

## CHAPTER 4

### YOUTH IN THE SERVICE OF COMMUNITIES

#### Motivation

Young people are often characterised by a confusing blend of idealism and pessimism. Their urge to help their fellows and contribute to their societies all too frequently conflicts with the feeling that such a contribution is neither welcomed nor possible. Where means can be found to encourage a sympathetic environment in which younger people can feel that they are serving the best interests of their community, confidence may be reinforced and potential unrest diverted into more productive channels. Opportunities for direct service to the community, backed by provision for recreation, leisure and self-improvement, can often compensate in some measure for deprived social or financial circumstances and inadequate opportunities for formal education and employment. An essential role for educated young people is to lead their elders towards an appreciation of the problems and potential contribution of younger groups. While youth is willing and anxious to help, however, it is increasingly reluctant to undertake by way of voluntary service those social welfare operations which it believes to be the financial and legislative responsibility of the government. Youth is willing to help but not to act as a cheap salve to the conscience of a nation.

Voluntary contributions to the improvement of a community seem to be a feature of relatively affluent and homogeneous societies; Malta, in world terms, is such a society. Even in such a country, however, young people cannot be regarded as a single group with common characteristics, differing as they do in age and maturity, in social and educational backgrounds, in ability and aspiration, in occupations and prospects, in commitment and motivation. In planning for the involvement of youth, therefore, the needs and possibilities of particular groups of young people should be carefully assessed and a range of opportunities created to meet the varying needs.

Community service may be understood to include voluntary service by all types of young people for the benefit of other members of their society, including service to other young people in need of help. Service may be through activities promoted by schools and colleges or other formal organisations, or it may be through quite unstructured activities undertaken by individuals or casual groups. Service may also be given through

individual or group participation in activities organised by other bodies.

### Participation

Voluntary service has traditionally been the preserve of the privileged. In recent years, however, the recruitment base has widened considerably and the type of service rendered has altered to meet the changing clientele. Uniformed organisations busily engaged in promoting stereotyped training to meet unlikely national disasters and unnatural emergencies no longer satisfy young people's requirements. An increasing social awareness makes it imperative for them to participate "for real", in actual situations demanding amelioration. It is no longer enough to know how to help, young people now want to carry their training into practice.

By no means all young people participate in community service. The reasons are many and complex. Some youngsters may feel that the improvement of their society is the responsibility of the State or the Church. Others feel that they have received so little from their society that they are unwilling to try to give anything in return. Others again are unaware of the extent of the need or the value of their potential contribution. Still others see themselves as impotent in the face of prevailing circumstances, restrained by conventional attitudes, bound by tradition, circumscribed by custom. For their part, many responsible adults, even with the utmost goodwill, doubt that a valuable contribution to intractable problems can emerge from inexperienced young people. A lack of self-confidence and a lack of confidence on the part of others can combine very easily to produce an end-product of apathy and inaction. Participation can be encouraged only by an infusion of confidence. Older people must not try to protect their heirs from all the errors which they themselves have already made. The right to make mistakes is an essential part of freedom. Very few people (or nations) learn from the mistakes of others; and will merely resent the attentions of well-meaning mentors, who are almost certainly out of date, anyway. Opportunities for participation will appeal to more young people if they are allowed to identify the problem which they wish to tackle, define the means by which it should be alleviated and set up a programme to carry it out, as in the Canadian Opportunities for Youth programme, for example. Even if the programme is less than successful, the young people themselves will have gained immeasurably from their participation in it. They will probably

begin to appreciate, too, the delicate strategies necessary if progress is to be achieved.

### The role of the school and college

Young people in secondary and tertiary education are privileged groups, privileged by comparison with many of their fellows, doubly privileged by comparison with their parents, in whose schooldays opportunities were so much more restricted. Educated young people, therefore, have both more to give and more reason for giving. As the likely future leaders of their communities, too, they have a potential "multiplier" effect in community service. For these reasons, the introduction into the curriculum of the principles and practice of community service, perhaps in the form of Civics, has a positive value, always provided that it is not permitted to decline into just another "academic" subject on the timetable.

Self-knowledge is an essential precondition for the knowledge of others. Here the schools can help, by showing the young person his relationship to the concentric circles of the groups in which he finds himself, from the close circle of his family to the wider circles of school, village, country and world. Having established these relationships, the school and college can make possible the voluntary contributions to society from each young individual. Among the younger age-groups these contributions may be relatively modest, although, as Dr Alec Dickson has illustrated many times, they may upon occasions have very real value. Older students, at Polytechnic and University level, could become more closely involved in the development of their communities if their theses, studies and projects were linked more closely to current problems. To achieve such an articulation between the educational institutions and the development process implies the need to re-examine the rôle of universities and polytechnics in contemporary society, (as Professor Colin Leys propounded in his lead paper to the Fifth Commonwealth Education Conference in 1971).

### Some avenues of service

Young people, given the opportunity to become involved at a responsible level, and the opportunity to make practical use of initiative, have in numerous countries shown themselves capable of rendering services essential to the well-being of their society and yet which are inadequately catered for by existing agencies - caring for the old, the chronically sick, the handicapped, the deprived, teaching groups of children in special need, undertaking

surveys to serve as the basis for further social planning, carrying out beneficial activities which would be deemed uneconomic if costed commercially, and acting as agents against delinquency.

The younger members of the seminar expressed particular interest in the problems of deviance and delinquency, and believed that there would be much value to be derived from organised discussions of deviance and anti-social behaviour in preparation for the devising of programmes of prevention and rehabilitation. Much concern was felt for the "unhappy loner", the individual unable to ally himself with any social group, driven back on himself and particularly prone to resort to anti-social activities. In this special case as well as in the more general field of delinquency, young people believed that they owed a duty to their peers and possessed the means of carrying it out. It was suggested that "detached" youth workers, living and operating among potential delinquents, represented probably the best counter to the increasing trend towards anti-social behaviour, and that young people themselves could assist youth workers and act as voluntary probation officers in an attempt to rehabilitate as many as possible of the deviants. The seminar members were especially interested in the concept of recruiting potential deviants as volunteers, and noted the activities of the Young Volunteer Force Foundation in England. This organisation has set about turning a social problem into a social benefit by recruiting the "unclubbables" and encouraging them towards socially-useful activities. The most powerful argument for this operation is that for the same cost as keeping one boy in Borstal, the Force can utilise the energies of 35 young volunteers to the public good. The volunteers to the public good. The volunteers gain as much as they give, they find self-respect and a sense of worth in being allowed to help others. The Force thus serves the not-so-obviously deserving who need help all the same.

Other avenues of service include national youth services (discussed in Chapter 2) and assisting in programmes designed to create opportunities for leisure, recreation and cultural activities for the less privileged members of the community. While the emphasis in many countries is now on service activities directly related to alleviating social injustices and inequalities, the more traditional forms of provision for young people remain, still playing a useful role and offering additional opportunities for service. Provision for leisure, recreation, sport and culture is recognised as valuable in its own right and in many countries is being refurbished in order to integrate it into the overall programme of national development. The National Physical Fitness Drive in India,

for example, is seen both as a contribution to improved national health and a sublimation of energy which might otherwise be misdirected into "protests, strikes, defiance of authority, destruction of property, etc. on trivial or wrong issues". Youth programmes, although not directed specifically to community service, may nevertheless contribute towards the easing of social problems such as those associated with urban living and the integration of the handicapped into the community. Social programmes of direct community service and meet needs which, though less apparent than some catered for by other programmes, are nevertheless important to the long-term health of the community.

The teaching of civics in school is no substitute for action, although it can provide a secure basis from which to move from theory to practice. Much emphasis is placed by many countries on the moral and spiritual development of the individual as an essential element in fostering leadership and self-reliance. For this reason programmes have been devised to help the individual to realise his potential as a contributor to his community and an inspirer of action. Outward Bound courses in many countries, schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (in a number of Commonwealth countries) and the President's Award (in Kenya), the National Youth Leadership Training Institute in Singapore and the National Youth Training scheme in Malaysia can all be regarded as serving the community in the sense that their function is to prepare individual young people to make their best possible contribution to the needs of their society.

### Responsibility and control

Young people should appreciate that initiative with regard to youth programmes cannot always lie with the government. By and large, inspiration originates with individuals and not with committees. On the other hand, it is reasonable that the government would wish to maintain overall responsibility for community service activities in order to ensure that any public funds involved are responsibly used and no activity is undertaken against the national interest. Functional control, however, is probably best delegated to a fully representative body with members drawn from all participating organisations. A National Youth Co-ordinating Council could promote co-operation and co-ordination by bringing together representatives of agencies and young people to discuss any possible desirable overlap in programmes, draw on mutual experience and ensure the maximum effectiveness of available funds. Financing might be organised by a system of "matching grants", whereby the government would agree in advance to

support approved projects by giving funds up to a declared maximum as a specified proportion of funds raised by the operating organisation. Such an arrangement rewards self-help, discourages waste and encourages joint projects by groups of agencies.

### Evaluation of programmes

The effectiveness of community service programmes depends not only on enthusiasm and commitment but also on efficient administration, including the best deployment of capable leaders (the training of whom is discussed in Chapter 2) and the devising of appropriate forms of follow-up and evaluation. Youth programmes should be followed up in two ways: by the provision of further opportunities for young people completing a project and by the continuous monitoring and periodic evaluation of all programmes so as to assess their effectiveness and permit readjustments where necessary. The Commonwealth Secretariat has begun the preparation of a handbook outlining techniques for the evaluation of youth programmes. This, it is hoped, will be of practical assistance to all Commonwealth countries, including Malta.

The fact that two of the student groups attending the seminar decided to continue to meet regularly afterwards confirms the desire of Maltese young people to work responsibly for the good of their community and the development of the nation. These activities should be encouraged in the expectation that they will lead to the involvement of larger members of young people who were not themselves present at the seminar.