

## **YOUTH ISSUES: Rosanna Wong**

### Youth Development Goals: Meeting the Challenge

Today is International Youth Day. Called for in 2000 by the United Nations (UN), its purpose may be described as two fold: to highlight youth – defined as those between the ages of 15 and 24 – as a global resource and to expose the myriad of challenges faced by these leaders of tomorrow.

Youth make up one sixth of the world's population of six billion. We are all acutely aware, however, that save for a minority, young people the world over are faced with an extremely uncertain future. Unemployment, inadequate education, poverty, hunger, armed conflict, criminality, AIDS and drugs are just some of the issues that confront young people and which, in some of the most dire situations, are the unstable foundations on which they have to build their future. A grim picture indeed.

Yet, I am not convinced that this is a fatal picture. On the contrary, in almost every country in the world, these issues are being addressed: locally, nationally or internationally, by governments, civil society and/or multilateral agencies. The urgency and priority afforded to these issues can be questioned – *should* be questioned – because in the long run, these are the issues that will seriously impact the entire notion of youth as a contribution resource for the future.

It is only in rare and exceptional circumstances that policy directives towards youth are given prominence in any government's list of immediate problems to tackle. Very often, youth are affixed as an appendix to broader economic and social issues, like employment and crime, for example. Explicit policy measures targeting young people – except in education maybe – are lacking, thus reaffirming the reality that youth are not the main concern for governments or societies.

To remedy this rather lax approach to youth, we need to pay vital attention to their issues. Not attention in the sense of *understanding* the issues, but attention in the manner by which we *address* them. Simple awareness is insufficient. What are needed are action-oriented programmes and policies that not only identify the problems, but also proffer concrete solutions.

Here in Hong Kong, youth are faced with similar, albeit contextually specific, issues as their global counterparts. Unemployment for young people is at an all time high, reaching a staggering 30.1 per cent among youth between the ages of 15 and 19 in

2002. There is also an increasing trend of economically inactive youth, with more than 10 per cent of those between 15 and 24 neither engaging in work nor in education. Making equally dismal reading are working conditions for young people. A large number of this already weak group are employed in tertiary service industries, which are always more susceptible to redundancies and layoffs during vulnerable periods.

More alarming is the fact that the proportion of youth in low-income households (defined as those households earning HK\$5,000 or below) has increased over the past decade. Youth recipients of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) had reached 9 per cent in 2002, with nearly one tenth of youth CSSA recipients being unemployed.

By just glancing at these figures, related *only* to the livelihood issue, how can we honestly, rather than fashionably, talk about the need for youth to be involved in shaping the future?

Hong Kong is rather more fortunate than many other places. Over the years, both the Government and the Third Sector have provided a number of initiatives that target youth concerns. However, most of these programmes have relied on the provision of services that offer help and alleviate immediate hardships. One could argue that these programmes have not been as successful as they should have been, precisely because of their *re-active* agenda.

What Hong Kong needs is to commit herself pro-actively to her young people. This can only be done, however, if we change our mindset. We need to first of all inculcate in our basic policy formulations a comprehensive understanding of young people as a *resource* and not as a liability. We need to create a rationale that looks at the development of young people as *contributors* to society. We need to seek for *long-term, sustainable goals*, rather than offer band-aid responses to a given issue. Most of all, we need to hear the voices of young people articulate for themselves their prospects and how these could be achieved.

Recently, a number of young people got together to identify ten issues, which they felt to be significant to their futures. Called the Youth Development Goals, and addressed to the community at large, these ten goals included, narrowing the gap between rich and poor; providing opportunities for productive employment, the promotion of equal opportunities and instilling in young people a respect and

consciousness to the Rule of Law. Also included, were a commitment to life long learning and the promotion of healthy living. They indicated their desire to be included in defining issues on sustainable development. They also wanted to strengthen their national identity, while enhancing their talents and skills to be global citizens. Finally, and most fittingly, young people saw the need to increase their own participation in public affairs and community actions

I am sure that the young people involved in this process do not want to see the Development Goals become another stagnant document and I encourage their intention to meet with members of the Government and of the community to discuss the implications of the Goals and to see how they might be applied in a concrete way.

The setting out of Youth Development Goals bodes well for the future of Hong Kong. At first glance, it shows that in spite of the discouraging figures on youth employment and poverty, there is *hope* and a *commitment* to serve the community. However, on deeper analysis they are actually a challenge to all of us. These young people are asking us to seriously consider their opinions, while also enabling them to shape their own futures. We cannot ignore this clarion call. This is an opportunity that should be snatched, to encourage and nurture the younger generation.

It is no cliché to say that the future belongs to young people. But unless we can ensure them a future worth living for, and committing themselves to, why would they want it? It is a joint responsibility and what better time to act than on this International Youth Day?

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