All too often youth policies and interventions are designed to deliver services to young people, failing to view youth themselves as important assets in delivering services to others. Youth service programs empower young people to play an active role in development while gaining the experience, knowledge, and values necessary for employment and active citizenship. Around the world, service programs are enabling young people to build sustainable housing, fight HIV/AIDS, and improve literacy rates through tutoring programs. These efforts challenge portrayals of youth as victims of poverty or problems to society and place them instead at the forefront of promoting development in their communities.
Youth service encompasses a continuum of activities that offer young men and women opportunities to participate in civic life in ways that are intended to benefit themselves and their communities. The range of programs spans from formal or national service, consisting of an organized period of substantial engagement, where young people are contributing to their local, national, or world community, in exchange for minimal or no monetary contribution to the participant to informal service, which is often the result of an ethic of service to others that is passed on through families, schools, civic organizations and popular culture. More formalized types of service usually take place through the efforts of government programs, employers, nonprofit organizations, and other civil society organizations that see a role for volunteers in achieving their missions. Research suggests that these more organized service programs provide the most benefit to both participants and the community.

In the most common national service model, young people in their late teens and twenties spend a year working full-time to meet local communities’ needs. But within that broad model, details vary considerably from country to country. The government might manage programs centrally and provide civil service options as an alternative to military service (Kenya, France, Hungary, Brazil 1967–89); the national government might determine criteria and funding and deliver services through non-governmental organizations (U.S., Hungary, U.K.); or the government might develop national service programs sponsored by various government departments (South Africa, Mexico, Nigeria). Programs also differ in terms of mandatory versus voluntary participation, length of service, and levels of compensation and benefits provided to participants.

An Investment with Many Returns

Youth service can be an effective youth intervention strategy and development strategy, providing important returns to the individual and the community, not to mention the important externalities that benefit society as a whole. A review of selected programs in OECD and developing countries provides evidence to this effect:

Returns to the Individual

Service 'employment' experience, even if unpaid, allows young people to gain the knowledge and skills that will facilitate their transition into paid employment.

Whether learning skills through on-the-job training that will serve them in their future career, or simply acclimatizing to a workplace environment, service can help young people for the workforce. As such, these programs not only serve goals for increasing youth employment, but enhance the overall employability of youth. Rigorous impact evaluations of the US Service and Conservation Corps—aimed primarily at disadvantaged youth (16–24) looking for a second chance to succeed in life—found that program participants in a 15-month follow up were much more likely to have worked for pay, had worked more hours, and were less likely to be arrested, vis-à-vis the control group. The Umsobomvu Youth Fund in South Africa finances a national service program with the explicit goal of providing youth with service opportunities across a range of sectors to enable young people to develop their skills in order to access employment or generate income.

Youth service provides constructive alternatives to risky behavior, and can provide a mechanism for reintegrating marginalized youth. Out-of-school and unemployed youth are at much greater risk of behaviors that are harmful to themselves and their communities, including crime, gang activities, social unrest, adolescent pregnancy, risky sex, drug and alcohol use. Youth service programs provide a structured environment in which to learn and work, while contributing to important development objectives at a relatively low cost to government or other service providers. A recently completed study in the US found that service programs were the only intervention among many surveyed that had a measurable impact on reducing teens’ pregnancy risk, even if the programs were not focused on sex education. This held true for multiple racial/ethnic groups, in rural and urban settings, and in both middle and high schools.

Participation in service programs empowers young people to become active citizens in addressing a wide range of critical community needs. The recognition of having something to contribute greatly affects their self-esteem and helps youth discount the future more heavily. The
experience of giving to one’s community can unleash a virtuous cycle of engagement in activities that strengthen communities and foster a commitment to public service. The *Popular Achievement* program in the *West Bank and Gaza* creates opportunities for young people to engage in productive activities. In one refugee camp, the teenagers held regular clean-up days, and lobbied local leadership to install garbage cans in the streets. In another West Bank town, youth built a library—constructing shelves from donated scrap lumber, collecting books from various civil society organizations, and convincing a local landowner to donate library space. A longitudinal study of *Americorps* found that participation in the program resulted in statistically significant positive impacts on: i) a participants’ connection to their community; ii) knowledge about challenges facing their community; and iii) participation in community-based activities such as attending public meetings and writing to newspapers. The same study also showed that program graduates were significantly more likely to enter public service careers in teaching, public safety, social work, and full-time military service.

**Returns to the Community**

Lasting change best occurs when communities support youth and youth contribute to their communities. Service programs can be an important—and cost-effective—tool for developing countries with limited budgets and staff in addressing a wide range of development priorities. Project examples include:

- **Combating HIV/AIDS.** In South Africa, the *groundBREAKERS* service program is engaging more than 1,000 unemployed youth aged 18 to 25 in one year of service to link public health clinics and community centers. The groundBREAKERS have also mobilized more than 5,000 mostly out-of-school and unemployed children, or ‘mpintshis’ (a township slang word for ‘friend, ‘mate’ or ‘helper’) aged 12 to 17 to educate peers about the risks of HIV/AIDS.

- **Building sustainable housing.** Since 1994, more than 47,000 low-income youth in the United States, South Africa, Serbia, Mexico, and Canada have built houses for homeless and low-income families through the *Youth-Build* program, while studying to complete secondary school, learning to be leaders in their communities, and getting support to make positive change. In Mexico, *Jovenes Constructores* is operating a similar program.

- **Improving literacy rates.** The *Pakistan National Youth Service* (PNYS) program recently launched a literacy campaign for educating women in remote, rural areas. PNYS has established 50 female adult literacy centers in both Rawalpindi and Kasur and are educating more than 1,500 women per year.

- **Protecting the environment.** The *Palawan Conservation Corps* (PCC) in the Philippines has been serving remote communities while simultaneously preserving critical ecosystems on the island. Youth-led projects, involving out-of-school youth, work to reforest areas around communities where erosion and flooding affect livelihoods and food security. Most recently, the planting of a 10,000 square-foot native plant nursery has greatly enhanced the PCC’s ability to restore the local wild areas. In Kenya, the *Slums Information Development and Resource Centers* (SIDAREC) is a youth development program that is serving an estimated 500,000 people in the slums of Nairobi. Among other projects, SIDAREC is enabling young people to establish a waste management and recycling center in Pumwani.
Building infrastructure. Service activities undertaken by young participants over a period of 12–15 months in a pilot of South Africa’s Umsobomvu Youth Fund program included the labor intensive construction of a road with culverts and drifts necessary to control run-off. Participants also worked on the construction of a multi-purpose center, and the repair of infrastructure in a conservation area.

Returns to Society: Positive Externalities

The examples presented in the previous section provide direct benefits to local communities, but they also serve national priorities and generate significant positive externalities. Most governments are struggling with how to implement effective policies and interventions to address the myriad challenges facing young people today, particularly the poor and marginalized who are generally out of school and out of work. From high levels of unemployment to increasing rates of crime and violence, from adolescent pregnancy to the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS infections, these challenges represent enormous economic and social costs to society. The values, attitudes and skills acquired by this generation will influence the course of events and shape the future in fundamental ways.

Youth service provides an effective means to address these challenges while meeting national objectives such as improving human capital, reducing unemployment, and providing cost-effective human resources to underserved communities. Yet, the benefits extend far beyond the obvious human and physical capital objectives. These range from reducing the economic and social cost of risky behavior to nation-building and transcending traditional social divides (see box on previous page).

Experience demonstrates that young people in every part of the world are eager to participate in activities that improve their communities and their own lives. What is missing is not motivation and interest from young people, but rather structured opportunities that help them develop the skills, knowledge and values necessary to become productive members of society.

Recommended reading

9. For more information, visit: www.youthbuild.org.
10. For more information, visit www.pnys.com.
11. For more information, visit http://www.sidarc.or.ki.