*. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
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8. Oba, J. (2005) “groundBREAKERS: breaking new ground in HIV prevention” from *Focus*, Volume 1, Number 2. Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa.
9. For more information, visit: www.youthbuild.org.
10. For more information, visit www.pnys.com.
11. For more information, visit <http://www.sidarec.or.ki>.

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