

THAT OUR LIVES WILL SHINE: COLLABORATING WITH YOUTH  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract**

Sustainable development must be environmentally sound, address issues of peace and human rights, involve all sectors in decision making, and be class and gender equitable. It must also involve young people. The potential of youth to be active participants in development has been under utilized, even ignored. The accepted approach to the so-called youth problem has been “youth development” -- what can we do for youth -- and not “youth in development” -- what can youth do with and for us. In this paper, I examine factors influencing youth’s ability to actively participate in development; identify expectations, aspirations, and concerns of youth living in Busoga District in southeast Uganda; and consider how those factors affect their desire to participate in development. In spite of daunting social, economic, and political circumstances, the youth in this study were overwhelmingly positive about their futures. Many expressed a specific desire to use their talents, time, and personal resources to improve their home communities as well as contribute to Uganda’s positive development. As agricultural and extension educators, we must tap young people’s energy and optimism, and include them in all stages of our current as well as future development and development education initiatives.

*Securing our common future will require new energy and openness, fresh insights, and an ability to look beyond the narrow bounds of national frontiers and separate scientific disciplines. The young are better at such visions than we, who are often constrained by the traditions of a former, more fragmented world. We must tap their energy, their openness, their ability to see the interdependence of issues (United Nations Environmental Program, 1990, p. 22).*

**Introduction**

The 1960s, designated by the United Nations as the First Development Decade, opened with considerable optimism. Poverty would be drastically reduced if not eliminated, and developing<sup>1</sup> nations would “catch up” with the developed, technologically advanced nations. By the 1980s, economic growth in developing countries did not match those expectations and the gap between the rich and poor nations widened. Furthermore, international economic growth, with little thought to the impact of large-scale industrialization and agribusiness, depleted natural resources, created environmental wastelands, and marginalized rural and indigenous peoples worldwide -- especially women, children, and youth. “It has

become starkly evident that such development is expending the very resources needed not only for the present generation but also for generations of the future. Thus it has become increasingly clear that development must be pursued along a course which is environmentally sound and sustainable” (United Nations, 1991, p. 1).

With that realization, development planners and governments reassessed their goals and strategies. Along with brave new ideas such as participatory development, farmer first strategies, and women/gender and development, evolved the concept of youth and young adults as actors and major participants in development. Chawla (1988, p. 31) felt strongly that the (development) “crisis itself could be overcome, to a certain degree, by using youth as an active agency for social change, thus capitalizing its vast potential for generating development.”

### **Purpose and Objectives**

This paper examines the expectations, aspirations, and concerns of youth in a developing country, and considers how those factors affect youth’s desire to participate in development. Objectives guiding the study were: (a) identify specific values and aspirations of rural youth in a developing country, (b) discuss factors influencing youth’s desire or ability to participate in development, (c) determine if rural youth are interested in participating in development, and (d) suggest strategies for collaborating with youth for sustainable development.

### **Methods**

Data instruments for the study consisted of: (a) an Autobiography of the Future (Rubin & Zavalloni, 1969) in which study participants were asked to write freely about their future hopes, aspirations, plans, and expectations up to the year 2040 A.D., and (b) a self-administered questionnaire covering the same dimensions through open-ended and multiple-choice questions.

The data were collected from 48 Ugandan in-school youth and 28 Ugandan out-of-school youth living in Busoga District in southeast Uganda, East Africa. Due to the physical difficulty of travel and security concerns in Uganda when the data were collected, limited financial resources, and time constraints, data collection was limited to selected areas in the district. Since this was a qualitative/exploratory study, the data were analyzed by accepted qualitative research methods. Responses were grouped in logical clusters, subsets identified, trends noted, and results presented through anecdote. As a naturalistic and feminist researcher, I am compelled to share my personal experiences and observations as well.

This study is representative of youth in developing countries to the extent that the study participants resemble groups of young people that one might encounter in rural areas of Uganda and other countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Youth: Who Are They?**

The most appropriate age definition for adolescence remains controversial. For instance, I worked with youth projects in East Africa where the ages of the participants ranged from 10 to 35 years and sometimes older. A human developmental stage rarely has precise limits whether it be chronological age, physical maturity, educational attainment, or a traditional rite of passage. Chawla (1986) elaborated on this idea:

The hinge of this issue is what exactly “youth” means ... For many young people in the world, there is no stage “youth” at all; for others it is precariously short and tenuous; for still others, it is indefinitely prolonged. Poverty, deprivation, scarcity, uncertainty -- all these are things which many young people must square with, in economic, social and psychological terms. (pp.7-10)

Wyn and White (1997) agree. “Although each person’s life span can be measured ‘objectively’

by the passing of time, cultural understandings about life stages give the process of growing up, and of aging, its social meaning ... Both youth and childhood have had and continue to have different meanings depending on young people's social, cultural and political circumstances" (p. 10). From a feminist standpoint, gender might also be added to their list of circumstances.

The United Nations defines youth as people from age 15 through 24 years, though in many countries around the world, people working in rural areas insist that youth should include people aged 10 through 24 and older (Chawla, 1986). For instance, in the younger age range, many girls take on adult responsibilities such as child care well before the age of 15, and "thousands of children are employed within the family or informal sector of the economy long before they might technically be classified as youth" (Rau & Lindley, 1985, p. 1). Rau and Lindley continue, "At the other end of the age spectrum, youth is often seen as a position in society reflecting a combination of age, experience, marital status and influence. Some societies regard people as young well into their 30s and 40s, and only then do they acquire the status of an adult or elder" (p.1). For the purposes of this study, I included adolescents and young adults between the ages of 10 and 35. This range realistically defines the ages of the young people whom I interacted with and observed during the years I lived and worked in East Africa.

One of every five inhabitants in the world is a youth with up to 70% of youth residing in rural areas of the developing world (Seiders, 1996). Rau and Lindley (1985) reported that, depending on the developing country, youth comprise about 20% of the total population, and rural youth may represent 60 to 90% of the total youth population. They continue that "in absolute terms, there were nearly 660 million young people in the developing world in 1980, a figure expected to climb to 807 million by 1990 and 882 million by the year 2000" (p. 1). In 1980, Africa's total population was estimated at 470 million with 71.1% living in the rural areas. With an annual growth rate of over 3%, the continent's population will increase to over 850

million by the year 2000. Rural youth will comprise an estimated 152 million of that total. In Africa alone, there will be over 300 million young people to educate and prepare for the future between 1985 and the year 2000 (Lindley, 1985).

### **Youth Participation in Development**

According to Mohammad Sharif, Executive Secretary of the International Youth Year Secretariat, "participation means that young people have a right to be included in the discussions and decisions affecting their lives and the future of their societies. It implies understanding, equality, acceptance, involvement, and an affirmation that they be taken seriously" (Silha, 1984, p. 2). Several factors and values affect youth's desire or ability to be proactive in their personal lives as well as participate in the development of their communities and nation. These are discussed below.

#### Tradition and Modernity

Families and communities, worldwide, are experiencing various degrees of crisis and change. These are dramatically illustrated in Africa where urbanization, destabilization of rural family and community values and cultures, and "western-style" development have generated and intensified changes in individuals, families, and communities. Some changes in the traditional African family include absence of the father resulting in female-headed households; mothers working outside of the homestead; absence of a male role model; weakening of the extended family; and decay of traditional social mechanisms such as story telling and rites of passage (Andama, 1987).

The majority of respondents in this study were born into traditional Ugandan families, and though many of them dreamed of leaving the village, almost all expressed allegiance to the extended family and the culture and values that represented. One young woman shared, "My home village is a sort of small village with ten inhabitants who are all my relatives. Right from my great granny to my nephews and nieces."

“Our village is a part of myself,” wrote another youth. Along the same vein, another continued, “It’s important that I have to visit my father’s homeland, my ancestors. It’s indeed an obligation to know the originality of oneself.” Interestingly, one male felt that the traditional ways negatively influenced development:

It is my intention to develop our village. I want to build my house in the village. It will be a house with treated grass near my family members. However, some family members still have the beliefs which must be left before any development can take place. Some beliefs are quite awkward and are not favorable in the society.

### Marginality

Marginality, as it applies to youth, relates to the degree to which they are integrated into the different social, economic, and political levels of society. Chawla (1986) suggested that youth are marginalized in a variety of senses. Young people who are marginal may be poor, caught between their rural heritage and urban opportunities, culturally unassimilated, or alienated from their families. Many young people live on the margins of society: rural youth looking for a better life in the cities and struggling to survive in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environment; unskilled youth looking for employment in a glutted job market; the undereducated and illiterate; children and youth suffering through war, famine, and poor health. Many youth are marginalized because of the very social and economic transformations designed to improve their lives. Not only are they agents of change, they are victims of it. One disillusioned youth wrote:

As a man from humble origin, I feel I should do much (hard work) in order to overcome the vicious cycle of poverty which has been characteristic in our family. When I look at my own village, tears come! There is no prospect of easy life though there is some gradual development especially in agriculture. My mother is very old now; father has

passed away. There is misery reigning at home.

Another talked of the hopelessness of his parents’ situation and his desire to be different from them:

It is my task to work hard, to work without resting so that I don’t be a failure in life like my father. My father did not achieve the western education so he intends to live a traditional life. So I hope to lead a better life than my father, but through hard work. My mother has never faced a blackboard as she never attended a school. So it is we the children to work hard and toil so as to be good participating citizens.

Youth marginality and poverty are paradoxes. They obstruct young people’s ability to grow as a person and/or participate in community development efforts; at the same time, they motivate those same youth to aspire for a life different from or better than their parents.

### Education

Education is the greatest single factor influencing African youth’s cultural, political, and economic marginality, and the chief means of importing new ideas and philosophies into Africa. African youth and their families consider education as a major route to wealth, status, and economic security. It is a primary value, a driving aspiration in adolescence and young adulthood, and central to youth’s future plans. Even so, according to the United Nations, less than 20% of Africa’s children will enter secondary school and only a small percentage will go on to higher education. Bray, Clarke, and Stephens (1986) projected that illiteracy will remain high in many of the countries of Africa. Girls and young women are particularly at risk.

Participant responses in this study reflected the “universal” concern for education. One young woman wrote, “I am very anxious to go to the University because in Uganda these days, unless you have education, you will not get a well-paid job. I am sure if I reach the University, I will be

able to break the poverty trend in my clan.” Another youth shared, “I will make sure all my children are educated and after which they will be able to help the rest of our fellow citizens not to suffer so much.”

### Employment

Traditional African society looked after the training and placement of young people usually in community-based economic activities and jobs, thereby guaranteeing the continuity and economic survival of the interdependent community. In contemporary Africa, the range of jobs available to young people has proliferated as has job mobility. Too, the present and future labor forces are growing faster than the number of job openings. Many young educated Africans, unable to find gainful employment in the rural areas, look beyond the drudgery of the farm to the opportunities of the city.

I heard and saw this attitude expressed by a young Basoga farmer I visited. Enoch’s mud and wattle house was situated in the center of a neatly swept compound. The village, being remote as most rural villages in Busoga are, had no modern utilities. Enoch’s ideas of the “good life” were graphically illustrated by the electrical fixtures carefully painted on one wall of his sitting room. On yet another wall, meticulously rendered, were a television set and radio cassette player. Enoch shared that he would soon leave the village in order to earn money to buy the things of his dreams.

Interestingly, many of the youth surveyed viewed work as a way to get money to support a valued way of life; to accrue savings for rural investment on return to their village of birth. One youth said, “When I acquire enough capital from my office in town, I will set up a small-scale industry in my village that produces cooking oil using groundnuts and sim-sim. This will be an advantage to my people and home since it will create employment for them.”

### Poor Health, War, and Violence

Each year millions of children and youth die from environmental hazards, poor sanitation, malnutrition, common diseases, and HIV/AIDS. Hit hardest by the AIDS epidemic in Africa are sexually active young adults, and adults between the ages of 20 and 39. Uganda has been severely affected by the epidemic, with estimates of one million people infected out of a national population of 16 million (Njoku, 1993). A cruel twist, AIDS is taking away Africa’s best and brightest -- the very people on whom Africa’s future development depends.

War, like poverty, ignorance, disease, and malnutrition, cripples a developing country. It limits the development of capable, motivated, and creative individuals in a society. It is reported to be the leading killer of children and young people in the developing world (Shamma’, 1986). The effects of war, violence, and the military on Ugandan youth have been traumatic. Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army depended heavily on children and youth, some as young as nine years, to wage a bloody, guerilla war. While in Uganda, I experienced roadblocks “manned” by heavily armed child soldiers, and AK-47 toting fifteen year old youths forcibly trying to enter my home.

The youth in this study were not immune to Uganda’s violent past. “Because of the insecurity that has been prevailing since the 1970s, all my family members were forced to move to Jinja which was relatively peaceful. In my home area, murder and armed robbery was a common practice,” shared one young man. It was often said to me, as I traveled from village to village in Busoga, that in Uganda “there is always a reason for death, and old age is not one of them.” Uganda suffered through over 20 years of violence and civil strife, the consequences of which on a generation of children and youth are yet to be determined.

But there is much hope in the Uganda of today. John Isabirye, a 21 year old out-of-school youth from a village located on the shores of Lake

Victoria, wrote in his Autobiography of the Future:

I expect to have problems, some disease and sickness, cooperation from my fellow men, to have contact with important people, a higher standard of living, to become famous, and to have advice from my relatives.

I plan to have two sons and three daughters, to have a well-constructed house, to construct a poultry house and a farm, to start a business, to take my money for banking, to have a plow, to have a plantation of coffee and one of sugar cane, to have a garden of onions, how I can make my children successful, and to help my community.

I hope to get money, to get a bicycle, to have a radio in my house, to get good clothes and good tables, to get good plates and cups, to have enough land, to have an educated and healthy family, that my village will be full of electricity, and Uganda will develop three times in the next fifty years.

I dream my life will shine well.

John's aspirations for a better life for himself, his family, community, and country are indicative of the hopes and aspirations shared by the group of young people in this study, as well as many youth worldwide. Most important, analysis of the data in this study indicated that the youth wanted to participate actively in determining their collective futures. They had strong roots in their home villages, a connection based on tradition and family; and ranked participation in community and national affairs as important. Many felt that service to others and assisting in the development of their country was an accomplishment of which to be proud. The majority of the youth identified helping others as the most important goal in their lives. An overwhelming number of the young people declared that they would actively participate in development efforts in their communities. One in-school youth shared:

My country, Uganda, which is among the Third World countries and underdeveloped, needs people who are hard working and creative. Thus, I feel that I should be one of those people who have the heart of developing their countries; who are nationalistic people who don't work for their own pockets only, but are people who toil for the wellbeing of the majority.

This leads one to ask the question, how can this youthful optimism and enthusiasm be harnessed to insure environmentally sound, sustainable, and equitable development?

### **Collaborating with Youth for Sustainable Development**

The best known definition for sustainable development was introduced in the World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 publication "Our Common Future", also referred to as the Brundtland Report. According to that report, sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development must be environmentally sound, address issues of peace and human rights, involve all sectors in decision making, and be class as well as gender equitable (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1994). It must also be intergenerational, including both young and old alike.

A United Nations report outlining guidelines for youth participation in sustainable development (United Nations, 1991) identified six underlying perceptions about youth regarding their role in sustainable development. Among those were the ideas that youth have a unique role in sustainable development by merit of their sheer numbers, as well as their dual status as victims and agents of environmental degradation (and development). Another perception was that "youth are entitled to participate in the decisions that affect them and should be given the opportunity to do so" (p. 8).

These are not new ideas. As early as 1968 Rene Maheu, then Director-General of UNESCO,

talked of youth's role in an evolving world (United Nations, 1969):

Youth may not yet be the motive force of history but it can be the detonator in cases where history can be made to move only by an explosion.

We can no longer rest content with merely working for the young. We must think, think and work with them and through them, for everything that gives life its value is in their eyes as in ours -- in theirs even more than in ours. Only by so doing shall we keep or regain their confidence, without which all our labour is in vain. (pp. 5-6)

Mohammad Shariff concludes, "Development implies innovation and progress -- for both individuals and societies. Young people must be free to develop new ways and in all directions..." (Silha, 1984, pp. 2-3).

Most exciting, youth want to be involved. This young woman described a future Uganda she fully intends to help create:

When I look into the future, I see that my home, village and country will have greatly changed and developed from what it is today ... Within fifty years, Uganda our mother land will have developed economically, politically, and socially. It will have brought forth many bright, intelligent citizens.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Youth are our future leaders. Comprising close to one-fifth of the world's total population, they have the potential to be leaders now. "To exclude them from participating as agents and beneficiaries of environmentally sound and sustainable development would be to frustrate such development" (United Nations, 1991, p. 3). The young Ugandans in this study supported monogamous marriage, smaller families, family planning, and child spacing methods, ideas crucial to environmentally sound, equitable, and sustainable development. Additionally, high

personal aspirations, altruistic goals, optimism for the future, and youthful energy combine into a powerful and positive force for a future of yet to be imagined possibilities. As agricultural and extension educators, we are in a unique position to facilitate the integration of youth and young adults into sustainable development efforts, and we would be remiss not to do so.

For far too long, the potential of youth in developing countries to be active participants in the development process has been underutilized if not ignored. The general approach to the so-called youth problem has been "youth development" -- what can we do for youth -- and not "youth in development" -- what can youth do with and for us. Let us formally recognize youth as active and essential participants in local as well as national development plans, and work directly with them to identify needs and action plans for participatory development. Let us educate our young people about the interdependent issues and positive implications of working together for sustainable development that is environmentally sound and gender equitable. It is critical that we provide youth with the tools to be active participants in development: youth-focused extension services, viable/funded youth organizations managed by trained youth professionals, basic literacy skills, well-equipped schools, agricultural/vocational training, environmental education, credit, and access to land. Furthermore, according to the World Bank (1992), improving education for girls may be the most important long-term development and environmental policy in the developing world. Finally, we must, in ourselves and in our work, be exemplary models of what this kind of development can and must look like.

Humankind dreams of a time and place when people of all races, cultures, and genders will live in harmony. "Peace is not just the absence of conflict. Peace is understanding, it is justice and equality, participation and development; it is the freedom to exist ... and the assurance that the future will be worth living" (Silha, 1984, pp. 2-3). Environmentally sound, equitable, sustainable development -- and peace -- cannot be realized in isolation. Since youth constitute an integral part of our global order, they must be

involved as, ultimately, we all must. John Isabirye's simple dream was that his "life will shine well". Working together, all our lives will shine.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term *developing* is convenient. It is not intended to imply that all people in a particular group of countries are experiencing similar development, or that other countries have reached a preferred or final stage of development. I use this term cautiously and with acute awareness of its inadequacies.