Building Bridges through Faith

The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Youth Development

Faith and faith institutions can be a powerful force in the lives of young people. In light of increasing engagement between faith institutions and global development programs, this note highlights both actual and potential faith-based development activities that directly involve—and benefit—youth. It acknowledges the special sensitivities around the role of faith in development, but also argues that the long and rich experience of faith communities working with young people—particularly with the most disadvantaged—calls for a deeper understanding of the impact of their interventions and of the value added they may bring to designing youth development policies and programs.
Why Focus on Faith and Youth?

Development institutions today recognize practical benefits of hearing youth ‘voices,’ and a parallel focus on youth drives many faith institutions. (1) Young people are prominent participants in major faith and interfaith events (Box 1), ‘World Youth Day,’ the tri-annual Catholic gathering of youth, may be the world’s largest single gathering of young people in one place: upwards of a million young people in Germany in August 2005, with the upcoming meeting in Australia in 2008 described as a ‘religious olympics’. (2) The myriad of interfaith and faith youth organizations are testimony to hunger for action inclusion, and building bridges. (3) A consistent message across secular and faith youth fora is an urgent call for better ways to engage young people in poverty and social justice programs and to link such work to the search of young people for meaning and values.

While for some, the case for heightened attention to ‘faith-development partnerships’ in the context of youth strategies and programs seems obvious, others see the potential for conflict. For this reason, it is important to articulate areas of common ground between faith and development organizations at both the institutional and policy levels. Four important factors to consider in this discussion are:

(a) Faith and faith institutions play central roles in the daily lives of young people across cultures, continents and communities. Faith institutions and related organizations are often the primary community institutions reaching out to youth. Faith institutions can offer inspiration and solace, safe havens, social services including health and education, and mentoring and leadership in learning and service.

(b) The vast array of youth-related programs inspired or organized by faith institutions offer enormous potential for learning and as models. Activities include inter alia, education, skills training, health care, counseling, camps, advocacy programs, youth exchange, and associations. They are sponsored by adults or by youth themselves, and generally aim to build social capital of youth. Of particular interest is the active role that many faith organizations play in poor and troubled areas, whether direct work with gangs or in conflict-ridden communities. Noteworthy programs work directly with youth in crisis, whether youth infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, those who are hungry, homeless, destitute, drug-addicted, depressed, or abused. Exciting new initiatives build on the potential resources of internet technologies to bridge divides among faith traditions and cultures. (4)

(c) Faith-inspired youth work often reflects deep understanding of problems and priorities of poor communities. Faith institutions justly stress their deep investment in the lives of their community members. Many institutions and programs are present “on the ground,” accompanying community members in their daily lives in ways matched by few non-faith institutions. Polls and surveys of young and older populations alike show faith institutions often earning the highest trust ratings. Faith institutions are often the only ones with the perceived moral legitimacy to have a sustained presence in some of the poorest and most crime-ridden communities.

(d) Focus on moral values and spiritual issues often resonate with young people seeking meaning in their lives. Ethics and values tend to be at the forefront of faith-inspired programs and action. Concern about spiritual issues and values is widely shared across cultures and traditions.

Despite these potential benefits in pursuing faith-development partnerships, mapping the terrain of faith-based youth interventions can be particularly complex:

- Faith-based institutions vary widely in quality and in the services they provide. A particular concern is that some are inclusive, reaching out to all people (regardless of faith affiliation) while others are not.
- Relationships between faith communities and secular institutions, whether governments or civil society organizations, can present legal and socio-political issues. Some are cooperative, others fractious and problematic. There are also sensitive church-state relationships in many societies.
- Categorizing faith-based programs and organizations is problematic as the ‘faith content’ of a program is often nuanced. Explicit links to faith teachings permeate many programs, but in other instances the faith connection is largely one of historical roots and general ethos.
- The focus on ‘moral values’ and ethical approaches in youth programs is often entirely compatible with more secular approaches. In important cases, however, the ‘values’ in question can be contentious, involving important differences in approaches to morality. Tensions, for example around gender roles, approaches to multicultural education, and teaching about sex and sexuality and behavior change, have important practical implications.

In sum, there are strong arguments for closer engagement with faith institutions on youth programs and strategies but thoughtful analysis and dialogue are necessary. The next section provides some concrete examples of areas in which a faith-development partnership could begin to develop.

Box 1. Youth as Key Actors in Global Interfaith Events

There is increasing interest in and energy around youth participation as an active and integral part of global religious gatherings. Religions for Peace, founded in 1970, is the largest international coalition of representatives from the world’s great religions dedicated to promoting peace. In August 2006, the Religions for Peace Eighth World Assembly convened in Kyoto, Japan, with a special focus on and major investment in bringing a diverse group of youth to the Assembly as dynamic, active participants. The youth participants grappled with key development and social justice issues, and issued the ‘Hiroshima Declaration: Religious Youth Choosing Hope and Taking Action’ which calls for drawing on faith traditions to transform conflict, build peace and advance sustainable development. (5)

The Global Youth Network, which gained full momentum in preparing for this meeting, is developing pilot programs to confront some of the most urgent challenges—including addressing environmental issues and coping with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Parliament of the World’s Religions (2004), and Sant’Egidio’s Annual Prayer for Peace are other examples of global interfaith gatherings with strong youth focus and participation.
Faith Institutions as Service Providers

Faith institutions and communities have important roles vis-a-vis youth through their direct provision of education and health services. Links between public and faith-run education and health institutions today are varied and often complex, running the gamut from direct faith management (for example, the vast global network of Catholic schools) to systems reflecting hybrid arrangements (including the Fe y Alegría system in Latin America which are part of state systems but led by faith communities, likewise similar arrangements for some hospitals in Mozambique). Religious institutions are primary providers in some countries and regions; in others, they serve to fill gaps or to enhance quality.

Faith institutions run many schools and shape attitudes towards education at all levels. Religious institutional roles in education are complex, widely varied, and often not well defined or understood (Box 2). Since education is so important for young people, this nuanced picture can present important issues. Faith run schools vary in quality from the best to the worst, ranging from fully-integrated into mainstream society to isolationist. Some involve best practice approaches to teaching respect and real understanding of the ‘other’, preparing students to thrive in a multicultural world, while others do not. Faith institution cooperation with or critiques of public education are often significant. Approaches to teaching about ethics, values and religion are hotly debated in some societies and need careful attention from development practitioners.

Faith institutions provide many health services and influence youth attitudes towards health and care. Faith institutions’ roles in health service-delivery have wide-ranging implications for youth. Key roles of faith leaders and institutions in responding to HIV/AIDS are a prime example, with engagement at every level, from prevention and treatment to care and support. The HIV/AIDS engagement and youth links are most significant in high prevalence countries of Africa and for Christian churches, but a wide range of faith institutions, including Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and others are increasingly active in many regions of the world. Examples of explicitly youth focused HIV/AIDS activities of faith institutions include Buddhist training of youth and novices on HIV prevention and awareness and youth-oriented programs in Uganda and South Africa, involving Muslim, Christian and other groups.

Faith institutions provide an extraordinary range of service opportunities for youth to engage in their own communities or internationally. Service can be life transforming for youth and for the people who benefit from their actions. It provides an opportunity for young people to develop their skills and experiences, while simultaneously contributing to core development objectives in their own communities, or in other communities abroad. Examples of such service programs can be drawn from both particular faith traditions as well as inter-faith organizations. Since 1956, thousands of young people have volunteered in disadvantaged communities in the United States and six other countries through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Similarly, the Art of Living Foundation in India focuses much of its community mobilization service on young people, while Islamic Relief gives special attention to youth in emergency programs. Jewish Hillel organizations on college campuses promote social justice service activities among young people. Habitat for Humanity mobilizes a million people each year, including many young people, to build homes for needy families and individuals in the United States and abroad.

Faith as a ‘Protective’ Factor

Faith institutions the world over provide first line interventions for at risk youth. At the same time, faith has also been identified by many young people as an important protective factor in their lives. Faith institutions often seek to build a sense of community and ‘connectedness’ promoting positive role models, providing safe havens and offering alternatives to risky behaviors and activities, such as gangs, substance abuse, and crime. Many take a holistic approach to youth development, providing life-skills, caring adults, and support to whole families. As such, community based faith networks can be a front line protective factor in preventing youth from engaging in risky behaviors, and can help them learn to make good decisions across a range of issues. Many also provide direct rehabilitation services to those youth who are already suffering the consequences of risky behaviors, such as prison, HIV/AIDS, alcohol and drug addiction. While data suggest that youth most needing these social services are often the most reluctant to use them, faith-based institutions have shown considerable success in reaching these groups. The important roles they can play for at-risk youth deserve much greater attention, as do the gaps in their reach and impact.

Some examples of the wide range of programs targeted to vulnerable youth include street children protection, orphan care initiatives, out-of-school youth programs, and intermediation with law enforcement authorities including prison ministries. These include programs directed to street children, orphan care initiatives, programs for out of school youth and vocational training, and intermediation with law enforcement authorities including prison ministries. In the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, effective programs reaching undocumented youth and those contesting allegiance with gangs are faith-inspired.

Box 2. The Complex Role of Faith and Education

The topic of Islamic education is widely debated globally but often poorly understood. The primary concerns are twofold. First, many schools run by Muslim leaders and communities are seen as providing a narrow educational curriculum, largely restricted to religious topics and rote learning. In practice, Islamic run schools run the gamut from broad-based and excellent schools in the Islamic tradition of learning to poorly resourced and run schools that teach little beyond memorization. Second, the schools run by religious leaders and institutions are seen as contributing to extremism by projecting highly negative views of non-Muslim societies. Again, the reality is far more diverse and complex and only a small fraction of Islamic schools fit what has emerged as a stereotype of the ‘madrasa’ that undermines social cohesion and civic norms of tolerance. In the debate it is important to highlight the great diversity of Islamic education worldwide including the best practice examples of excellence such as the Aga Khan Foundation supported madrasa preschools in East Africa and the Islamic education system of Malaysia.
Organizations like Don Bosco, which operate in many parts of the world, are recognized as having the boldest programs today working with street children. In many countries, communities such as Sant’Egidio reach youth in prisons. Religious organizations often carve out special roles, whether caring for orphans, supporting adoption initiatives or other community-based approaches. The Nyumbani Village in Kenya is an example of a Catholic organization that combines care of abandoned children with outreach to HIV/AIDS-affected youth in the broader community. Other organizations work creatively to find ways of intervening as positive role models in the lives of at-risk youth. Encountering difficulties in bringing youth together explicitly around HIV/AIDS, the Coptic Orthodox Mission in Africa convenes youth around sporting events, and then finds ways to interject mentoring and teaching about HIV/AIDS before a game. The idea is to find ways to be a positive part of the lives of youth and do more than ‘preach at’ youth. Other faith-based organizations large and small bring similar dedication to working with young people across the world.

Conclusion
Faith and faith institutions can play a critical role in helping youth to navigate the often difficult transitions to adulthood. While there are important sensitivities surrounding the role of faith in youth development, the presence and importance of such institutions cannot be denied. The long and relevant experience of faith communities working with young people—particularly those who are most disadvantaged—deserves more attention among those seeking to design and implement youth policies and interventions.

Not only are faith institutions key stakeholders in developing such policies, but they have tremendous influence on many youth and their families which can facilitate (or hinder) the successful adoption of policies and implementation of interventions. Ensuring that their voice is heard through active dialogue and engagement is an important step forward. Equally important is the need to learn lessons from the on-the-ground experiences of faith-run programs in a more systematic manner, including understanding their impact, and why they might be more (or less) effective working with youth in different contexts than other development programs. Among the many organizations working to understand these issues is the World Faiths Development Dialogue. Ultimately, outreach among faith and secular organizations concerned with youth at country, regional, and global levels offers great promise for learning about what works and what does not in addressing the tough issues facing the next generation.

References and Recommended Reading
(3) See for example Interfaith Youth Corps website: http://www.ifyc.org/ and the Tearfund Youth website: http://youth.tearfund.org/.
(4) Among programs that combine internet and personal links are Seeds of Peace http://www.seedsofpeace.org/site/PageServer.
(8) See for example, the Don Bosco program in Mumbai, India: http://www.shelterdonbosco.org/.
(13) World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) is a non-profit organization established in 2000 in the UK and it is now a US 5013(c) entity, based at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Its focus is on policy and on partnerships that aim to fight poverty, and its mission is to build bridges among agencies working on poverty and development issues, working from secular and faith-inspired perspectives. For more information, please contact WFDDInternational@gmail.com.

Other Resources:
• Islamic Relief website: http://www.irw.org/.