LIVELIHOODS: WORKING FOR CHANGE

This issue of What Young People Are Saying is dedicated to children and adolescents’ thoughts, opinions, and recommendations on livelihoods. The term ‘livelihood’ refers to the capabilities, assets and activities adolescents need for a sustainable ‘means of living’ (DFID). Young people on Voices of Youth echo this broad definition, focusing their comments on the profound social, physical, and mental health benefits livelihoods can offer. This includes helping adolescents realize their inherent capacities to be economically successful, independent and free thinking, active and valuable members of society, and role models for others.

OVERVIEW

Young people on Voices of Youth support livelihoods as a strategy for self-improvement and development. They see livelihoods as offering all adolescents, and especially those facing challenges, with the potential for a better quality of life – now and in the future. They are quick to point out that improved health, social well-being, and a resiliency to social hazards are all benefits of having a livelihood. They see livelihoods as a tool for HIV prevention, breaking down gender disparities, and leveraging civil society.

VOY members also highlight the link between livelihoods and life skills more generally, putting forth their own experiences as examples and testimonies.

In their discussions, members propose innovative and practical recommendations to provide more young people with access to livelihoods, including improved access to education through government funded need-based scholarships and creating work-study jobs for adolescents who want to earn money and still continue their education.

INDIA

Livelihoods therefore can help [women] to live their life on their own terms. It will prevent their exploitation and will help them command the respect they deserve in society. It helps the woman establish her own identity, and so she should pursue her livelihood very seriously. Men will respect women who respect themselves and understand themselves. boy, 17

Young people are aware of the dark side of livelihoods, which holds the risk exploitative child labour. They voiced their concern over this risk and called for close regulation and legislative safeguards.

The following is a summary of what young people are saying about livelihoods and how they can help adolescents around the world improve their physical and mental health, enhance their social support and life skills, and facilitate their contribution to society.

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ISSUES IN CONTEXT April 2006
Click on a link to read what young people are saying about livelihoods

Education Adolescent girls Health Social networks and life skills Child labour

Conclusion

EDUCATION
Children on Voices of Youth from around the world agree that education is a central ingredient for a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. A quality education can be the key to a good livelihood. And a livelihood can provide the economic means to pursuing an education.

MALAYSIA
Children who are educated will be more productive at home, better paid in the workplace, better able to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS & other diseases and they tend to assume a more active role in social, economic and political decision-making throughout their lives. girl, 21

In addition to enriching the minds and livelihoods of adolescents today, young people also view education as encouraging growth and prosperity for generations to come.

GUATEMALA
If children get the education they need, then the possibilities of getting a better job increase. If they get a better job, then they can maintain their family with a better income. girl, 18

The difficulty in balancing work and schools was also dually noted.

IRAQ
I don't think it's an easy thing to get children into schools. Here in Iraq a lot of children have to work to support their families. You can't just take a child and put him in school. It's hard. He has a family to look after and his dad's salary is not even enough for their home's rent. So it's a sure outcome that children will have to work. girl, 18

Many of the adolescents who spoke out on VOY stressed the steep cost of education as a concern and believe that the appropriate remedy should come from government leaders and through government subsidies. Though young people recognize the urgency of other priorities competing with education for funds, they call for state-funded scholarships, financial assistance and a quality public school system for all.

THAILAND
Education is [...] a NECESSITY. It's a merit service that the Government should provide as many countries are adopting free market policies. I know that in my country, the government tries really hard to spend money on education; however, natural disasters, terrorism and other incidents that demand immediate actions have attracted the government's attention more than education. girl, 17

Rather than simply ranting about the inequalities within the education system in their countries, VOY members set out to tackle this problem with optimistic and creative solutions.

VIET NAM
I think countr[ies] need volunteers to help children go to school for free, at the same time teaching them the best jobs that correspond with their health and ages. [This way], they can both go to school and work to get money for their parents. Then, you will make the children [...] want to go to school and make them to understand that going to school is to their advantage and very good for their future. girl, 16

I was just thinking, what if the VAT paid by general consumers are partially gathered up and saved in every country? Then the world could collaborate and unite all the revenue received from the VAT (some of it) and spend it on improving every country's education. Is that silly? girl, 17

SRI LANKA
Start now. Read!! Take to your self and develop your self. Education doesn't have to be [about] spending money on your school and tuition. But it really means how you should be able to conquer all kind of odds, in order to win the World!! girl, 21

ADOLESCENT GIRLS
Livelihoods play a central part in deciding the social role of all young people, and in particular of adolescent girls. In regions where early or forced marriages are the norm, a stable financial situation can offer adolescent girls some decision-making power in the home as well as potential for autonomy, protection from violence, and hope for opportunity. For those adolescent girls who do not marry, access to livelihoods may offer them a way to resist and challenge the social conventions that restrict them.

FRANCE
I do believe it helps young women increase their decision-making power. Indeed, when you've got a livelihood, you are economically independent so you can make decisions about what you want to do with your earned money. That's the first step towards a "social independence." It shows you that you can be independent in some ways [...] That doesn't mean abandoning the family or whatever. That just means you are free to make your own decision. girl, 17

INDIA
Providing vocational and professional courses to girls can equip them to improve their living conditions, enabling them to earn a decent and quality life. Special scholarships to girls to complete their education, and job quotas reserved for the deserving women can be a major draw towards education. girl, >21
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VOY members were conscious that financial independence activates personal independence and offered examples of how girls have used livelihoods to achieve their personal goals.

NIGERIA

Acquiring vocational livelihood is advantageous to both sexes as it gives them the chance to be independent and not bow to pressures due to lack of finance or information. In a case like mine, it helped me stay focused throughout the time I was pursuing admission for an undergraduate study. My mates got married and some had three kids or more by the time they were 24. But I got eight years experience, a steady relationship, and my much-coveted undergraduate admission for the course of my choice with a scholarship. If I had no skill to get a job for the past years, I would probably be in the position of some of my frustrated friends. girl, >21

Young people were quick to note the significant hurdles that girls must overcome just to enter the work force. And some pointed out that even after obtaining a job, women still struggle with gender biases and inequalities in the workplace.

CHINA

The time of teens is the best time to study and work for a country. We shouldn't waste on marriages now. China is developing very fast—why? Because we [would rather] have a good job before hav[ing] a marriage. boy, 18

UNITED STATES

For certain jobs woman are paid less. For example, a first year male teacher will get paid more than a 20 year female teacher. They should get paid for experience or equal pay. girl, 16

HEALTH

On the most fundamental level, livelihoods help foster physical and mental health. Livelihoods help provide basic food, water, shelter and access to adequate health care. In addition, the sense of productivity and accomplishment can relieve stress, combat depression, and instill a hopeful and optimistic outlook on life. Young people on Voices of Youth stressed that these benefits are especially important for populations vulnerable to HIV, and note that a healthy self-image encourages adolescents to protect themselves against the virus.

INDIA

When people do not have livelihood skills, they tend to take drastic measures endangering themselves and others in the process. Young men may take to crime, take to drugs and end up in prison. Women will be forced to take up jobs at an early age and will be married off to reduce the burden on the family. As a result of this her ambitions and aspirations are over. Some may become careless and contract HIV/AIDS. The risks are limitless and the answer to all this may be a decent livelihood. [...] boy, 17

SINGAPORE

Livelihoods help protect young people because they do not feel the need to depend on others. [...] Depending on others might lead to things such as prostitution which might lead to them contracting HIV. Having livelihood skills means they do not have to stoop down to being prostitutes. They would have many different skills so that when they go out to find jobs. girl, 17

Young people also stress the need to complement financial independence with education and information.

FRANCE

When you've got a livelihood, you earn money, so you are able to buy contraceptives. But [...] first, people have to be aware of contraceptives. girl, 17

INDIA

A decent livelihood will make a woman more street-smart and such she will be better equipped to handle situations. She will be more aware of what is going on and the risks in today's world and as such she will take reasonable measures to protect herself. So it will go a long way in helping a woman to protect herself from HIV/AIDS. boy, 17

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND LIFE SKILLS

Aside from financial capital, livelihoods provide adolescents with social resources, like networks and group memberships, which can enhance their socioeconomic status and open the door to a wide array of options. This is especially important for adolescents with limited opportunities and support.

NIGERIA

[Adolescents] should know that they have to work hard in order to achieve. This can only be done when the parents create an environment that encourages children to have a direction in life. So kids should not be discouraged from doing house chores or even starting little jobs that could earn them a few pennies. They should just be taught to set their priorities straight. They could be allowed to make decisions but the parents should always be there to carefully guide them. girl, 21

In addition, many young people note that livelihoods prepare adolescents for life skills that enable them to be productive members of society.

AUSTRALIA

In Australia, many young people start working part-time or casually around the age of 15, while they are still at school. This allows us to gain inter-personal skills, learn to manage our time more efficiently and to become more financially independent of our parents. I think for the most part, people learn how to manage their time before long. Going for the job interview, learning to deal with other people and meeting your employer's expectations are all skills that young people learn whilst working, which will come in handy when we're adults. girl, 15

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SINGAPORE

When young people who have not worked before go into the world of working, they actually lack a lot of interpersonal skills. They lack knowledge of how to read people and also working with others. They might not be used to not getting what they want thus giving up when a task given cannot be done. These people do not know the stresses of working in an environment, where everything has to be done in a fast pace, and also the culture of a workplace. girl, 17

With more than 1.5 billion adolescents living worldwide, young people are becoming more and more critical to global economic, social and political stability. Their presence is enormously influential and for some communities, where teenagers make up as much as 30% of the total population, their contribution to society is vital. But aspects like citizenship and civic leadership are not necessarily intuitive responses for adolescents. Some young people argue that jobs and economic responsibilities may inspire a renewed interest in the community.

INDIA

Our dignity, our self respect, our self-esteem can only exist and we can protect them only by means of a livelihood. So basically our identity and our right to live in society as respectable citizens is governed by a livelihood. boy, 17

CHILD LABOUR

Although they recognize the merits of working as an adolescent, young people worry about the exploitation of child labour and encourage strict regulation to ensure safe practices and work environments.

MALAYSIA

Whilst it is true that some of these children desperately need to work, in my opinion, they should not be allowed to work. At least not in places where the work environment is bad for them! The authorities should be given the task of ensuring that these children are not being treated unfairly and that they are not being deprived of the right to a decent education. girl, 21

In my opinion, I think child labour is to be described as a rapidly growing epidemic hitting most of the children in the 3rd world unless we do something. It is mostly to be found in mine areas where there are mines and plantations. The shocking thing is that the conditions of work (in cases where the child has no choice), are hazardous to their health. [...] It is not enough to make laws. Some people may not even know that the laws exist. The best solution may be to implement education. girl, 16

Young people also worry about the physical and mental toll that working can have on children, especially in an exploitative environment where they may have few job alternatives.

UGANDA

It’s really the working conditions in these shops that make them bad. There is nothing wrong with providing jobs for people, but pay them well and improve their lives, clean environments, good health benefits. That’s some of the important things that count. girl, >21

Some young people think that there should be age limits in place to protect young children, who are most susceptible to the physical and emotional abuses of labor-intensive environments.

TUNISIA

Children under 15 mustn’t be at work under any conditions. It’s the family and government problem to guarantee them an easy life. Even if you are in a poor county, it is not a reason to make children work. With solidarity I think we can avoid that problem. boy, >21

CONCLUSION

Rather than idly observing the inequalities of the world around them, children and adolescents on Voices of Youth are active voices in the humanitarian community. They have thoughtful approaches to improving the state of adolescents living in impoverished and disparate conditions and insist that the international community respond to these situations with a consideration of livelihoods. Livelihoods will empower the current demographic of adolescents, and as these adolescents mature into responsible adults, their improved positions will fuel the growth of their communities for generations to come.

For more information, read past newsletters from Voices of Youth:

February 2006: Adolescent girls
December 2005: The Excluded and Invisible

VOICES OF YOUTH

Since 1995, VOY has focused on exploring the educational and community building potential of the Internet, and facilitating the active and substantive participation of young people on child rights and development related issues. Through web boards, interactive quizzes, youth leadership profiles, live chats and more, Voices of Youth provides more than 20,000 young people from over 180 countries with an opportunity to self-inform, engage in lively debate, and partner—with their peers and decision makers—to create a world fit for children.

http://www.unicef.org/voy/
RESOURCES ON LIVELIHOODS

Documents

Promoting Adolescent Livelihoods: A discussion paper prepared for the Commonwealth Youth Programme and UNICEF
CYP & UNICEF, June 2001

The Role of Social Support and Economic Skill Building Programs in Mitigating Adolescents' Vulnerabilities: Perspectives and UNICEF's Experience to Date
UNICEF, August 2005

ICRW & Population Council, 2000

Population Council, April 2004

Websites

Department for International Development: “Livelihoods Connect”
www.livelihoods.org

International Labour Organization: “Youth Employment Network”
http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/yen/

Population Council: “Transitions to Adulthood: Livelihoods”
http://www.popcouncil.org/ta/livelihoods.html

World Bank: “Children & Youth: Livelihoods & Employment”