



Assessment of National Youth Policies for Further Implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond

*The paper below reviews the available information on the experience in the formulation and implementation of youth policies in the region and draws lessons for the development of more effective youth policies in the coming years. It served as a background paper for the **Second Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on HRD for Youth** in Bangkok from 1 to 5 June 1998.*

Youth policy is an important means of promoting the greater participation of young people in the life of society both now and in the future. As stated in the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, which was adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 50/81 of 14 December 1995, "the capacity for progress of our societies is based, among other elements, on their capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of youth in the building and designing of the future".⁽¹⁾ Therefore, in the formulation of long-term policies, societies should take into account not only the ability of youth to mobilize support for today's development policies, but also their unique perspective of the future.

The economic, social and political participation of youth will largely determine the effectiveness of the actions proposed in the World Programme of Action for Youth. As advocated in the Jakarta Plan of Action on Human Resources Development in the ESCAP Region, both the means and the ends of development should be people. Young people should be given a position that allows them to express their views on the improvement of the social, economic and cultural aspects of society. Policies should aim to create an atmosphere in society that provides young people with the possibilities for bringing about improvement in their own lives and for the future of society as a whole.

What then has been the experience of the countries and areas of the Asian and Pacific region in the formulation and implementation of national youth policies? Admittedly, the experience is still limited since, with a few exceptions such as Bangladesh, Guam, Sri Lanka and Thailand, most countries and areas of the region did not formulate a youth policy until after the International Youth Year: Participation, Development and Peace, which was celebrated in 1985, and in many cases such policies were not formulated until the 1990s.

Most of the existing youth policies were formulated as part of the implementation of the recommendations in the guidelines for further planning and suitable follow-up in the field of youth, which were endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 40/14 of 18 November 1985. In a sense, however, a regional exchange of experience on the formulation and implementation of youth policies is all the more important precisely because of the scarcity of experience in the region.

The present paper reviews the available information on the experience in the formulation and implementation of youth policies in the region and draws lessons for the development of more effective youth policies in the coming years.

I. WHY A YOUTH POLICY?

Why do countries need a youth policy? The following is a brief review of the

rationale for such policy.

A national youth policy is an instrument of national significance. It represents a nationally agreed formula for meeting the needs and aspirations of young women and men and provides a framework for youth development. It is both an acknowledgment of the specific needs of young people and a formal recognition of their potential and unique contribution to national development. It identifies a country's priorities and the direction it intends to take with regard to the development of its young men and women. It should encapsulate a vision, framework and realistic guidelines from which strategies and actions can be developed to facilitate meaningful youth participation and development within a country.

One of the important functions of a youth policy is that it serves as a statement of a society's commitment to its young citizens. The very fact that a country has a youth policy attests to its commitment to accord priority to young people. Therefore, any youth policy at least partially serves its purpose by appealing to the society to give priority attention to youth concerns. However, an effective youth policy should aim to achieve much more, including the following:

- (a) To identify the priority needs and aspirations of youth, as well as communicate the country's vision for its young people;
- (b) To provide a framework for common goals and cooperation/coordination of actions/strategies for youth development among various concerned bodies, including government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and youth groups;
- (c) To provide examples of how youth can engage in the decision-making processes of the country through involvement in the formulation and implementation of youth policies;
- (d) To provide a basis for equitable distribution of government resources to meet the needs of young women and men, particularly those that are the most disadvantaged;
- (e) To provide an opportunity to mainstream youth policies into other sectoral policies and programmes;
- (f) To serve as a basis for the strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes that affect young people.

Effective youth policies can play a major role in creating an enabling environment in which youth can develop their full potential and aspirations through the creation of a framework for action for all agencies and organizations interested in the needs and contributions of young women and men.⁽²⁾ What might be involved in formulating and implementing effective youth policies that bring about the benefits listed above? The best practices of some countries in the region and beyond are reviewed in the following sections.

II. STRATEGIES FOR FORMULATION

A. Identifying the needs of youth

In order to develop fully the aspirations of youth for people-centred development of society, policy makers need first to understand the problems and needs of youth. Precise understanding of the felt needs of youth must be a prerequisite for the formulation of a youth policy. However, capturing a wide range of needs of a variety of subgroups, such as girls and young women, in-school youth, out-of-school youth, and those who are the most disadvantaged, is not an easy task. None the less, as stated in the guidelines for further planning and suitable follow-up in the field of youth,⁽³⁾ it is more significant to focus on young people "as a broad category encompassing many specific subgroups" than as a single demographic entity.

In the context of Asia and the Pacific, it is important to pay special attention to two of the more vulnerable groups: girls and young women, and rural youth, both of which constitute a significant proportion of the population. Girls and young women in many countries of the ESCAP region constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in society. As the World Programme of Action for Youth points out, "girls are often treated as inferior and are socialized to put themselves last,

thus undermining their self-esteem. Discrimination and neglect in childhood can initiate a lifelong downward spiral of deprivation and exclusion from the social mainstream".⁽⁴⁾ Likewise, in many ways, rural youth in the ESCAP region are one of the most disadvantaged sectors of the population as a result of the general situation found in the countryside, characterized by poverty, exploitation, lack of access to land, illiteracy, lack of stable work, isolation, unsanitary conditions and little participation in the decision-making processes which affect the lives of the people themselves. The problems of rural youth are often more acute than those which confront their urban counterparts because of the urban-rural gap in development which is predominant in many countries. The issue of rural youth has also to be considered in the context of the massive urbanization that is occurring in many countries of the region, since rural-urban migration is more likely to take place among youth than any other population group. The special needs of any particular youth group, especially those of vulnerable groups, thus need to be well captured in the formulation of youth policies.

B. Participatory formulation processes

The achievement of a credible and useful national youth policy requires commitment to process, time and resources. The following elements of the formulation process have been found to be important in ensuring that a youth policy captures the felt needs and issues of youth:

- (a) Accordance of national commitment and priority to the task and process;
- (b) Creation of a reference group, or task force to direct, oversee and service the formulation process. Ideally such a group should include personnel from both governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as youth participants;
- (c) Identification of needs, resources and opportunities. A national youth policy must be based on the following: an understanding of the broad socio-demographic characteristics of the country and its youth population; the expressed perceptions, needs, aspirations and priorities of its young men and women; the resources available to meet those needs and hopes; and awareness of possible options and opportunities;
- (d) Consultation with and participation by various stakeholders. It is vital that this involves adequate opportunity for the contribution of ideas and opinions by both a diverse range of young women and men as well as all concerned agencies (both governmental and non-governmental) whose service has an impact on young people;
- (e) Drafting of the policy document, reflection on the feedback obtained and review of the document;
- (f) Adoption of the policy by the highest authority, either at the cabinet level or by parliament.

In the Asian and Pacific region, a variety of techniques have been employed to enhance the consultation and research phases for the preparation of national youth policies. The following examples highlight a strong commitment to ensuring maximum participation by young men and women:

- (a) Maldives. Conducted participatory planning workshops involving all key governmental and non-governmental agencies, in which each group was represented by at least a two-person team, which included at least one member within the youth target age group;
- (b) Bangladesh. Implemented a programme of workshops on "youth issues and opportunity". Over 560 workshops were conducted from the subdistrict to the national level, and a set of sectoral workshops was held on priority issues such as employment, training and education, self-development, drug and health issues, environment, culture, participation and migration;
- (c) Malaysia. The new national youth development policy, proposed and co-drafted by the Malaysian Youth Council, went through a process lasting several years, which comprised brainstorming, consultation, negotiation, review and feedback among the parties concerned, including the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the National Youth Consultative Committee. The policy was ultimately approved by the Cabinet in 1998.

Outside the region, the process followed by South Africa in formulating its national youth policy is worth highlighting for its uniqueness, comprehensiveness and commitment to ensuring that young people are consulted on their situation, needs and vision. That process included the following:

- (a) Establishment and inauguration of the National Youth Commission by the president of the country, who is charged with the responsibility of producing a national youth policy and action plan. The Commission is composed of 19 full-time and part-time commissioners, all within the youth age group;
- (b) Organization of a national youth summit which drew together 200 representatives from major youth, political and community organizations to discuss the process of policy formulation and to create a framework and direction for the national youth policy;
- (c) Organization of an extensive youth consultation process involving provincial youth summits in all provinces (involving 1,400 people) and youth hearings (involving over 3,000 young people in 35 hearings);
- (d) Organization of a series of 12 sectoral workshops and focus groups on key strategy areas;
- (e) Encouragement of written submissions (92 were received) proposing a wide variety of concepts, programmes and opportunities for youth development.

In formulating a youth policy, policy makers should have objectives that are conducive to the development of the potential of youth and the promotion of their active participation in society. In a survey undertaken by the ESCAP secretariat in 1996 on the status of youth policies in the region, it was found that most countries of the ESCAP region recognize youth as a positive force. As such, they are focusing their youth policy objectives on the development of the full potential of that portion of their human resource pool in order to ensure the maximum contribution of youth to the development of their societies. In that regard, most countries recognize the importance of providing a suitable environment for the active participation of youth in society. However, the concept of the participation of youth seems to vary among the countries of the region. Only a limited number of countries clearly include the participation of youth in the decision-making process in the objectives of their youth policy. It should be noted, however, that the concept of the participation of youth in national development should not be interpreted to mean the exploitation and utilization of youth as human resources for national development. Rather, it should imply the participation of youth in decision-making with regard to national development. In other words, rather than perceiving youth merely as resources for national development, they should be viewed as stakeholders and members of society. Genuine participation of youth should be encouraged in the formulation of youth policies, using some of the means suggested above.

C. Mainstreaming youth policies

While it is important that a national youth policy should be formulated as independent legislation, it is necessary for countries to integrate such policy into the overall development scheme. Youth policy needs to be related to and coordinated with other sectoral policies and integrated into the national strategy for development. It is essential that the particular needs and problems of youth should be considered an integral part of national planning and policy-making. A major step towards integration is to ensure that youth policy is not isolated from the other objectives of the national development plan, but incorporated in the mainstream sectors of the plan. A national youth policy should not be treated as a separate plan for young people. It should cut across sectoral lines so that the needs of youth and the implications of policies on youth are duly recognized in each of the sectoral development plans. Without the mainstreaming of national youth policy, backed by an appropriate budget allocation and infrastructure for implementation, policy formulation can become a futile exercise.

Furthermore, in order for youth policy to be mainstreamed successfully, it is necessary to involve relevant agencies and ministries at the initial policy formulation stage in order to enlist their collaboration in the implementation stage. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the survey conducted by ESCAP revealed that in 12 countries the formulation of youth policy involved a number of parties, most notably youth organizations. In other countries, it involved parliamentary commissions, the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, political

parties, universities and research centres, religious and local communities, and local government. None the less, in the majority of the countries of the region, the explicit incorporation of youth policy in national development plans had yet to take place. In order for youth policy to be truly effective, it should be developed as independent legislation, while at the same time it also needs to be closely integrated and mainstreamed into the national development strategy. Thus, in the formulation process the mainstreaming requirement needs to be kept in mind.

In this regard, the recent experience of Thailand is noteworthy. In an effort to mainstream youth policy in the national economic and social development plan, the period of coverage of the youth policy was made to coincide with that of the national development plan. Furthermore, in the recent formulation of the youth development plan, the same participatory process used in the formulation of the eighth five-year plan (1997-2001) was applied. There were two parallel processes: governmental review and people's participation through NGO representation. The governmental process was coordinated by the National Youth Bureau, the highest government agency responsible for youth affairs, which focused on the strategies to develop the desirable human qualities identified in the eighth five-year plan. The non-governmental process aimed at developing an action plan at the grass-roots level, based on a survey of the youth situation at the provincial level. The two processes converged towards the conclusion of the planning process at the stage of preparation of the draft documents.

III. STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. Clear framework, flexible programmes

Policy makers should aim at creating an enabling rather than a constraining environment through youth policy so that different actors may play their roles and realize their aspirations. In other words, youth policy should aim, inter alia, to promote non-governmental youth organizations by setting up a clear framework for their activities. This may be done through the articulation of a broad but clear policy framework that allows for flexibility in programme development in order to tap the creative talents of the concerned parties involved in youth affairs, particularly youth NGOs. An important role of youth policy, in addition to providing an overall framework and direction for youth activities, is to promote the involvement of a wide range of actors, including government, NGOs, the private sector and youth themselves. According to a 1992 report published by the Commonwealth Secretariat, a "youth policy should spell out only broad parameters of work and general outline of action so that the implementing agencies, especially the NGOs, have adequate scope and freedom to evolve their own programmes and activities on the basis of their philosophy of work, objectives, needs of the beneficiary groups and position of resources."⁽⁵⁾ By setting up a clear but broad framework for programme development, a youth policy serves as an effective instrument for mobilizing the different parties concerned in a country, particularly youth organizations, in planning and implementing youth programmes. The new National Youth Development Policy of Malaysia is intended to serve as a guide which will give opportunities and space for all in planning and implementing programmes to strengthen youth development.

B. Linkage with action plans, implementation and coordination mechanisms

A youth policy has to be flexible enough to allow a variety of parties to evolve their own programmes within the framework provided in the policy. At the same time, it is important that a national action plan be developed to accompany the national youth policy. As expressed by the Commonwealth ministers of youth:

"It is not enough to formulate national youth policies. What is more important is their implementation. It is therefore necessary that member Governments should develop national plans of action for youth, consistent with the policies. Resources should also be made available to ensure that this plan of action is fully implemented."⁽⁶⁾

Effective national youth policies are linked to national youth action plans. They also outline a range of organizational mechanisms and activities required for effective implementation and coordination. The Commonwealth Handbook states that the function of the action plan is as follows:

"The national action plan should be designed as a cooperative expression of all key government and non-government agencies concerned with youth development. The national action plan should be gender sensitive and provide a practical statement on the implementation of the national youth policy, reflecting the direction, priorities and strategy areas of the policy... The plan should clearly define the specific actions that will be undertaken; when they will be undertaken and by whom. It should also indicate what resources will be required to effectively undertake these actions."⁽⁷⁾

Maldives has not only completed the formulation process, but is now designing a national youth action plan that includes the following:

- (a) Formulation of an overall government response to the key strategy areas of the policy;
- (b) Strengthening of the lead government agency, namely the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to fulfil its role adequately, in terms of both programme initiatives and staffing;
- (c) Design of appropriate coordination mechanisms.

The Philippine medium-term youth development plan (1999-2004) also lists all the agencies responsible for the strategies to tackle the existing challenges.

Policy makers should be mindful of the fact that the implementation of policies and programmes for youth should encompass a broad range of sectors in society. Hence, extensive involvement and coordination are required with a large number of governmental as well as non-governmental actors. Youth policy encompasses all facets of life and, for that reason, in addition to the integration of a youth policy into the national development framework, appropriate collaborative mechanisms should be put in place at the stage of policy formulation. Policy implementation requires concerted efforts by a number of ministries, agencies and non-governmental bodies. To bring about a collaborative relationship of that nature at the time of implementation, as already discussed above, the formulation of policy documents should also involve appropriate consultation and collaboration among the various bodies concerned since they will have to work within the general framework of the national development policy.

However, coordination in the implementation of policies and programmes remains a major challenge. Experience has shown that the task of coordination has been overwhelming for national focal point agencies, given that most of them are newly established and lack strong financial backing.

In this connection, it may be useful to note the suggestions of a 1993 study by the United Nations on the global situation of youth in the 1990s. The study points out that basic conditions have to be fulfilled in order for coordination mechanisms to function effectively. These include the following:

- (a) An adequate commitment to, and adequate instruments for, furthering youth policy objectives;
- (b) A capacity to coordinate ongoing activities and to identify areas requiring attention and developmental effort;
- (c) Development of the proper organizational balance by sufficient governmental, non-governmental and youth representation.

Furthermore, based on past regional experience, it may be concluded that the organizational location, that is, the level of government authority attached to the focal point agency, together with the level of budgetary support, is a critical factor in the effectiveness of the agency as a coordinating body.

The institutional strengthening and appropriate positioning of youth focal point agencies should be considered for effective implementation of youth policy. One strategy advocated during the International Youth Year was to establish appropriate coordination mechanisms within each country to encourage the integration of youth issues into national development planning. In response to this, numerous governments in the region formulated a youth policy and created ministries, councils, departments, secretariats and offices which, in many cases, were granted a high level of government authority to promote and implement the

policy.

However, the mechanisms for implementing youth policy appear to be in need of review in many countries. Ministries or departments responsible for youth affairs are often charged with responsibility for developing policies and programmes which address the masses of unemployed youth, but they are left in a weak financial and political position with regard to the coordination of youth activities with other line ministries and NGOs. Even when coordination efforts with other ministries are successful, the necessary support is often provided only when surplus resources are available after each sectoral ministry has implemented its own programmes. Therefore, in many countries where strong political commitment is absent, youth ministries tend to limit themselves to peripheral activities concerning youth, such as recreation, culture, sports and mobilization of youth organizations for specific projects. While the creation of youth ministries and equivalent agencies is, in a sense, a manifestation of government support for youth development, the strategic positioning of such institutions, together with adequate financial backing, appears essential to their full and effective functioning.

IV. KEY INDICATORS FOR THE EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

National youth policy is formulated and implemented to achieve goals or create positive outcomes. What outcomes should the policy makers aim to achieve through youth policy? In other words, what indicators should one look for to determine the effectiveness of the policy?

At a national youth policy and programme regional consultative meeting for Asian Commonwealth countries, held at Colombo in October 1995, the following were identified as key indicators for an effective youth policy:

- (a) Improvement in qualitative and quantitative indicators related to priority strategy areas, such as unemployment, health and literacy;
- (b) Greater degree of youth participation;
- (c) Greater youth satisfaction levels as evidenced by indicators such as less antisocial behaviour and greater usage of youth services;
- (d) Greater level of stakeholder satisfaction;
- (e) Improved coordination and cooperation between stakeholders;
- (f) Enhanced commitment by government as evidenced by:
 - (i) Greater financial commitment;
 - (ii) Recognition of the importance of youth affairs;
 - (iii) Setting of targets;
 - (iv) Greater awareness of youth in various ministries and enhanced resource allocations for youth concerns;
 - (v) Creation of new institutions and services;
 - (vi) Enhanced status for key lead youth agencies;
 - (vii) Improved equity and access for youth subgroups identified as disadvantaged, particularly young women;
- (g) Increased awareness in society of youth issues as evidenced by:
 - (i) Increased participation and support;
 - (ii) More media focus on young people;
 - (iii) Recognition by the international community and donors of youth initiatives.

The ESCAP survey on the implementation of youth policies in the region revealed that the lack of a systematic monitoring and evaluation process is a common concern in many countries. For example, the Government of Sri Lanka conducts evaluations of youth policy through discussions with youth representatives at the national, provincial and grass-roots levels. Although the

value of such an exercise is fully recognized, it is also felt that the application of common evaluation criteria is difficult because of the wide range of youth projects carried out by various entities. The results of these activities are often recorded in qualitative but not quantitative terms. Therefore, the measurement of the aggregate effect of a youth policy often becomes difficult.

In this regard, the Philippine medium-term youth development plan, 1999-2004, provides an example of an effort to express achievements and challenges in quantitative terms (e.g., through a survey on the satisfaction of youth with school facilities, and monitoring the increase in the government budget allocation for education). It also stresses the importance of periodic reviews of youth policy. Periodic reviews are necessary not only to assess the status of the implementation of youth policies and programmes, but also to review and update relevant information on the economic, social, legislative and physical environment which affects the implementation of policies and programmes. The Philippine plan not only evaluates the status of the implementation of programmes through different surveys, including a survey on the satisfaction of youth, but also identifies the implementation bottlenecks and determines why certain programmes have not produced satisfactory results.

It is important that mechanisms should be created and responsible bodies identified to conduct regular reviews of the national youth policy. The synchronization of coverage with the national development plan, such as in the case of Thailand and the Philippines, would help to regularize the periodic review of youth policies. Furthermore, it should be noted that information-gathering on the status of the implementation of the youth policies, through such means as surveys of youth satisfaction and interviews with youth leaders, serves to raise the awareness of society on issues concerning youth.

V. CONCLUSIONS

One strategy advocated during the International Youth Year was the need to establish appropriate coordination mechanisms within each country to encourage the integration of youth issues into national development planning. In response to this, numerous governments in the region formulated a national youth policy and created ministries, councils, departments, secretariats and offices which, in many cases, were granted a high level of government authority to promote and implement the policy.

However, the mechanisms for implementing youth policy appear to be in need of review in many countries. Ministries or departments responsible for youth affairs are often charged with responsibility for developing policies and programmes which address the masses of unemployed out-of-school youth, but they are left in a weak financial and political position with regard to the coordination of youth activities with other line ministries and NGOs. Even when coordination efforts with other ministries are successful, the necessary support is provided only when surplus resources are available after each sectoral ministry has implemented its own programmes. Therefore, in many countries where strong political commitment is absent, youth ministries tend to limit themselves to peripheral activities concerning youth, such as recreation, culture, sports and mobilization of youth organizations for specific projects. While the creation of youth ministries and equivalent agencies is, in a sense, a manifestation of government support for youth development, the strategic positioning of such institutions, together with adequate financial backing, appears essential to their full and effective functioning.

Efforts should be made to ensure better coordination, not only among government agencies but also between government agencies and NGOs. Youth organizations need to be supported. Non-governmental youth organizations have played a key role in reaching out to young people with programmes and services as well as in representing their interests. A youth policy should aim, inter alia, to promote non-governmental youth organizations by setting up a clear framework for their activities. Youth organizations should not be viewed merely as an arm of governmental organizations to be used in reaching the youth population; a youth policy should actually be structured in such a way as to encourage creativity and initiative on the part of youth organizations. Governmental support for youth organizations could take a variety of forms and not just be limited to financial assistance. Such support could be in the form of services and expertise in the planning and implementation of the activities of the organizations, bearing in mind the need to maintain the independence of such

organizations. One method would be to support a network of youth organizations as a forum for exchanging views and experience, and for providing opportunities for resource sharing.

While a number of initiatives have been taken in the Asian and Pacific region during the decade following the International Youth Year, many countries only began in the 1990s to take action to set up a youth policy, as well as a youth ministry and agency. In addition, the newly developed youth policies have yet to be fully integrated into national development strategies. Youth policy is among the newest type of legislation in many countries of the region, and there is a high demand in the region for sharing experience on its formulation and implementation. The possibilities for regional cooperation in this field, particularly through networking of youth organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, are tremendous. The time is ripe for governments and NGOs to forge ahead with such initiatives.

1. General Assembly resolution 50/81, annex, para. 104.
2. See Commonwealth Youth Programme, Formulating and Implementing National Youth Policies: A Commonwealth Handbook (1996).
3. See A/40/256, annex.
4. General Assembly resolution 50/81, annex, para. 98.
5. Commonwealth Youth Programme: Asia Centre, "Youth Policy and Its Implementation (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1992).
6. Working Group on Youth Policy Development, Commonwealth Ministers of Youth Meeting, Trinidad and Tobago, 1995, cited in Formulating and Implementing National Youth Policies: A Commonwealth Handbook (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996).
7. Ibid.

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