



Putting Youth Engagement Into Practice

A Toolkit For Action



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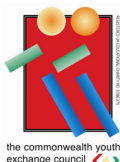
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Foreword

Through the Commonwealth Youth Programme, the Commonwealth has consistently promoted youth empowerment not as a hypothesis but as a strategic pillar of the Commonwealth Secretariat, often pioneering youth development processes. Our member countries, made up overwhelmingly of young people, continue to support our work and turn to us to help maximise their potential.

Young people are everywhere. They are at home, in schools, in clubs, on sports fields, on the streets, in hospitals, in prisons, in business. They are our present and our future. Youth mainstreaming aims to recognise this reality and make youth development everybody's business.

It is precisely because the ages 12-25 are said to be the formative years that society believes that that the youth are the future. It is clear that for society today to ensure that general standards of living are maintained or improved, young people have to be informed and involved in the every day business of living, whether in the home, community or government. Young people must play a part in ensuring that the sweat and toil of generations past does not vanish in a wave of violent conflict, or is not squandered by bad decisions which do not value our full human and physical environment.

The youth today are vibrant, innovative and often naïve, looking forward to a bigger, faster and brighter future which they will own. For their participation to be successful requires a collective effort of the very youngest and the oldest citizen to ensure that young people are afforded the opportunity to shape a positive, common future. They must therefore be equipped with information, expertise, access to power and the humility and humanity to make decisions that benefit all people within their communities, regardless of gender or generation.

The toolkit reflects a common concern for youth mainstreaming, shared by the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation and civil society partners: most especially the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council, the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit and the Royal Commonwealth Society. We hope that this alliance for youth engagement will prosper and grow in the years to come. A pressing task for us all is the field-testing and dissemination of participatory training resources, including the toolkit itself, in all regions of the Commonwealth.

Mr Ignatius K Takawira
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Commonwealth Youth Programme
Commonwealth Secretariat

Introduction

The purpose of this publication, *Putting Youth Engagement into Practice – A Toolkit for Action*, is to assist organisations and institutions to find ways of bringing in young people as genuine partners in their work. The aim is to open up a dialogue as a way of assessing where we are and where we can go. In doing so, we will be able to create opportunities for young people to play meaningful roles at an operational level, as well as in the decision making structures of organisations, by making young people part of their governance.

Terms like ‘youth engagement’ and ‘youth participation’ have found widespread acceptance but they are not straightforward. This is because there is no agreement about who is covered by the term ‘youth’. There is no universally agreed definition of youth and the age definitions differ from one society to another. There is also no agreement on what ‘youth participation’ really entails and so it can range from tokenistic efforts of consultation to youth-led projects. The expectations of what young people are capable of also differs from one organisation to the next.

For the purposes of this publication, we have adopted a pragmatic approach, based on the understanding that most established organisations do not have young people under the age of 30 in leadership roles. People under the age of 30 do not participate meaningfully in the operational and governance structures as equals (in this context, 30 is an arbitrary cut off point, used simply as a representative guide to help us identify young people who we want to bring into our organisations). For many organisations this may go higher and for others, the emphasis may be on much younger groups. In some cases, depending on the work that an organisation does, this group also involves young people who are categorised as children. With the right support, they too can be brought into the culture and the institutional structures of our organisations.

The challenge for mainstream organisations

The challenge of making young people an integral part of our work is especially sharp for those organisations that do not work with youth issues or with young people in a direct way. These can be mainstream organisations working in areas such as agriculture, law, economic development, architecture, social policy, research, health and so on. Their work has an impact on young people as it does all members of society. Over the years, some organisations, whether they work with young people or not, have realised that their work is not having the kind of impact it could. They are also aware that they may not survive into the future unless they are able to bring in young people as full partners.

Forward-looking organisations are searching for ways of bringing in new energy that can rejuvenate them and carry their vision into the future, including collaboration with the next generation of leaders.

This Toolkit for Action will kick-start a dialogue that can help our organisations find ways of making young people integral to their work in the present and in the future by raising the following questions:

- ❖ What is youth participation and what does it mean for our organisations/institutions?
- ❖ How ready are our organisations/institutions to bring in young people as genuine partners in our work?
- ❖ What are the strategies that can engage young people – how to attract them, retain them and work with them in an effective way – at all levels, especially leadership and decision-making levels?

By looking at these issues, we can develop a knowledge base on the strategies and tools that can assist senior staff and decision makers to understand youth engagement and implement it as part of our

work. Through this dialogue, we can also deepen our understanding of youth participation in society in general and find ways of affirming the full citizenship of young people.

How does this Toolkit work?

This Toolkit for Action is divided into three sections:

- ❖ **Part One** provides an overview of the youth participation agenda and of the benefits of youth engagement for young people, organisations and wider society alike. This section also includes some of the arguments, excuses or genuine concerns that often become obstacles to youth engagement – brief case studies illustrate how these obstacles have been tackled by some organisations.
- ❖ **Part Two** introduces two tools that we can use within our organisations to assess the situation and begin to find ways forward. The self-assessment questionnaire will enable organisations to monitor present levels of youth engagement in various areas such as governance, staffing, outreach programmes, internships and finance. Following on from this questionnaire, a planning framework provides an opportunity to identify areas in our organisations' structure, culture and operation where youth engagement could increase. By completing this planning framework, organisations will be able to identify areas for development and the resources needed to achieve this.
- ❖ **Part Three**, by way of conclusion, looks into how we can all work together to continue to develop tools and ideas on youth engagement. Only through sharing and building such a knowledge base will youth engagement move from mere words to actions across the world.

The big issue – mainstreaming youth participation

This toolkit is focusing on youth engagement within organisations, by getting young people involved in operational and governance issues. This issue is set within the wider debate on where young people are positioned in society.

Mainstreaming youth in society is about ensuring that young people are a full part of all organisations and all social institutions that make up our societies. Like gender mainstreaming, youth mainstreaming seeks to ensure the full citizenship of people; enabling an excluded sector of society to become integral in shaping the nature of that society through its different social formations, organisations and institutions.

It also helps organisations and institutions that serve society to prioritise the needs and interests of young people. Its final aim is to enable organisations to bring young people into their ranks, making them partners with adults to create a better world.

Mainstreaming youth forces all organisations to think in a different way about their relationship with young people. This is especially true for organisations that do not work directly with or for youth. Before embarking on a youth engagement strategy, we should consider the following:

- ❖ **How does our organisation’s vision integrate the needs, interests and wishes of young people?**
- ❖ **Do young people understand and support the vision, the aims and the objectives of our organisation?**
- ❖ **Do we work *with* young people to achieve our vision?**

An organisation that has engaged in the process of mainstreaming youth will recognise that young people are not just an add-on to programmes and social interventions. Young people stop being just a target group or beneficiaries, they become integral to the process of finding solutions and become part of implementing solutions.

Youth engagement is not just about recruiting young people as volunteers, interns and junior staff members. It is about a deeper transformation that makes them central in the work of the organisation.

By accepting this formulation, we must also accept that our organisations cannot stay the same. This requires us to develop creative strategies and be open to learning new ways of doing things. This may be particularly difficult because many organisations have established histories, cultures and leadership styles. In most cases, even in the most forward-looking organisations, adults have all the power. Adults control the resources and make the final decisions, as they have been doing for a long time, without young people.

The prerequisite for developing a youth engagement strategy is to create an open, safe and democratic environment based on inter-generational partnerships founded on mutual interest. This partnership recognises that young people, by virtue of their age, do not have all the experience and skills needed to run the organisations. However, young people do have skills and capacities that adults do not have, but they must be supported into playing more demanding roles in an environment based on mutual respect and sharing. To embark on this challenging process, organisations must be able to imagine the benefits of bringing in young people.

Fully and creatively applied, the concept of mainstreaming youth participation means that we would have to imagine a different type of organisation.

Imagine

- ❖ How will your organisation change for the better by bringing in young people in leadership roles?
- ❖ How will your organisation’s public image, strategies, activities, leadership, change if young people were brought in as genuine partners in the pursuit of a common vision?

All organisations will have to change their structures, policies and organisational cultures, albeit to differing degrees. In other cases, youth engagement may alter established patterns and priorities. As with gender mainstreaming, mainstreaming youth participation implies and demands the visible inclusion of young people as full partners in the running of society. Families, churches, universities, businesses, cultural organisations, economic development institutions and government will all look and feel different.

The idea has been discussed and endorsed in various forums at the local, national and international levels, but it is difficult to implement.

The reality

Hardly anyone in the leadership of organisations and key institutions opposes the ideal of bringing in young people as partners in social change and development, yet everyone struggles to find creative ways to make it happen.

The case for youth engagement

What is the benefit for organisations?

If organisations are unable to capture the imagination of the young, then they will miss the opportunity to bring in new energy and enthusiasm and without this, these organisations will not survive into the future. But beyond survival, by not bringing in young people today, we deny ourselves the opportunity to tap into the creativity and resources of young people. Here are some positive reasons why organisations should engage young people:

- ❖ **Young people bring new ideas** into an organisation, creating a channel of communication with the next generation. It opens itself up to new ideas and perspectives and this in turn makes sure that it stays relevant to the changing environment. It is worth noting that the next generation of young people is exposed to more information and knowledge than any before. They experience the world in ways older people cannot, and for this reason they hold the key to the future.
- ❖ Young people bring with them an **enthusiasm and optimism** that has not been blunted by repeated failure and hard experiences. Inexperience is often seen as a reason not to bring in young people, yet it is the very quality that opens room for innovation and experimentation. Young people are more able to take the necessary risks needed to deal with a changing environment. This ability to envision the future can invigorate any organisation.
- ❖ When an organisation works with young people, it **creates deeper roots and stronger loyalties**. Organisations that will survive in the future are those that are credible in the eyes of young people and therefore enjoy their support. Depending on the vision and the work at hand, young people can be the best advocates, leading and influencing their peers and shaping new ideas.
- ❖ Any vision can only live in the future if it is able to **cultivate and nurture the next generation of champions**. Given the right tools and support, young people can often be joint leaders who will carry the organisation into the future. They will change it and update it, but in doing so they will ensure that organisations will continue the struggle for a better world for all people.

What is the benefit for young people?

Youth engagement does not only aim to keep our organisations alive. It also aims to work with young people to develop their full potential. This is as important, if not more so, than ensuring the survival of the organisation into the future. When an organisation opens itself up through engaging young people, it becomes a vehicle for youth development without necessarily becoming a youth serving organisation. This means that for the groups of young people it brings in (even if few in number), it will provide them with the space needed to enhance their skills and competencies.

“Participation is an essential part of human growth, that is development of self confidence, pride, initiative, creativity, responsibility, cooperation, ...this is [how] people learn to take charge of their lives and solve their own problems, [and] is the essence of development.”

Stan Burkey, 1993¹

Here are some of the ways young people will benefit from a youth engagement strategy:

- ❖ **Participation fosters the development of leadership competencies:** Through youth engagement, young people can gain leadership skills by enhancing their knowledge and understanding of society, especially in the technical and specialised fields where young people do not often participate. This enhances their sense of responsibility as their problem solving skills and creativity is encouraged. The young person is not only an asset in the organisation; they are also an asset in society in general.
- ❖ youth engagement **provides young people with a bridge into the world of adults.** When young people are engaged, they are more likely to benefit and acquire skills from the partnership that they build with adults in the organisation. They become more open to learning and to engaging in critical dialogue as they forge mutually respectful relationships with adults.
- ❖ **Participation begets more participation.** When young people experience the benefits of participating in something worthwhile, they are more inclined to participate in other areas of society. They become more resourceful in their families, communities and broader society. There is compelling evidence that political skills of participation acquired during youth are a key part of the process of identity formation. The individual is more likely to stay active in civic life as s/he grows older.

What is the benefit for society?

Youth engagement is a term used here to talk about the intentional strategies to increase the visible participation of young people in the life of our organisations, especially in those activities related to the policies, and governance of organisations. As stated earlier, youth engagement is a sub-set of a bigger discussion about the full citizenship of young people in society.

Promoting the involvement of young people in broader civic life is an important objective, as important as carving out a space for young people in the governance structure of an institution. On the other hand, promoting the recognition of youth rights in society is no less urgent than facilitating the economic integration of unemployed young people in the economy. All of them are important. What is at stake here, when we argue for greater youth engagement, is the more focused objective of bringing in young people to play a role in adult-led organisations. It is one part of a bigger puzzle. Put together, the pieces cohere to form a fuller picture of a society where all people, including the young, are fully contributing members of a democratic society.

By putting youth engagement into practice in organisations and institutions, we are contributing to the larger goal of opening up spaces for young people to exercise their agency – this creativity and resourcefulness adds to the process of developing society in general.

Our focus on youth engagement is founded on a vision of young people as equal contributing members of society. By adopting youth engagement as an intentional strategy, organisations will become part of a progressive dialogue on youth and social change. Youth engagement strategies should be based on the concepts that:

- ❖ **Youth participation is a progressive perspective on the role of young people in society.** Through participation, young people cease to be passive recipients of services or passive victims. Young people are seen as stakeholders with distinct and legitimate interests and they are entitled to share in the exercise of power at all levels.
- ❖ **There is a symbiosis between the goals of youth participation and those of fostering development in young people and in society** in general. Young people cannot be developed fully without the investment in the process of their development.
- ❖ **The level and nature of young people’s participation is in itself a marker of a society’s development.** The capacity of a society or community to maximise young people’s participation as citizens in the social, political and economic life indicates the extent to which that society can flourish. Young people are a barometer through which we can measure the level of social cohesion and democracy – or the lack of it.
- ❖ **Youth participation is a precondition for effective strategies of working** with young people at all levels of society from families, to schools, communities, businesses, governments, etc.

- ❖ **Youth participation – and by implication youth engagement – is about social transformation.** They lie at the core of creating compassionate, sustainable and equitable societies. They do not just advocate the provision of targeted services aimed at integrating relatively small numbers of young people into a social mainstream but rather the complete engagement of all young people in the creation of a new mainstream. When young people are fully engaged, organisations, institutions and communities become something more.

The Challenge

If young people's participation is such a good thing, why is it so hard to put into practice?

Taken as a comprehensive package, the benefits to organisations, the benefits to young people and the benefits to society in general created by youth engagement form part of a long-term social change agenda. Youth engagement will create optimum conditions to ensure that all young people have opportunities to become full and competent citizens that contribute to the prosperity of their communities and society as a whole.

Obstacles to youth engagement

The obstacles to the full participation of young people in adult-led mainstream organisations or institutions fall into two categories: ideological and structural. At the ideological level we must ask the following:

- ❖ Do organisations believe that young people can become equal partners in the solution-seeking process and in the implementation of solutions?

And at a structural level:

- ❖ Do organisations have the *policies*, *processes*, and *structures* that promote the full involvement of young people in the life of the organisation?

There is a symbiotic relationship between the structures of the organisation and ideas that drive the organisation – the ideas shape the structures and in turn, the structures shape the ideas. These structural and ideological factors influence the inability of organisations to bring in young people, especially where it matters the most – at the level of governance. Here, young people and adults could come together to share power, to work together in the making decisions, running operations and forming the vision of organisations. This exclusion of young people from the organisation's governance goes on to form the ideological and structural obstacles preventing young people's participation.

Just as with gender mainstreaming, there is now widespread official acceptance of the idea of youth participation, yet unspoken ideas and commonly held beliefs, and therefore structures, are obstacles to implementing youth engagement.

Below are some of the commonly stated reasons why youth engagement cannot be applied. For some these are merely excuses but for many, they are genuine concerns. Review them and see if any apply in your situation.

“We have never shared power with young people...”

We live in a society where adults hold power over young people, especially in families, schools, churches, community organisations and other social spheres. Adults make the decisions and implement them, inserting young people where they deem appropriate. The refusal to share power is the single biggest obstacle that stands in the way of an organisation's desire to bring in

The Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC), UK²

The Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC) facilitated the Pan-Commonwealth Youth Summit “CitizenYou” in 2002.

Young people worked with adults through the various stages and levels of the CitizenYou project. The Youth Planning team selected priorities, speakers and resources; the Facilitation team organised the conference logistics and ran sessions; young people sat on the planning committee and eventually took up positions on CYEC's Board. Through the mutually supportive environment of CitizenYou, young people gained skills and knowledge to carry into the future. CYEC benefited from the diversity, creativity and enthusiasm of young participants and built a network of young advocates and partners for their future work.

young people as co-creators of positive social change. Increasingly, there is evidence that when young people work together with adults in a supportive environment, they can add value.

“We want to involve young people more in our organisation, but we don’t know how...”

Many organisations, particularly ones that have been in existence for a long time, have been established and are run by adults who have little or no contact with young people in a working environment. For adults, it is hard to imagine their organisations running in a different way, especially if they do not see anything wrong with the way things have been running. Bringing in young people is seen as an unnecessary complication. Just as male-dominated institutions find it hard to integrate women in their work, many adult-led institutions do not know how to work with young people.

Changing established patterns is a process and engaging young people will be hard. It must be seen as an incremental journey with a lot of trial and error. This willingness to try a new approach will create the experience required for the organisation to involve young people in a way that is most appropriate to its unique history, mandate, structures and culture.

“We don’t have a culture of participation in general...”

ActionAid Nepal (AAN)³

ActionAid Nepal’s work to include young people’s participation in programme areas acted as a catalyst for encouraging adults in the communities, and within AAN, to listen to and begin to change their behaviour towards young people.

Through using children and young people’s research projects, AAN demonstrated that children and young people were able to be active participants in the development process and their absence from the planning of these interventions could have adverse effects. AAN’s experience revealed that it was hard to gain acceptance for children’s participation if adults’ participation was low. The programme became more successful when an effort was made to empower the poor and disadvantaged adults alongside the young people, reinforcing AAN’s belief in full participation.

Many mainstream institutions and organisations are not participatory. They do not work in ways that promote the participation of people in general, young or otherwise. At best, they consult their constituents and stakeholders where they have to, but it is the few adult males at the top who make all the decisions about what needs to be done and how it is to be done. Without democratic values and practices, young people’s participation cannot become a priority and organisations will not represent or benefit all its members, especially the young. The participation and inclusion of young people, as with the participation of women, can often lead to a more open and democratic environment that affects organisations in a positive way. Open organisations are more likely to be successful – they will survive into the future.

“Young people are inexperienced and incapable of participating...”

Most organisations and social institutions work on the unfounded assumption that young people are still in the process of ‘growing up’. To them, young people are vulnerable, and in need of adult supervision and control. In extreme situations, young people are seen as requiring adult surveillance, without which they may cause problems. Young people are not seen as responsible partners. In this case, the participation of young people would be deferred indefinitely until they are older and ‘qualified’ to handle responsibility.

What is often missed here is that participation is part of a methodology of training young people with the skills they require to become a full part of the organisation’s life. Young people cannot become aware of the challenges that face an organisation by waiting in the wings for a time when they will be grown up. By participating, they develop the skills and experience they need to become effective partners at a higher level.

Project Alternatives and Opportunities (PAO) and the Foundation for Development, Friendship and Answers (FUNDAR), Honduras⁴

Project Alternatives and Opportunities (PAO) and The Foundation for Development, Friendship and Answers (FUNDAR), worked in partnership in Honduras to set up a peer education programme to tackle drug abuse issues.

FUNDAR trained young people as peer educators to work both at the informal and secondary school level. As young people's knowledge, life skills, self-esteem and communication skills developed through the programme, a youth advisory council was established in PAO enabling young people to be involved in the decision-making process of the project and to discover their potential to serve as young leaders in the community.

“Young people have problems, they must be fixed...”

For many organisations and government agencies, especially those created to serve young people in difficult situations, adults tend to treat young people as deficient. They see them as having problems or as the cause of problems. In extreme situations, young people are generally seen as irrational, untrustworthy, unpredictable and prone to delinquent behaviour. The effect is that young people cannot participate as equals and they cannot exercise creativity in the running of a programme, as they are perceived to need to be controlled. The fact is when young people take on responsible roles in any setting, especially when they get the opportunity to play a leadership role, they acquire a range of positive competencies that improve their lives in a positive way in other areas of their lives. The process of participation is a powerful method of fostering youth development.

RefugeeYouth, UK⁵

The Barbara Melunsky Refugee Youth Agency, known as RefugeeYouth, is a small network of young refugee groups in London and the UK, *run* by and *led* by young refugees.

Young refugees probably face some of the hardest challenges in life and are often viewed as vulnerable and therefore incapable of helping themselves. RefugeeYouth shows how these young people can be positive leaders and advocates in their field when given the opportunity. RefugeeYouth was originally set up in response to the fact that young refugees found it particularly hard to gain access to work placements. For those involved in running RefugeeYouth, the skills and knowledge acquired enable them to play an active contribution in society now and in the future.

“Our work is technical, youth can't just participate...”

Many organisations work in areas where the knowledge base is usually acquired through a lengthy, systematic process of training and preparation. Areas such as economics, law, health, education, architecture, agriculture, engineering, and other technical fields are led by individuals with extensive training and experience and therefore see the inclusion of young, untrained and inexperienced people as a ‘dangerous’ risk and an intrusion.

Participation allows young people to develop an appreciation of what is required in the different fields before a person can be fully effective. Bringing in young people as partners in the design, implementation, governance and evaluation of such technical activities gives young people the insights they need to understand the complexities involved in pursuing development and change. In addition, the early introduction of young people to professional fields can serve as a powerful motivator for young people to join a profession based on experience and knowledge.

The Commonwealth Engineers' Council (CEC)⁶ and International Young Professionals Foundation (IYPF)⁷

The Commonwealth Engineers' Council, which aims to advance the science and practice of engineering across the world, realised that to achieve many of its objectives it was necessary to invest in the younger generations of engineers. In 1997, the Commonwealth Young Engineers Programme was established, but soon extended its reach to other young professionals who were concerned with issues of sustainable development. In time, the group evolved and is now established as the International Young Professionals Foundation. Over the last five years, the IYPF has been involved in lobbying at various international meetings and has run conferences and events across the world.

“Youth participation is costly and time-consuming...”

Bringing in young people as full partners in an initiative requires an additional dedication of resources. It also requires a change in organisational culture and perhaps a modification of the styles to which adults have become accustomed. For example, an organisation may have to change the time and location of its key management and governance meetings to make it possible for young people to attend. Young people may also require financial support for transportation in order to get to the meeting. Youth engagement requires additional resources, time, money, training, etc.

For some organisations, these costs seem unjustifiable, especially since young people tend to move around a lot. They leave organisations for many reasons; to pursue their studies, acquire jobs; they change their minds about what they believe in, and so on. Some organisations become weary of training new groups of young people at regular intervals. Many organisations do not want to go through the trouble of changing when they cannot count on young people to stay with them.

There is no easy way out. If an organisation wants to survive into the future it needs to make the investments required. The benefits of youth engagement far outstrip the investments – especially the monetary investment. The failure to make the investment will be more costly in the end.

“We want to engage youth but we don’t want to get it wrong... and we don’t want window dressing”

Many mainstream organisations do not have the ability and tools to engage young people. Adult managers do not have the orientation or the training to allow them to work effectively with young people. Some organisations take on the role without adequately preparing either the young people or the adults involved. This often leads to failed experiments that are then used as examples to argue against young people’s participation. This can alienate both the young people and the adults involved.

Many organisations are also uninterested in the idea of engaging young people because they have seen too many cases where organisations sometimes bring in young people merely as decoration. This is an abuse of talented and enthusiastic young people to create a semblance of participation, often to impress donors. Such manipulative exercises eventually dwindle, leaving the organisation unchanged. They erode trust between young people and adults and put off potential allies for youth participation. Well-meaning adults stay away from youth engagement because they would rather not risk being put in situations where they are seen as being disingenuous. The best way to counteract this is to share information and experiences about what works and what does not. There are many examples of what can be done and how it should be done. The problem is that such information is not shared widely.

Save the Children Fund (SCF), Jamaica⁸

Jamaica’s Save the Children Fund (SCF) began work with marginalised street children in Jamaica amid concerns that their donors’ agendas were not always compatible with genuine young people’s participation. By gradually developing a culture of participation within the programme, these concerns were diminished.

SCF began by providing services and projects that adults had designed, allowing young people to join as and when they wished to do so. Over time, the programme grew and staff asked for feedback, which led to small changes to certain aspects of the project where possible. This rather tokenistic effort energised the young participants. As they established greater trust in the programme, three young representatives joined the management group to review, plan and implement project activities. From this point on, the children and young people took more interest and responsibility within projects and in time, were given the resources to organise their own projects and events.

Reality Check

What are the reasons often put forward in your organisation that make it difficult to bring in young people as an integral part of the life of your organisation?

Youth engagement: the challenge

Youth engagement has many benefits and challenges. Simply ignoring it is no longer an option. Only through developing a new generation of leaders will our organisations be carried into the future. This is our premise.

Organisations will only survive into the future if we are able to capture the imagination of a new generation today. To grasp the positive possibilities that come with youth engagement it is important to envision the kind of organisation and society we desire. Consider the following questions:

- ❖ **If we expanded the scope for the genuine participation of young people, how different will our organisation be?**
- ❖ **How different will our image, culture and operation be?**
- ❖ **What is the positive impact we will see in the world that we are seeking to change?**

Once we can grasp the positive possibilities for the future, we have to deal with the challenges of making youth engagement practical. Engaging young people as partners is not a simple or straightforward affair. Young people, however eager and enthusiastic, do require support, supervision and mentoring. In all cases, it involves extensive preparation. This is equally true for adults, as many do not have any experience of working with younger people in an empowering way. For the process to be successful, it is up to the adults who run our organisations/institutions to create the conditions for a genuine partnership with young people. But how ready are we to do this?

The challenge

Young people are valued and valuable partners who can contribute to the present success, as well as the future growth, of our organisation. It is a partnership based on the shared belief that young people are resourceful, dependable and creative. Young people can renew organisations and make them better able to handle the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Are we READY?

How ready is our organisation to embark on a process of engaging youth as an integral part of our work today and into the future?

Assessing readiness: a self-assessment questionnaire

Different organisations are at different levels of readiness. Some have already embarked on experiments to bring in young people. Others have considered it, but have not found the right tools and support to help them launch the process. In both cases, it is a good idea to do an honest readiness assessment. On the following page is a tool that can help make such an assessment. The tool consists of statements that depict an ideal state. The task is to review each statement and rate the organisation's performance to get an idea of where the challenges lie.

Although the assessment can be conducted by an individual in a leadership position sitting apart, it is preferable to involve a group. The tool will spark a dialogue and allow the whole organisation to build consensus on how successful or unsuccessful the organisation is at putting youth engagement into practice.

This self-assessment questionnaire can be used a tool in a workshop or meeting initiated or endorsed by the senior leadership of the organisation. It is a good idea to include people from different sections of the organisation, from the Council or Board of Trustees, to project managers and especially younger people. Discussion using the assessment tool is a starting point for longer conversations that may eventually lead to a more rigorous planning process for a youth engagement policy

The self-assessment should also be used in conjunction with the review of the 'Planning Framework' suggested in the next section.

The Issue

Vision, leadership and governance

	Yes	No	?
We have a clear vision of young people as partners in our work.			
Our board and senior leadership understands and supports the vision/concept of youth participation.			
We have allocated resources and time in our strategic plan to support the goal of attracting and retaining young people in the leadership and management of our organisation.			
Young people participate regularly in activities planned and executed by our organisation's leadership and management.			
Young people participate in the planning and execution of our strategies and programmes.			

The Issue

Strategic investments – tools and tactics

	Yes	No	?
Our organisation has internships/attachments and other programmes that bring in young talent in a meaningful way.			
Our internships/attachments programme is part of a deliberate strategy to train the next generation of leaders in our organisation.			
Our internships/attachments programme increases the partnerships our organisation has with young people in general.			
Our work is more effective because of the internship/attachment programmes.			

The Issue

Working with youth staff members

	Yes	No	?
We have significant numbers of young people (under 30) in our staff.			
Our organisation has a policy of recruiting and training younger people to be part of our work.			
We invest in training and supporting young people in the staff of our organisation.			
Our young staff are able to take on positions and assignments of responsibility.			
Young people are happy with the culture, language and rituals of our organisation (give specific examples).			
Older staff members get along and work well with young members of our staff.			
Once recruited into our organisation, young people tend to stay for a long time.			

The Issue

Reaching out to young people

	Yes	No	?
We have programmes that create awareness and interest among young people about our work (especially those who are not direct beneficiaries of our work).			
We have programmes that benefit young people – perhaps a segment of our programme where young people are direct beneficiaries.			
Our organisation is known, understood and supported by young people outside of the structures of our institution.			

The Issue

Serious business...and governance again

	Yes	No	?
Young people (staff and participants where appropriate) participate in the budgeting processes of our organisation.			
Young people (those on the staff or those who are part of the management and governance structures) participate in the recruitment and management of staff.			
Young people (especially those who are on the staff) participate in the management of projects and programmes.			
Young people (both those who are on the staff of the organisation and those who are served by the organisation) participate in the monitoring and evaluation of our work.			
Young people (especially those on the staff and those who participate in the leadership structures of the organisation) can and do represent our organisation to the public/outside world.			
We have a clear vision of young people as partners in our work.			
Our board and senior leadership understands and supports the vision/concept of youth participation.			
We have allocated resources and time in our strategic plan to support the goal of attracting and retaining young people in the leadership and management of our organisation.			
Young people participate regularly in activities planned and executed by our organisation's leadership and management.			
Young people participate in the planning and execution of our strategies and programmes.			

The Issue

Youth-focused interventions

	Yes	No	?
(This section may not apply to all organisations; it is especially relevant to organisations that deliver direct services to young people. The scope of engagement extends beyond young staff to programme participants.)			
Our organisation has programmes and projects for young people.			
Our youth programme has led to an increase in the quality of young people's participation in our organisation.			
Our youth-focused interventions have led to an increased in the numbers of young people working in our organisation.			
Young people (staff and participants) are more involved in the following areas of the youth programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning and implementation; • management and governing; • review and evaluation. 			
Our organisation has clear plans to support youth development in the long term.			
The youth-focused interventions are understood and supported by our senior management and board.			
There are verifiable improvements in the quality of life of the young people participating in our programme			

Putting youth engagement into practice – a planning framework

After reviewing your organisation’s level of readiness to engage young people, you may agree that there is scope for improvement. In other cases, there may be a need for a more thorough transformation. But where do we start? How do we initiate a youth engagement process and avoid ending up with a haphazard strategy that will cause more confusion and resentment in the long term? The planning framework is made up of a number of objectives and outcomes – like the assessment questionnaire, the planning framework depicts an ideal condition to which we should all aspire. Go through each and see if they apply to your organisation and if they are achievable given your specific context. This is seen as a follow on to the readiness exercise; it must also involve various sections of the organisation and be supported by the organisation’s senior leadership.

Table: Putting youth engagement into practice – a planning framework

Strategic Objective	Envisaged Outcome	Reality Check
<p>1. Conduct a joint review process: once the organisation/institution has decided to look seriously at youth engagement, it is suggested that the senior staff (perhaps with the participation of the board) should conduct a joint review. The assessment questionnaire can serve as useful starting point for such a review.</p>	<p>There is a shared understanding of the organisation’s readiness (or lack of it) to engage young people.</p>	<p>Is this realistic in our context? What needs to be done to achieve this?</p>
<p>2. Share the results of the review and create an organisation wide dialogue: the results of the review should be shared with the broader organisation. An open discussion about the philosophy, culture, history, objectives and structure of the organisation will allow people to understand where they come from and where they are. They can also develop a shared vision on what youth engagement could do to improve things.</p>	<p>Youth engagement is discussed as an organisational priority for all people connected to or working in the organisation.</p>	
<p>3. Secure high-level commitment for the vision: based on the shared ideas and perspectives of the organisation, it is important to create a high-level vision that clarifies the organisation’s position and vision for youth engagement. When such a position is put forward and led by the board, it has a greater chance of being implemented in a systematic way.</p>	<p>The implementation of a youth engagement strategy is endorsed and supported at the highest possible level of the organisation.</p>	
<p>4. Develop a plan to involve young people in the governance of the organisation in a structured way: one of the clearest signals of an organisation’s seriousness about youth engagement is the way it creates spaces for young people to be part of the decision-making of the organisation at the highest level – the board and top management. This may require additional training and resources to make sure that young people take on their responsibilities with the appropriate orientation, training and support.</p>	<p>The development of officially recognised positions on our leadership structures where young people play an equal role to their adult counterparts.</p>	
<p>5. Conduct a frank assessment of the organisation’s youth friendliness: do our language, rituals, procedures and general demeanour encourage or block the active participation of young people? Which of our established practices need to be reviewed, abandoned or changed in order to make young people more comfortable with us?</p>	<p>The creation of an organisational culture and outlook that is more welcoming to young people.</p>	
<p>6. Integrate youth engagement into the strategic planning of your organisation: based on the directives and support of the board and senior management, develop a strategic plan to implement the youth engagement strategy.</p>	<p>The organisation has an objective to increase the numbers of young people working in the organisation as well as the quality of young people’s participation in the structures and the programmes of the organisation.</p>	

Assumption

Many of our organisations have already implemented strategies to bring in young people, especially through internships and volunteer programmes. There is an experience base and some knowledge about what is working. Now build on it!

The planning framework for youth engagement will give us the opportunity to identify areas in our organisation's structure, culture and operation where we can make the most important changes.

This suggested process is ongoing. There is no single and instant application of a youth engagement strategy – the strategy will grow as the organisation develops a deeper understanding of the challenges and tools. Although the planning process is put forward here as a series of steps, it is not linear, it is a cycle of continuous improvement.

Strategic Objective	Envisaged Outcome	Reality Check
7. Bring in young staff: based on the organisation's vision and strategic plans, identify the opportunities where young staff members can be brought in from outside or promoted from within the ranks of the organisation/institution.	There is a balance in the representation and participation of all groups – age, race, gender and so on, throughout the organisation	
8. Create opportunities for special interventions: if the organisation does not have existing internships and attachments, find ways of creating them. These may vary in their content and length, but if they are intended to bring in new talent, they have the added benefit of building a new cadre of staff and leaders for the organisation.	The organisation/institution has a clearly defined policy and programmes on internships that bring in younger people to the organisation.	
9. Create a supportive environment: once the decision to bring in younger people has been taken, the organisation has the responsibility of supporting them in their work. This is often done best through training and mentoring systems.	The organisation has a structured programme of support, training and mentoring.	
10. Involve young people in the 'serious business': as a part of the operational and management plan of the organisation, the best way to ensure high-level participation of young people is to get them involved in the serious business of the organisation such as, planning and implementation, management of projects, participating in governance, budgeting, fundraising and monitoring and evaluation.	Young people are part of the decision making structures of our organisation – taking on serious responsibilities beyond youth programmes.	
11. Allocate resources to youth engagement: the overall plan will require resources. These may be used to find new positions dedicated to young staff members, to support special training, meetings and workshops or even to support unconventional recruitment strategies that target media channels that reach young constituencies.	The organisational budget has allocated resources to support the youth engagement strategy.	
12. Reach out to young people: where necessary and appropriate, the organisation has a programme of ensuring that young people know about its work. This may include road shows, talks in schools, or sharing information through media that targets young people.	The work of our organisation is known and supported by young people in the different communities.	
13. Develop special youth interventions and programmes: this does not apply to all organisations, but for many organisation and institutions, there are opportunities to create special programmes that work with young people in a direct way. This affords the organisation the greatest opportunity to work with large numbers of young people in a way that will change the culture, as well as shape the future content, of the programme.	Youth development programmes are an integral part of the organisation's overall programme and interventions.	

Conclusion: building a knowledge base

There is no magic bullet: transformation is an iterative process. The tools discussed above provide us with a starting point that should inform future strategies. It is only when we know where we are that we can identify what we need to do next. By implementing such a process, we have the opportunity to identify what is already working, and what needs to be improved.

There is a great need to share knowledge about what works with youth engagement and what does not. By sharing case studies, monitoring and evaluation reports and participation in ongoing dialogue (web interaction, conferences and workshops) we can add substance to the case for youth engagement.

There are four key areas of knowledge building to which we can contribute:

- 1 Validating young people's contribution by recognising young people's experiences and numerous roles in society;
- 2 Theorising by and about young people, and including their voices and thoughts alongside theoretical studies.
- 3 Building a youth studies discipline. As with the gender movement, it is important to carve out an area within the social sciences to raise questions about young people's position in society and to critique youth work practices.
- 4 Quantitative and qualitative analysis of youth participation, which honestly and openly question youth programmes and review their true impact on young people.

We can also commission or conduct the type of research that will give greater insights on where we are in relation to the bigger vision and what we can do improve our work. By working together with others, we will create a solid knowledge base to inform practice and unlock creativity. This can only be achieved through regular dialogue and exchange between organisations who share a common vision of building a genuine partnership with young people. We can learn about the most common difficulties and the strategies of overcoming them. **With our collective wisdom, we can put youth engagement into practice.**

Suggestion

Document the lessons at each stage of the process and share them with other organisations. This will create a shared knowledge base that will improve the effectiveness of all organisations.

Steve Mokwena



Steve Mokwena was born in Soweto South Africa. He obtained his Bachelor's (Hons) degree from the University of the Witwatersrand and a Master's degree in Development Studies and Political Economy from the University of Leeds. As Chief Executive Officer of the South African National Youth Commission, Steve developed the first national strategy document on youth development. Throughout his career, Steve has conceptualised, implemented and managed successful programmes for young people, ranging from community youth service, arts and culture in schools to employment training and young women's development programmes. He joined the International Youth Foundation in May 1998 to manage IYF's

strategy for learning and transfer of knowledge on effective youth development strategies.

Steve has written and published papers on youth development, youth culture and youth policy. He is currently editing an international study on youth participation in governance and policy making for the UK based Carnegie Young People's initiative. He is also working on a book and a documentary on young people, democracy and change in Africa and has just completed a documentary on youth culture and politics of change in the 1970s called **Township Soul**.

Notes

- 1 Burkey, S (1993) *People First: A guide to self-reliant participatory rural development*, London, Zed Books Ltd.
- 2 For more information on CYEC, or CitizenYou, go to www.cyec.org.uk
- 3 Case study taken from *Stepping forward: Children and young people's participation in the development process* (1998) Johnson, V, Ivan-Smith, E, Gordon, G, Pridmore, P and Scott, P (Editors). London, Intermediate Technology Publications.
- 4 Case study taken from *Stepping forward: Children and young people's participation in the development process* (1998) Johnson, V, Ivan-Smith, E, Gordon, G, Pridmore, P and Scott, P (Editors). London, Intermediate Technology Publications.
- 5 For more information on RefugeeYouth, go to www.refugeeyouth.org.uk
- 6 For more information on the Commonwealth Engineers' Council, go to www.ice.org.uk/cec
- 7 For more information on the International Young Professionals Foundation, go to www.ipyf.org
- 8 Case study taken from *Stepping forward: Children and young people's participation in the development process* (1998) Johnson, V, Ivan-Smith, E, Gordon, G, Pridmore, P and Scott, P (Editors). London, Intermediate Technology Publications.

Useful websites

Carnegie Young People's Initiative, www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/cypi/home

Commonwealth Secretariat, www.thecommonwealth.org

Commonwealth Engineers' Council, www.ice.org.uk/cec

Commonwealth Foundation, www.commonwealthfoundation.com

Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council, www.cyec.org.uk

Commonwealth Policies Studies Unit, www.cpsu.org.uk

International Young Professionals Foundation, www.ipyf.org

RefugeeYouth, www.refugeeyouth.org.uk

UK National Youth Agency, Hear by Right, www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright

Youth on Board, www.youthonboard.org



Commonwealth Secretariat

Commonwealth Youth Programme
Marlborough House, Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5HX, United Kingdom