

Annex 1

Definitions of Youth

Youth, in Commonwealth educational material, is not a ‘natural category’, and it cannot be a ‘universal concept’.¹ Young people’s life chances are determined by their age, and change across time, place, economic, social and political contexts. Young people’s experiences are also defined by physical and psychosocial developmental phases such as early and late adolescence, and by youth-adult relationships and resultant power dynamics. These conceptions have implications for our planning for them.

Perhaps the most dominant means of perceiving youth is as an ‘age category’; the Commonwealth refers to young people as those between 15 and 29 years of age. The United Nations refers to young people as those between 15 and 24. Country definitions range from a lower limit of 13 to a higher limit of 40. Age ranges for minors and majors also differ within cultural and regional laws and legal instruments within states.² But clearly chronological markers are of limited use in a world of continual flux for young people, across time and space. Chronological markers do, however, assist in defining specific needs and rights that are priorities for specific age groups of youth, such as those in early and late adolescence, early adulthood and so on.

While it is clearly recognised that **transitional markers** are not particularly unique to youth, specific, generalised transitional markers – such as leaving school, entering employment, owning a house, experience of first impressions such as love, initiation to sexual practices and experimentation – are all associated with youth. However, experiences such as entering employment or owning your own house are constantly delayed for young people, given contexts of poverty, austerity, war and so on.

In this regard, Commonwealth learning material links economic and social policies as markers that define youth and points out how structural adjustment continues to create extended periods of unemployment, which **extends the period of life experiences**

generally ascribed to ‘youth’.³ Similarly, in some cases, there are also arguments for extending the lower age limits for youth to 12 or 13 years of age, considering the increasing overlap of older children’s needs, such as sexual and reproductive needs, with those generally ascribed to the ‘youth’ category.

In recent youth rights discourses, however, it has been abundantly highlighted that young people are not just ‘becoming’, ‘in transition’ or ‘the future’, but that **young people are the ‘present’**. This concept of young people as fully formed citizens has important implications for the way in which we see their role as agents in their own growth and empowerment and in national/global development.

The Commonwealth also highlights the need to pay attention to the ‘problems of **class and gender inequality** among young people ... for instance, they may define the social unrest that is caused by poverty as something that *young* people do. By doing this, they are able to ignore the fact that it tends to occur among *poor* young people.’⁴ Clearly, class, race, sexual orientation and so on multiply the marginalities of young people.

The definition of ‘youth’ is also **transient through time**; ‘the social meaning of youth one hundred years ago was not the same as it is today.’⁵ Indeed, it changes from generation to generation. In generalised descriptions, Generation X (born in the mid-1960s to early 1980s) was seen to be inclusive and individualistic, whereas Generation Y (born 1980s to 2000), or millennials, are known for their engagement with technology, connectedness and pushing for change and disruption based on values. Generation Z, or post-millennials, are assumed to be a generation that will build more aggressively on generations past, but their reality may also be informed by growing inequality and global insecurity. As generalised as these categories are, however, generational experiences through time are often a useful way of understanding youth groups in specific contexts. These generational experiences differ in each national/local context, given the history of Commonwealth member countries, and need to be formally researched prior to planning for them in youth mainstreaming.

Notes

1 Commonwealth Youth Programme 2007, 47.

- 2 Age of criminal culpability, minimum age of marriage etc. also set acknowledgement of maturation across cultures and nations, and are separate from child/youth categories.
- 3 Commonwealth Youth Programme 2007, 49.
- 4 Ibid., 45.
- 5 Ibid., 47.

Reference

Commonwealth Youth Programme (2007), 'Module 2', *Young People and Society: The Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Development*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London

