

Part 8

The Role of Young Women and Men in Post-conflict Reconstruction



Steve Mokwena at May consultation, Sierra Leone

The Role of Young People in Post-conflict Reconstruction: Reflections on the South African Experience

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I wish to share the South African experience in relation to the role of young people in society and in particular to the role of young people in post-conflict reconstruction. In 1976 when I was in my second year of school, the townships erupted in flames. It was the first visible sign of youth protest. There was a sense that it was young people who were resisting apartheid education and refusing to be subjugated, and who took to the streets in large numbers. The decade from 1976 to 1986 was marked by considerable conflict and confrontation between young people and the state. Those of you who know something about South African politics would agree that it was also a time when the state (the white government) and the black community were in frequent clashes, but what we understood was that the struggle for power was around race.

But there was another dimension to that struggle. Young people were particularly disadvantaged by the fact that because of their age they were not accepted in society—they did not have the political, economic and social resources to become part of what they then thought was the mainstream of society. By the 1990s, when it was clear that South Africa was going to have a negotiated political settlement, people started talking about the face of an ill-fated generation. Psychologists, media people and community leaders came up with all sorts of names to describe what was happening to young people. The most popular description of all was to talk about young black South Africans, particularly young black South African men, as the 'lost generation'.

That generation typified everything that was bad about our country. We said that that generation of young people was going to threaten democracy. They were responsible for crime and indeed they were taken and put apart from the rest of society. I was involved in an organisation that was speaking not of young people as being lost but of a nation that would be lost if it did not come to terms with its young people. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan, later echoed these ideas when he argued that a nation, any nation, that cuts off its young people from itself does not deserve its future. In fact, he said, it deserves to bleed to death.

At that time, South Africa was on the verge of separating its young people and saying that they were deserving of punitive top-down measures because they were now outside of the so-called mainstream. We put forward an alternative recommendation, one that I would like to propose as something you may wish to debate. And that is, if you want to understand a society that is experiencing a level of destabilisation, or the nature of poverty or trauma in that society, look at the situation of children and young people—they are often a very good indicator of the level of social decay and deprivation that exists in the society.

I have been privileged this week to be walking around Freetown and the environs and talking to children, young people and those between childhood and adulthood. Some of them don't have jobs, some are amputees, and some are traumatised in one way or another. We are talking about people who do not see themselves as part of the mainstream. The question we have to ask ourselves is—what discussions, mechanisms and structures are we putting in place to make sure that we do not end up with a group of people who have been labelled, who have been stigmatised, as being 'outsiders'?

In South Africa in 1990 it was very clear that we had done just that. We began to talk about a process of 'marginalisation', which is a systematic process through which young people are denied education, they are denied jobs; they are also more importantly and, perhaps more controversially, denied access to power. They do not sit at the tables where things are talked about, where decisions are made, particularly those decisions that affect them more directly. So we looked at the process of exclusion, which is central to understanding why young people would be acting in particular ways in society. And our mission since then over a ten-year period has been to integrate young people to participate actively in the structures of society, particularly in the structures of power.

As a society in conflict at that time, we also had to deal with the many faces of violence and the many faces of trauma. Once we recognised the context of organised resistance to state power, there was a sense of comradeship among young people that allowed them to act positively in the struggle against white power. But once that context of white power was removed, young people were left without a structure, a framework in which to express themselves. And the slide between organised resistance and organised violence against one set of enemies—the slide between that and criminality was very easy.

We went into a post-election period with a very real possibility, a threat even today in South Africa, of young people who continue to centre their efforts in violence because they do not have a legitimate enemy or a legitimate struggle in which to channel that energy. Many young people have remained armed, and some of those who are still armed today are now participating in criminal activity. So one of the questions is that, once you have made a political settlement, you have perhaps found a political solution, but the central contradiction of the exclusion of young people from participation in society, has

not yet been removed. Their frustration, their sense of being vilified and stigmatised, remains. What do we do with that and in what ways do we then bring young people in?

I would like to put forward a few thoughts, which I have not so far heard in the discourse here. When we talk about post-conflict, we are assuming that there is some sort of generally agreed resolution to conflict. In South Africa our transition was highly contested, and I bet there are some people who are still saying that some of the decisions were made in ways that they should not have been. But the central weakness of our solution, which may well be the case here, is that young people's organised structures, or young people in whatever form, were not involved in the processes of dreaming and shaping what kind of society they want to have.

Young people are present or visible in this type of gathering by their absence, because we know that they are a sizeable group, that they can be found if we provide the platforms, the mechanisms to have this kind of conversation, to paint the picture of healing that they are entitled to.

In South Africa we made a fundamental mistake that may not be the case here. We called a national conference on 'marginalised youth'. With hindsight, I argue, be careful what you name things, be careful what you call people because, after we had called the conference, the press picked up the term 'marginalised youth'. People began seeing you in the streets wearing your hair in a particular way or, if you were out of school, or perhaps in trouble with the law, you were a marginalised youth. That was just as bad as calling people 'a lost generation', because then you could not bring them into a very constructive dialogue about what they felt needed to happen in their own country. We had stigmatised young people. So one of the lessons that I have learned is that if we had to do it differently, we would have first called the endeavour something else.

Young people in South Africa had taken up arms and had been very active in a credible struggle against an enemy. But once we started talking about solutions, we started thinking of them as less than they were actually worth. We spoke of them as 'vulnerable', as 'at risk' or 'lost', thereby denying them their power and strength to be social agents of change. We stopped negotiating a partnership with young people after apartheid and started saying to them, 'Go back to school, stay out of trouble, just wait, we, the adults or the government, will find the solutions.' Now we all know that because solutions do not emerge automatically, the frustration of young people becomes heightened as they are repeatedly told: 'When the time is right, you will be consulted.' We know, for a fact, that no solution is an instant one. It is better to include people as partners and core contributors of change, rather than as recipients. The opportunity is still there, the moment is right, young people can come in.

We are now in a position to reflect about things, so we know now that we could have done things differently. And I'll think about some of the positive elements too.

I'd like to come back to the point about the many faces of trauma and how it plays itself out. In South Africa we assumed that because young people had been exposed to trauma and violence and were affected negatively, that they had no developmental capacity. We assumed in our policies that what we had to do was 'fix' young people before we could 'develop' them. With hindsight now, working with young people, we learned that once you bring young people into the process of seeking solutions, and imagining and dreaming an alternative vision, the process itself has a healing, redemptive, restorative capacity. So you speak of development and the qualities you want in young people and communities, and you don't just speak of the fact that you're trying to improve literacy, or to eradicate violence, or to prevent HIV/AIDS.

You need to challenge yourself to ask, what is it you are trying to build? We know what we are trying to eradicate, but what is the vision of this society for its young people? For all of its young people? One of the better things that I have seen over the past 12 years of working with young people is work around youth policies. Now youth policies are often drawn up as a positive statement that commits a country and its people to a developmental vision for young people. But it often takes the form of a sub-ministry or a group of activities that happen away from the central corridors of power. In its most positive forms, it is the institutions and structures that allow young people to be sitting at the table making decisions about post-conflict reconstruction. Because young people's issues are everybody's issues, young people are concerned about health, about peace, about security, young people have something to say about rehabilitation, about the process of resettling people back into their communities, about the allocation of resources for children in education. Young people have everything to say about how the police should act or not act. Young people know that particularly, because they themselves are victims of such actions and processes. So I hope that we can review the policies that affect young people, and the administrative structures that are in place, and ask ourselves, are these strong enough to make sure that the voice of young people is found in decisions on issues that affect us?

People, not just young people, women, disabled people who have been affected by war, do not live in or are not the subjects of projects and programmes—so we cannot say, for example, that programme X or project Y is from a community. People live in homes, they grow up in social networks and they are part of communities. We cannot talk of the development and restoration of young people in the absence of the development of their communities. Those two things are inextricably intertwined. And within that, we cannot talk about the development of young people purely as the recipient of services, because young people have the intellectual, emotional and spiritual wherewithal to be redeemed within their own communities. So in taking a community perspective, it

begins to unleash a new set of resources, and it begins to allow people to be there in development not through their victimhood. People are not counted because they are targets of one programme or another. People count because of what they can contribute to a new and positive situation.

This is linked to young people's organisations. I find that young people, when asked to do something, or when given a chance to do something, when they find they are rated high enough, they can actually do what needs to be done. Young people's organisations come in different shapes and forms: sports organisations, drama groups, political debating organisations. These organisations are out there in their thousands and they don't require awards to exist, nor do they require the permission of governments to flourish. But with the support of society, with additional resources, they actually create a strong safety net that allows them to flourish.

The final point I want to make has to do with the issue of gender. What we have been looking at mostly, when people talk about or conjure up the word youth, in any context, what images come to mind? People think of roving bands of young men engaged in one thing or another. The word youth itself is such a strongly gendered term that it hides the experience of young women within it. When young women come up in the discussion, they often come up as victims, particularly as victims of young men, of violence, of aggression. There are many programmes, and some of them we have seen here ourselves, which bring together a combination of opportunities and expectations for young women that allow them to begin to acquire the skills and the resources that they need to flourish. We were looking at some of these very good programmes that just went ahead and did a good thing. We visited a programme working with young mothers who had been traumatised and brutalised, who were being taught new skills in order to move forward, and we heard countless stories of what they had seen and faced.

And I kept asking myself, who is doing work with young men? The type of work that makes them question their role in society, the kind of work that makes it possible for young men to also find healing and a place in society in ways that do not assume their supposedly powerful or dominant role over their female counterparts. We haven't quite yet seen the entire country, but I know from my experience in South Africa that not much has been done to confront the media images of males by males, that are actually sometimes at the centre of the problem when we talk about violence in society.

The key question is that there can be no reconstruction, there can be no post-conflict situation unless the central contradiction between youth and society is addressed. And therein lies the issue of power. Do we truly believe that if we sit at a gathering to talk peace, and change, and have not invited young people around the table, we will actually find peace? I think not.



Many lost their homes
