
Volunteering, youth and civic participation in southern Africa

Helene Perold

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Overview

- Introduction
- A historical perspective
- Challenges facing youth
- What voluntary service offers youth
- Transition to democracy and youth
- Renewed interest in volunteering
- Conclusions

Introduction

- A five-country study was conducted in 2005/6 to establish the form and extent of civic service and volunteering in five SADC countries:
 - Botswana
 - Malawi
 - South Africa
 - Zambia
 - Zimbabwe
- Focused on structured and informal community-based service and volunteering programmes
- Study supported by the Global Service Institute at Washington University, St Louis, Miss, USA

A historical perspective

- The concept of service and volunteering is part of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* (Isizulu), *letsema* (Setswana) and *kujitolea* (Kiswahi)
- Impact of colonialism
 - completely different value systems
 - failure to invest significant resources in the development of African communities
- The spirit of cooperation and reciprocity persisted in indigenous communities; citizen activism flourished in the struggle for independence and in the anti-apartheid struggle
- Voluntary activity contributed significantly to development in newly independent/democratic countries

A historical perspective 2

- Post independence:
 - Some policies rooted in tradition of self-reliance
 - rapid investment in social development and absence of pluralist economies fostered expectations that government would provide in all respects
 - impacted negatively on the spirit of volunteerism
 - national youth service programmes established
 - some became strongly militaristic, used to entrench political parties
- 1970s: structural adjustment shifted burden of development to communities – revitalised traditional voluntary action
- Today: significant layer of NGOs active in development

Challenges facing youth

- Individual and collective identity
- Feel caught in forces over which they have no control
- Face conflicts between the values preached and those practised
- Globalisation and modernisation changing youth culture
- Challenges for young women seeking to break out of traditional constraints
- Unemployment and poverty
- Inadequate education and health challenges
- Poor access to information and modern technology
- Civil war and political instability

What voluntary service offers youth

- Opportunities to play an active role
- “Increased employability, social capital, and social and civic skills” (Johnson et al, 2006)
- Enhanced educational performance (Tapia, 2004)
- Seven out of eight MDGs have outcomes that relate to young people
 - Where youth are not the focus, they are instrumental in the achievement of the MDGs (World Bank, 2006)
- Youth volunteering for development
 - broadens world view
 - reduces xenophobia
 - enhances participation in national and global development

Transition to democracy and youth

- Botswana
 - Self-reliance informed national development strategy
 - But self-reliance was eroded by expectations that government must provide for all citizens
 - Today youth volunteering is driven by the need to develop skills for the labour market and acquire contacts for employment
- Malawi
 - Post-1994: rapid changes in the concept of volunteering
 - Communal voluntary service floundered as communities waited for government to solve local problems
 - Today volunteering responds to donor initiatives

Transition to democracy and youth 2

- South Africa
 - Young people were central to the anti-apartheid struggle
 - Democracy brought the expectation of a better life for all
 - Now volunteering widespread in the face of unemployment
 - Some preference for community-based volunteering
 - Emerging policy framework for youth service:
 - Unemployed youth
 - Higher and further education students
 - Youth in conflict with the law
 - Integrated youth service model (service, skills, learning)
 - Youth volunteering strategy to reach more young people

Renewed interest in volunteering

- Evidence of increasing interest in youth volunteering in African countries (UNV, 2006)
 - Governments: concerned about large, uninvolved, unemployed youth populations
 - Young people: look to volunteering as a means of getting ahead, getting employment
 - Relationship between public policy and volunteering?
- Botswana:
 - Government is urging citizens to do more – largely to cut costs and reduce dependency on state provision
 - Government increasingly relying on volunteers to provide needed services in home-based care and people-centered rural development policies

Renewed interest in volunteering 2

- Malawi:
 - Donor funding for HIV/AIDS, rights and governance and orphan care - youth clubs proliferate
 - Community-based volunteering targeting schools, but 'food for work' incentives are discouraging unpaid volunteering
- South Africa
 - Education system is not delivering the skills required by the economy
 - 40% of young people unlikely to find employment
 - Volunteering and youth service are filling a gap
 - Programmes are driven by the understanding that voluntary service can contribute to national development

Conclusions

- The growing interest in youth volunteering in African countries is a significant opportunity for public policy and for young people
- Young volunteers in southern Africa can become active contributors to national and global development
- The relationship between public policy and the extent of volunteering must be monitored – can have unintended consequences
- More collaboration, regional networking and research is needed to share, understand and document the field of volunteering