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GOVERNANCE/VOICE

Youth as Nation Builders

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Consider this vision of a thriving society: A country whose citizens, young and old, are informed about and engaged in all the major issues that affect their lives. A place with adults and young people together at the table, debating, grappling with problems, crafting solutions and jointly deciding on how resources should be allocated. A robust democracy where all people, including youth, exercise their right to select those who would speak and act on their behalf and hold them accountable. "Nation building" is a term for the process by which the citizens of a country work together to build a thriving society from the ground up. The critical question is, does the country consider youth as citizens? If so, how are youth engaged in the nation building process?

A great deal of power lies behind the potential role of youth as nation builders through political participation. Nation building refers to a constructive process of engaging all citizens in building social cohesion, economic prosperity and political stability in an inclusive and democratic way. Ideally, it is a process through which all people (regardless of age) have access to and control of structures and mechanisms that govern their lives. Admittedly, the vision sounds unattainable for two reasons. Few societies have found adequate ways to ensure that all adult citizens fully participate in the political process. Even fewer have found adequate ways to ensure that young people share in the burdens and benefits of citizenship. Nonetheless young people and adults have been exploring and developing this vision for years in other regions—notably Europe and South Africa.

Nation Building—South Africa

The South African government passed the National Youth Act in 1995, leading to the establishment of the National Youth Commission in 1996, a government structure made up of publicly nominated and appointed commissioners and linked to the Office of the President. The Commission is made up of five full-time official commissioners, five part-time and nine additional members representing the nine different provinces. All members of the Commission must be under the age of 35 to ensure that young people are participating fully in formulating their concerns and working toward a solution. The National Commission is establishing a comprehensive framework for the development of policy that supports youth issues. In 1997, the commission developed a national youth policy after an elaborate process of research and consultation. It has also put forward possible legislation on a national youth service program.

In addition to the National Youth Commission, a number of youth organizations have come together to establish the South African Youth Council (SAYC)—a civil society counterpart to the Youth Commission.

The establishment of these bodies during this period represents two major achievements. First, the establishment of the Commission denotes a clear political commitment to providing young people with the space and avenues for them to influence policies and to propose solutions. More significantly, it is a demonstration of a political commitment to make sure that young people take their rightful place as full partners and participants in the shaping of a more democratic and caring society. Second, both the

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Commission and the Council have brought together young leaders from different organizations in common work, thus building bridges between groups of young people who had been divided by political conflict and war. With this process comes a new culture of nation building and reconciliation.

Challenges. Creating structures for coordination and lobbying on behalf of young people by young people themselves is an important part of ensuring that young people's interest are represented. The challenges facing young people and the organizations that represent them is very clear. Platforms such as the Commission and Council are only useful if they are able to:

- Engage and mobilize grassroots support that advances the ability of young people to be involved in their own development and the development of their communities.
- Bolster the efforts of nongovernmental organizations and community based organizations by maximizing their resources and building political support for practical programs
- Advance the youth development agenda inside the government without forming a client relationship with the state—that is, becoming dependent and marginal.

This last challenge is perhaps the most serious, because failing to overcome it would limit the capacity of the political youth movement to lobby effectively for lasting social transformation. It is the litmus test for both the Council and the Commission as South Africa draws closer to the second democratic government election. Accomplishments. The National Youth Commission has successfully developed a set of government policies that are youth friendly and have earmarked significant resources for the support of grassroots youth programs. These government youth resources have oversight by the South African Youth Council, which ensures that there is full community representation.

Inter-Nation Building—the European Dimension

In the late 1960s, many European countries first established national youth policies and nongovernmental youth structures that directly interacted with national governments in the fields of education, youth policy and other matters of concern to young people.

In many European countries these national youth structures are called national youth councils. A national youth council is the national representative body for the majority of national youth organizations in a country. Many European countries acknowledge their national youth councils and support their work through financial assistance and political recognition.

Youth for Europe. The European Union, which is comprised of 15 European countries, supports youth work significantly through programs such as Youth For Europe. The Youth for Europe program, with an approximately \$128 million four-year budget, promotes close co-operation and solidarity among young people in all European countries. Youth for Europe is by far one of the largest youth programs in the world, enabling young people and youth workers to organize and finance training courses, seminars, conferences, exchanges, pan-European cooperation, research and information projects. It also monitors public policy in European Union Institutions. It provides young Europeans and all relevant professionals in the youth work field opportunities and financial assistance to prepare and implement youth exchanges and projects as well as support cooperation and information sharing activities.

European Youth Forum. In 1997, the founders of Youth for Europe—Council of European Youth Committee (CENYC) and the European Coordination Bureau of International Youth Organizations (ECB)—formed a new larger representative youth structure called European Youth Forum. Most of its members are comprised of the national youth councils of the 41 countries that are part of the Council of Europe member states and over 40 international non-governmental youth organizations.

The European Youth Forum's annual budget of \$2.25 million comes largely through the European Union, the Council of Europe, and membership fees. European states often fund nongovernmental organizations, which make up civil society. Thus the Youth Forum, despite its funding source, remains an independent nongovernmental body.

The European Youth Forum gives European youth organizations a powerful tool to influence policies and programs that affect young people. Its close links with European institutions—the Council of Europe and the European Union—makes it one of the most effective lobbying organizations in Europe. Its policy areas reflect the challenges young people face today in Europe, namely employment, education and training, interdependence and solidarity, gender issues, human rights and, last but not least, a civil society in all of Europe.

Challenges.

In the last two years, people have increasingly been criticizing the “representativeness” of youth organizations. Some European governments have expressed concern about the lack of involvement of “un-organized” young people, meaning those who are not involved in youth organizations. The Youth Forum as an umbrella body comprises the largest possible group of young people in Europe, yet it cannot claim to represent all young people in Europe.

During the 1990s, young people also began to change their attitudes toward youth organizations, turning away from organizational structures with set rules and toward short-term localized initiatives such as environmental projects, loose associations with various causes and campaigning groups. Youth organizations will have to respond to these changing patterns of civil engagement and offer new ways of participation.

The issue of social background is also increasingly important. Youth organizations have a reputation for being very middle class structures. While this is not true in every case, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds still find it difficult to associate themselves with “traditional” youth organizations. Structures such as the European Youth Forum will have to find ways to keep the doors open and engage all young people, regardless of background. Failing to do so would seriously undermine their legitimacy.

The European Youth Forum does ensure that Europe is being built with young people in mind. Young people form the largest single constituency in Europe, and European states are aware that young people have to be

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taken seriously. Young people in Europe have taken up the challenge and are fully prepared to get their voices heard.

Accomplishments. The European Youth Forum has an official seat at the Council of Europe and directly influences policy that affects young people in the Council's member states. The Forum has directly affected policies that have created jobs and job training programs for thousands of youth in the European community; it has successfully lobbied and passed policy that supports monies for youth higher education and vocational training opportunities in the European community. The Youth Forum has also successfully lobbied for millions to support tolerance in the European youth community and has run a successful youth led campaign across Europe called All Different All Equal, which focused on developing tolerance for ethnic and racial difference.

Considerations for the United States

There are many lessons to be learned from the international community on the role young people are playing in the nation building process, the structures developed to support youth in nation building and the outcomes of youth involvement in nation building issues. This article provides some initial examples and thoughts for consideration from South Africa and Europe.

Youth are the least politically organized constituency in the United States and, more often than not, those organized around youth issues are caring adults and not youth themselves. Recognizing this situation, youth in the United States have begun the process of exploring grassroots nation building. Over the past two years, people have been convening in many meetings, projects, initiatives and organizations interested in connecting the dots between existing youth action and nation building. Emerging is a more informed youth constituency that is recognizing the value in coordinating nation building efforts nationally. Currently organizations such as Local Initiative, Support, Training, and Education Network (LISTEN, Inc.), are facilitating national conversations around coordination of youth in nation building in the United States. As young people explore how youth can be active participants in a nation building process in the United States, they have much to learn from the international community. If we are serious about entering into a conversation on nation building in the United States, we should begin with two immediate questions:

1. What should the role of young people be in nation building in the United States?
2. What mechanisms are appropriate and desirable to promote youth participation in the political process?

Endnotes

The European Dimension is excerpted from a paper written by Thomas Tichelmann, education officer for the Non-Formal Sector at the National Committee for Development Education of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. The South African case is excerpted from a paper written by Steven Mokwena, South African Youth Development Specialist.

About the Author

Jules Dunham has worked on youth development issues and with young people for over 10 years. She has worked for the United Nations Development Programme's Office of Development Studies and served as the United Nations representative for Youth For Development and Cooperation, an international youth network based in Amsterdam. In addition, she has taken an active role in several major UN Conferences and trained youth on nation building issues. She was the youth caucus co-chair at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, Egypt and was the co-coordinator of youth involvement in the UN conference on Human Settlements, held in Istanbul, Turkey.

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