

Chapter Three

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON YOUTH

I. INTRODUCTION

The interest of the United Nations in the specific question of youth dates back more than a quarter century. As early as 1965, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Declaration on the Promotion Among Youth of the Ideal of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between People* (GA Resolution 2037 (XX)). In the following twenty years, a number of resolutions adopted by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly expanded on this concern emphasizing the questions of youth participation, peace and development.

The first major international landmark on the question of youth, however, came with the declaration of 1985 as the *International Youth Year*. It was preceded, accompanied and followed by a flurry of activities beginning in 1982. Over 140 member countries of the United Nations established national coordination committees to prepare and observe the International Youth Year. Activities including the dissemination of information to youth groups and the establishment of networks among them were undertaken by the organizations of the United Nations system. As a result of the assessment of these activities and intensive consultations, *The Guidelines for Further Planning and Suitable Follow-up on Youth Issues* (henceforth referred to as *The Guidelines*) were formulated and endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1985 (GA Resolution 40/41). The Guidelines are significant in their scope and in the fact that they do not treat youth as a single group but as subgroups with varying social and economic needs. They provide proposals for specific measures relating to youth with disabilities, measures that are gender specific and others that take rural-urban differences into account.

“The most comprehensive international instrument on youth to date is the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond*...which was formulated in 1995.”

Perhaps the most comprehensive international instrument on youth today is the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond* (henceforth referred to as *The Programme of Action*), which was formulated and adopted by the General Assembly in 1995 (GA Resolution 50/81). In follow-up, a number of international and regional meetings and conferences were organized by the United Nations, including a World Youth Forum in Vienna in November 1996, in which hundreds of youth from all over the world participated.

The Programme of Action builds upon, not only The Guidelines and other resolutions of the General Assembly, but also on the declarations and programmes of action emanating from a large number of global conferences relating to other issues than youth such as environment, population, women and social development¹. Understanding international thinking on youth, therefore, must be based on a review of instruments dealing specifically with youth, as well as those dealing with other issues of international concern, emanating from major global intergovernmental conferences that took place under the auspices of the United Nations system. Looking at it in this fashion, it is clear that international thinking developed not only in the direction of recognizing the different needs of youth groups (male and female, rural and urban, etc.), but also of realizing that youth questions permeate all aspects of development including manpower, environment, population, health, poverty, social development and public participation.

Indeed, The Programme of Action identifies ten priority areas for the international community to consider in its approach to the question of youth: education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure-time activities, girls and young women, and the full and effective participation of youth in the life of the society and in decision making. In line with the outline of this report, five of these areas will be discussed in this chapter: education, employment, health, public participation and gender.

II. YOUTH AND EDUCATION

The international community recognizes, of course, the importance of literacy to the welfare of the youth population. Combating illiteracy among youth, particularly in areas where illiteracy is high, as in some parts of Africa, was set as priority for action by the World Social Summit for Social Development (report, para 60 b). But to insure the effective participation of youth in society, education must go much beyond the elimination of illiteracy. Secondary level education is repeatedly emphasized in international instruments as a pre-requisite for this participation. Indeed, the Earth Summit sets the goal of ensuring that a minimum of 50 per cent of youth, gender balanced, are enrolled in, or have access to, appropriate secondary level education, including vocational training, by the year 2000.

¹ The major ones among these are: the World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs adopted at the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien in 1990, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Agenda 21: the UN Program of Action from Rio resulting from the Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit in 1992), the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action emanating from the World Conference on Human Rights of 1993, the Program of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Program of Action of the World Summit for Social Development held in 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and, the Istanbul Declaration and Habitat Agenda adopted at the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1996.

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Education must also be relevant to employment. Many of the international instruments have expressed the need for more emphasis on the vocational and technical training of youth in developing countries. In this respect, education and career planning are to go hand in hand. In addition, education of youth should include other aspects than relevance to employment opportunities, such as the knowledge of the cultural heritage of their societies, the capacity to be resourceful and to participate in society as good productive citizens. Curricula should be revised where necessary to insure this type of education. In other words, what international instruments call for is education that is of high quality, economically relevant and that prepares youth for effective participatory citizenship.

Most international instruments emphasize also the need for equal opportunity in education. They recommend, therefore, that special attention should be given to rural youth as well as youth living in conditions of poverty. Dropping out of school should be combated with appropriate means. As will be seen later, gender equality in education receives particular attention in most international instruments.

In their own words

When asked about how international resolutions on youth impacted their lives, most of the young people had no opinion, or no information about the subject. One young man asked: “the international community, or the United Nations, may resolve to improve education opportunities, but what is actually being done about it?” A twenty-two year old computer science graduate said: “this is the first time that I hear about these resolutions, they should be implemented more actively on the ground, and worked on by youth organizations.” Ziad, who is active with the YMCA, and attended the International Youth Conference in Amman two years ago, explained: “there is no real co-operation between youth organizations in Lebanon. Each organization works within its own agenda. We did many activities after the Amman conference, such as youth camps that concentrated on the reproductive health theme, which was the main focus of the conference. We also implement many cultural activities that promote the overall development of youth. All these activities remain limited, however, because there is no real system of co-operation between the different governmental and non-governmental youth organizations in the country.”

III. YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT

The international community recognizes that relevant education is not sufficient in itself to insure youth employment. It must be supplemented with action on the demand side for youth

employment through increased job opportunities for them and a better organized labour market. Most international instruments stress the seriousness of employment problems confronting the world's youth and call for specific programs that promote youth employment and youth self-employment. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, for example, recommends that "each country should undertake initiatives aimed at reducing current levels of youth unemployment, particularly where they are disproportionately high in comparison to the overall unemployment rate (para.25.6). The Programme of Action calls on governments to identify new job opportunities for young people with special emphasis on self-employment and self-help activities. In order to promote self-employment, it recommends providing seed money through grants, cooperative schemes and youth development banks. It also recommends the creation of employment opportunities for young people in fields that are rapidly evolving as a result of technological innovation. The Guidelines recognize, in addition, the importance of public employment agencies in finding appropriate work for youth and recommend the strengthening of these agencies.

Most international instruments emphasize the need for a broad and equitable distribution of employment opportunities, including through better spatial distribution of economic activities. The International Conference on Population and Development, for example, urges governments to support the sustainable development of rural areas, including the adoption of labour-intensive projects there, training in non-farming jobs for youth and effective transport and communication systems. In addition, it calls on governments to decentralize their administrative systems.

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Equity in employment should also extend to specific groups of youth that often receive inadequate attention. The Programme of Action, for example, recommends that governments should designate resources for supporting employment opportunities for disabled youth, young girls, refugees, migrant and displaced youth, street children and the youth indigenous population. It also calls for encouraging voluntarism among young through the establishment of voluntary service programmes for them. In doing all this, the international community recommends repeatedly that youth be involved in the formulation and implementation of programmes designed for them.

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IV. YOUTH AND HEALTH

One of the major concerns of the international community in the area of youth health is undoubtedly about the reproductive health of young persons. Most international instruments dealing with the subject call on governments to develop comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care services and to provide young people with universal access to those services. These include family planning information and services, information and services to help youth understand their sexuality and protect them from unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS, and the risk of infertility. The International Conference on Population and Development recommended the inclusion of sex education in the curricula of health education “with parental support and guidance”, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Such educational effort should begin within the family unit, in the community and in the schools at an appropriate age.

In the application of these goals, the international community recommends that innovative programmes be developed to make information, counseling and services for reproductive health accessible to adolescents and adult youth. All countries should design and implement special programmes to address nutritional needs of women of child-bearing age, especially those who are pregnant or breast-feeding and should give particular attention to the prevention and management of nutritional anemia and iodine-deficiency disorders. Priority should be accorded to improving the nutritional and health status of young women through education and training as part of maternal health and safe motherhood programmes.

Other issues relating to the health of young people have also received the attention of the international community. Thus, the Programme of Action recommends that governments investigate the possibility of adopting policies for discouraging drug, tobacco and alcohol abuse, including banning the advertisement of tobacco and alcohol and educating youth on the adverse effects of these products. Furthermore, it recommends that governments should combat malnutrition among young people by promoting supplementary feeding programmes in schools. It also asks governments to cooperate at the international level and take effective steps to protect children, adolescents and youth from neglect, abandonment and all types of exploitation and abuse. Many of the international instruments recommend that appropriate legislation should be enacted in support of youth health strategies.

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The international community expresses here again its concern over the maldistribution of health services and its consequent negative effects on groups and areas where these services are non-

existent or deficient. It calls on governments to correct this situation and to address the disparities in access to health care, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas.

In doing all this, governments are urged to promote greater community participation in reproductive and other health-care services by decentralizing the management of public health programmes and forming partnerships with local non-governmental organizations and private health-care providers. All types of non-governmental organizations, including local women's groups, trade unions, cooperatives, youth programmes and religious groups, should be encouraged to become involved in the promotion of better reproductive health. The Youth Forum recommended, additionally, the use of the media and entertainment industries to transfer health messages to the public.

V. YOUTH AND FAMILY FORMATION

In most countries, family formation begins at the youth stage of life, that is between the ages of 15 years and 24 years. It is not surprising, therefore, that this issue is given great importance in international instruments when dealing with the question of youth. Motherhood at a very young age is considered to entail a risk of maternal death that is much greater than average, and the children of young mothers have higher levels of morbidity and mortality. Early childbearing continues to be an impediment to improvements in the education, economic and social status of women in all parts of the world. Early marriage and early motherhood are thought to severely curtail education and employment opportunities for women and are likely to have a long-term, adverse impact on them and their children's quality of life.

One oft-repeated recommendation is the one calling for the prevention of early marriage and for raising the legal age of marriage to appropriate levels. In consequence, it is recommended that governments strictly enforce or change laws concerning the minimum legal age of consent and the minimum age for marriage. Governments should also strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. In this context, it is considered necessary that governments and non-governmental organizations work to raise awareness of these laws and generate social support for their enforcement through education and employment opportunities. In addition, adolescent females and males should be provided with information, education and counseling to help them delay early family formation, premature sexual activity and first pregnancy.

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VI. YOUTH AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Almost all major international instruments dealing with the question of youth call for and encourage the participation and active involvement of youth and their organizations at all levels of development. According to The Guidelines, the participation of youth should encompass the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of development. In order to achieve this type of comprehensive participation, young persons should articulate their needs and direct them into coherent policy and development plans. They should, in return, be provided with relevant and innovative education programmes to acquire the necessary negotiation and analytical skills. Opportunities for youth to learn their rights and responsibilities, with complete access to relevant information, should be strengthened. Governments are called upon to elicit the participation of youth, to the maximum extent possible and in a way commensurate with their age and responsibility, in the design, implementation and evaluation of national policies and plans affecting them and their future. In this context, youth associations should be promoted through financial, education and technical support and promotion of their activities. As a result of all these measures, a process to enhance dialogue between the youth community and government must be established.

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The international community also put part of the responsibility for the public participation of youth on itself. The International Conference on Population and Development, for example, included youth among the bodies that must have responsibility for effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Conference’s Programme of Action, together with local, national and international bodies. It also called for the promotion of exchange between various youth organizations at the international level as well as at the national and regional levels. In addition, the Plan of Action calls for stronger representation of youth in national delegations to the General Assembly and global conferences. The World Youth Forum also proposed the creation of a United Nations Youth Rights Charter as well as the appointment by the General Assembly of a Special Rapporteur to monitor youth rights for not less than three years.

VII. GENDER ISSUES

Permeating the recommendations regarding youth in all the above areas is the gender issue, particularly gender equality. The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women declared that

“gender discrimination begins at the earliest stages of life and must be addressed from then onwards” (Beijing Declaration, para. 38).

All relevant international instruments recommend to eliminate the discrimination against girls and young women, and to guarantee their full enjoyment of human rights, fundamental freedoms and equality. For this purpose all should cooperate. Leaders at all levels of the society must speak out and act forcefully against the various patterns of gender discrimination within social and familial structures. Schools, the media and other social institutions should seek to eliminate stereotypes in all types of communication and education materials that reinforce existing inequities between males and females and undermine self-esteem of girls. Teachers’ attitudes and practices as well as school curricula and facilities must also change to reflect a commitment to eliminate all gender bias. Special education and public information efforts are needed to promote equal treatment of girls and boys with respect to nutrition, health care, education and social, economic and political activity, as well as equitable inheritance rights. The use of the media to promote the idea of gender equality has also been recommended.

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The elimination of gender bias in education is a goal set by a large number of international instruments. Some also emphasize the special needs of women in education and training. The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women, for example, calls for education, training and re-training policies especially for young women and women re-entering the labour market, to provide skills to meet the needs of changing socio-economic conditions. It also calls for increased vocational and technical training for young women as well as efforts to increase their enrollment in such fields as sciences, mathematics, engineering, environmental sciences and technology, information technology and management. The Guidelines call for the use of the education system for improving the status of women in society and insuring equality for them.

Gender equality in employment has also received special attention. Many international instruments call for the reduction or elimination of discriminatory conditions in employment. They also recommend that special attention be paid to the education and training of women so as to insure its harmony with the demand for labour in the economy. The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women emphasized the importance of self-employment for young women and recommended that “special windows be opened for lending to young women who lack access to traditional sources of collateral” (Beijing Declaration, para. 63).

In the area of health and family formation, international instruments repeatedly emphasize the role of gender in policy formulation and implementation. Some call for the removal of all barriers to

access to formal education for pregnant adolescents and young mothers and the provision of childcare and other support services to them to permit them to continue their education. At the same time, they call for education measures and appropriate services to discourage and eliminate teenage pregnancies. One of the recommendations that is repeated in many of the international instruments on the subject requests governments to do all possible to eliminate the practice of female genital mutilation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In further follow-up to The Programme of Action, the United Nations convened recently another World Youth Forum in Braga, Portugal, from 2 to 7 August 1998. The Forum was immediately followed by the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held in Lisbon, Portugal, from 8 to 12 August 1998 (see box). Both meetings put considerable emphasis on the formulation of comprehensive national youth policies and action plans. The emphasis on the formulation/review and implementation of an integrated national youth health policy is also noted. Furthermore, the forum stressed that youth be encouraged and ensured to actively participate in all fields of society and in decision-making processes at all levels.

There are ample references to youth concerns and potentials in the declarations and plans of action adopted at recent international conferences. These provide a platform for national action, and it is suggested here that there be systematic follow-up in this respect. Even though the instruments adopted specifically related to youth are not legally binding on governments, they provide additional justification for action and a synthesis of what is required. National action would be facilitated by the establishment of a national coordination mechanism, such as a national youth council. Such mechanism, which would associate public sector institutions and youth organizations, could be entrusted with the formulation and overseeing of the implementation of a national youth policy and plan of action, which would reflect youth concerns and fully engage youth potentials. This would involve prioritizing which of the international recommendations respond to national needs and are to be urgently implemented. Increased action for youth would also require the strengthening of key public sector institutions dealing with youth, notably the Directorate General of Youth and Sports.

Continued dissemination of information and raising of awareness among national authorities, other development partners and youth in general about the need for national initiatives and action towards realizing the country's youth potential are to be sustained in future years. The UN System has a specific responsibility in this respect.

Braga Youth Plan of Action and Lisbon Declaration on Youth

The UN World Youth Forum (Braga, Portugal, 2-7 August 1998) was attended by 500 representatives of non-governmental organizations, youth-related agencies and organizations of the United Nations system and youth-related intergovernmental organizations. The ultimate act of the Forum was the "Braga Youth Plan of Action . The **World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth** (Lisbon, Portugal, 8-12 August 1998), in which 160 countries were represented and more than 100 delegations were headed by a Minister," adopted the "Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes." Following are some excerpts from the recommendations of the Forum and the Conference arranged according to the issues of the present report:

1. General:

"The formulation of youth policies by all states, by the year 2005, which are cross sectoral, comprehensive and formulated with long-term vision coupled with Action Plans..." (Forum).

"Developing national youth policies and operational programmes, at appropriate levels, to implement the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, taking into account the national priorities, realities and limitations arising from different socio-economic and cultural development contexts" (Conference).

" The international community, the private sector and especially governments [should] provide young people with adequate financial resources in order to realize their entire potential..." (Forum).

" ... sexism is an obstacle that must be overcome and the empowerment of women [is] a prerequisite for development." (Forum).

"Encouraging awareness and commitment among young women and young men to sustainable development principles and practices..." (Conference).

2. Labour Force:

"...the recognition that the problem of youth unemployment is serious and complex which requires action both [on] the macro and microeconomic levels by governments, the social partners, NGOs, and the United Nations system" (Forum).

"Promoting equal employment opportunities for young people and in particular for young women..." (Conference).

"Promoting research on youth unemployment..." (Conference).

"Investing in the entrepreneurial capacity of young women and young men..." (Conference).

"Promoting employment-oriented education and training to ensure constant adjustment of education to the changing social and economic environment, including market needs" (Conference).

"Promoting the development of mechanisms for career counselling for youth ..." (Conference).

"Promoting youth entrepreneurship in rural areas..." (Conference).

3. Education

"...education shall be free of charge at all levels, and equally accessible to everyone. ...We call... for the establishment of a World Education Fund to provide grants to facilitate equal access to all levels of education" (Forum).

"while recognizing that education should be relevant to employment opportunities, we call on the governments to...incorporate the teaching of languages... and global citizenship education, emphasizing universal concepts such as peace, human rights, intercultural and inter-religious understanding, environmental protection, sustainable development, and gender equality" (Forum).

"Allocating resources to vocational training and insuring that education and training systems correspond to economic, social and entrepreneurial realities based on identified needs and technological advancement" (Conference).

"Encouraging the inclusion of issues such as family life education, reproductive health, ...and drug and substance abuse prevention in the design of school curricula, as well as in extracurricular activities" (Conference).

4. Health:

"the formulation/review and implementation of an integrated national youth health policy addressing all major health issues including: sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, infectious diseases, substance abuse, nutrition and hygiene, harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, mental health, occupational and environmental health" (Forum).

"Creating the political, legal, material and social conditions that allow access to basic health care...with special attention to major diseases..." (Conference).

"...support the development in each country of comprehensive programmes to reduce the consumption of tobacco, exposure to environmental tobacco smoke, and the abuse of alcohol" (Conference).

"Recognizing the problem of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse...against young women and young men and taking effective measures for their prevention" (Conference).

"Raising the awareness of youth...of the dangers of drug abuse of both licit and illicit substances..." (Conference).

"Instituting strong measures aimed at restricting and/or preventing access to drugs by young women and young men" (Conference).

5. Family Formation

"Recalling that the family unit has a vital role to play in the integration of youth into society...specific measures and mechanisms should be created or reinforced within an integrated perspective of families." (Conference).

6. Public Participation

"-youth should participate in political decision making on all levels..." (Forum).

"the formation and/or strengthening of national youth NGO platforms, which represent the widest range of democratic youth organizations of each state..." (Forum).

“the formulation of informal and formal consultative mechanisms between national youth NGO platforms and governments...” (Forum).

“Ensuring and encouraging the active participation of youth in all spheres of society and in decision-making processes at the national, regional and international levels...” (Conference).

“Facilitating access of youth to legislative and policy-making bodies, through their representatives...” (Conference).

“Giving higher priority to marginalized, vulnerable and disadvantaged young women and young men...in order to provide them with the means and motivation to contribute effectively to their societies.” (Conference).