

YMCA Europe Assembly Presentation

Global perspectives on youth development

Kiev, May 2007

Not long after the formation of the World Alliance, in 1859, an English novelist, Charles Dickens, wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*. The two cities are Paris and London at the time of the French Revolution – so social, political and economic upheaval, uncertainty, hope and fear form the backdrop to the unfolding drama of the book. The novel has one of the most famous opening lines in the English language: ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’.

I was reminded of these words recently by a YMCA colleague who was telling me about his visit to one of the most remote, conflict-torn, disadvantaged regions of Africa. This is what he said: ‘I think that people born in northern Europe in the second half of the 20th century are among the most fortunate people ever to have been born’. He was speaking about living standards, material comforts, opportunity and security, and he was contrasting these with the material poverty that he had witnessed on his travels.

We are truly living in a generation where some people look at their world and reflect that these are the best of times - and others who look at their experience and feel that they can only call this age in which they live ‘the worst of times’. Which is it for the majority of the world’s 1.5 billion young people, 85% of whom live in developing countries? Is it the best of times or the worst of times? Some would say that the indicators of development should lead us to be optimistic about the prospects of those growing up now in developing countries; others feel that such optimism is misplaced.

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Development is helping the poor:

In last 50 years, life expectancy (which itself is a good indicator of development) in developing countries has risen by 20 years. In the same period, access to clean water has doubled, child death rates have halved, and food production has grown 20% faster than the population. 50 years ago half the planet was living in extreme poverty – earning less than \$1 a day – while now the proportion is not half, but one sixth. In the last ten years, the number of people in Asia living in extreme poverty - \$1 a day – dropped by 250 million. Perhaps, then, there are reasons for optimism?

OR IS IT THE WORST OF TIMES?

More than a billion people still live in extreme poverty (and in the last ten years, those living on less than \$1 a day in Africa increased by 140 million) while 800 million people will go to bed hungry tonight, and 12 million children will die this year before their fifth birthday.

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Poor countries are showing they can grow very fast: We are witnessing dramatic economic growth in some of the poorest parts of the world: the economies of India and China (representing, after all, more than a third of the world's population) are doubling in size every ten years. This rate of growth creates huge opportunities for lifting people out of poverty.

OR IS IT THE WORST OF TIMES? Because the planet cannot survive the environmental impact of these rates of economic growth:

It is reported that each time China and India's economies double in size, their carbon emissions into the atmosphere increase by 50%.

It has also been estimated by economist Jeffrey Sachs that in the last 250 years, the human impact on the environment has already increased a hundred fold. Add to this the notion that the people of the developing world – 5/6ths of the planet's people – want to catch up with the levels of wealth, comfort, and security achieved in the richer world, the stark question we are faced with is this: can the earth and its resources sustain this kind of growth?

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Because by cancelling debts, rich countries have been helping poor countries in an unprecedented way

In 1999 G8 countries meeting in Cologne made a promise to cancel substantial portions of debt owed by the poorest countries. Within 5 years, USD 50 billion had been cancelled, resulting in big increases in education and health spending in the poorest countries. Millions more children are in school, and millions are receiving better healthcare in the world's poorest countries, because of debt relief.

OR IS IT WORST OF TIMES? Because rich countries have not kept their promises on cancelling debts:

This figure of USD 50 billion was less than half the amount that had been promised by the rich countries. To take just one example, Zambia still pays 30% more on debt payments than it does on health.

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Because trade is increasing dramatically: We know that increasing trade increases economic activity and prosperity.

OR IS IT THE WORST OF TIMES: Because trade laws are unfair to the poor: Unfair trade laws have too often kept the trade barriers of richer countries but opened poorer countries up to cheap foreign goods which can destroy the livelihoods of local producers.

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Because more young people in poor countries are in school: Commitment to the millennium development goals means that more children are able to go to school, and we know that when young people are able to go to school, they are more likely to have better life skills, better prospects of earning an income and of staying healthy and contributing to society.

OR IS IT THE WORST OF TIMES? Because for those denied schooling, life is even tougher: Many young people still don't get the chance to go to school, and many have to combine school with working to earn a living for the family. For young women, limited education probably means an early marriage, higher risk of HIV, and more children.

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Because drugs are reaching more people who need them: In the last ten years, access to essential drugs such as antiretroviral therapy in poor countries increased five fold from 240 million to 1.3 billion – in Sub Saharan Africa this growth was from 100,000 in 2003 to 810,000 two years later. Is this not cause for optimism?

OR IS IT THE WORST OF TIMES? Because HIV/AIDS is killing the poor: Essential HIV drugs still only reach only twenty per cent of those who need them. Every day, 14,000 people become infected with HIV and 8,000 die from HIV-related diseases. And three million people, mostly young children, die of malaria each year.

IS IT THE BEST OF TIMES? Because there is hope that population rises will begin to slow: When people get access to family planning, and when they are confident that their children will survive, they have fewer children.

OR IS IT THE WORST OF TIMES? Because the world's population is still forecast to increase dramatically in the next few decades - in some parts of the world, the population continues to double every generation - and population pressures continue to increase poverty.

The environment, debt, trade, education, health, population – these are some of the forces at work in the world that influence the context in which 1.5 billion young people make their journey through adolescence to adulthood. What is your conclusion from all of this? Are there reasons for optimism? Is it the best of times – a time to say that the world and its people are getting more wealthy, more healthy, better educated, with better incomes and more secure?

Or are we threatened with a vision of the worst of times: unsustainable population growth, environmental degradation, conflict, unequal distribution of resources, and the unfair impact on the poor of trade and debt?

Let's choose one example of one community and see how these forces make an impact on real lives. I remember reading about one place, in Haiti, a small town named Fonds Verettes. Let it symbolise for us the impact of these forces and of global inequality on the lives of the poor. Fonds Verettes has been washed away three times in the last ten years because of an increase in the frequency of tropical storms as a result of climate change. Each time, the people rebuild their homes there because they have nowhere else to go. When livestock and crops – the people's livelihoods - are lost in the storms, there is no money for school or health, and there is not enough food, so the people are forced to cut down trees to manufacture charcoal in an effort to earn an income. And sugar farmers, meanwhile, who might have been able to earn a living despite all these challenges, are out of business because when the country borrowed from the IMF to support its struggling economy, it was forced to let in foreign imports, which flooded in made local crops worthless.

If the people of Fonds Verettes are typical of the hundreds of millions of the earth's poor, should we surrender to pessimism and despair and say 'yes, we are in, or we are entering, the worst of times?'

Or are we, instead, fuelled by hope? Hope that our human ingenuity will show us that we can use the world's resources more efficiently and more fairly? Hope in young people - young people who have a stake in the future, who are quicker than we are to see and to resist inequality and poverty and its effects? In 2005, YMCA young people from around the world wrote, in what was called a Letter from Mumbai, of a 'globalising world characterised by increasing militarization, poverty, disease, famine, natural disasters and inequalities, and ongoing violations of human rights'. Those same young people also recalled the words of the YMCA's Challenge 21 and its call to action to empower all 'to take increased responsibilities in working towards a more equitable society'.

We've taken a sweeping look at how the world appears to be shaping up. Let's take a more personal look. Let's call an amnesty on statistics and think a little more from a personal perspective, from the perspective of those we are called to care for. Young people grow up around the world in vastly different circumstances, but when you think about it, their wants and their hopes look pretty much the same. Young people everywhere, wherever they live, whatever their situation, want to be healthy, educated, learn skills, get a job, form relationships and in time families, feel secure, and be part of a community. These are the things that matter to young people as they navigate their way through adolescence and look to the future as adults.

The YMCA wants these things for young people too – we express it in different ways, but we too want young people to be healthy, or strong, or to grow, in body, mind and spirit. We want to support young people in their transition from childhood to adulthood – a time of change and challenge and choice for all young people. Now, 85% of the world's young people are in developing countries, so let the YMCA care deeply about them – because they are, with our young people in Europe, those whom the YMCA is called to care about.

As they make their journey towards adulthood, young people make some important transitions as they complete their formation as adults. The World Bank, in its 2007 World Development Report, has recently paid attention to these transitions, although the YMCA has long known and cared about them. The report explores:

- the importance of learning - education
- developing skills - earning a living
- learning a healthy lifestyle – good health
- beginning a family – forming relationships
- exercising citizenship – making a contribution and feeling secure in society

All young people face these transitions – they all go through these personal and social and spiritual developments. They matter for all young people, but the most disadvantaged young people face the toughest challenge in making the transition successfully. If you are poor it's much harder to get the resources to navigate these changes successfully, and to acquire along the way all the life skills needed for adult life. And if you are poor you may be more likely to make poor judgements and decisions in some of these transitions – to join gangs to protect you or to feel a sense of belonging, or to accept money or goods in return for sex, increasing the risk of disease, or to take drugs to anaesthetize you from the pain and hopelessness of life on the street, or to be drawn into, or forced into, a brutalising life of fighting as a child soldier.

So let's think about these key transitions for your young people and for the 1.3 billion young people growing up in the developing world. And let's think how global forces shape these personal journeys.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING - EDUCATION

We know that education is vital for young people. Primary education is increasing in poorer parts of the world – it's one of the Millennium Development Goals to increase the number of children and young people in education. But despite the improvements of recent years, many millions do not have the chance to go to school. It's a struggle for so many.

Listen to the words of Mamadou from Senegal:

“When I was growing up, my father's priority was putting food on the table for me and my brothers and sisters. My father died in 2000, and my uncle took care of us. But there were seven kids to care for, without counting his own, so paying for my fees and school supplies became a real struggle, and I had to quit school in 2002.

“In 2004, we moved back to my uncle's village but I felt lonely and asked to be enrolled in school again so I could meet kids my age. Conditions are still very difficult but my older brother manages to get occasional agricultural work and contributes to our fees, whilst my uncle works to feed the children. A year ago, our family circumstances and our village. I helped with other young people to build the school in my village. It is much better now, with new furniture and school support. I never could have dreamt it could be this good. I also help to teach and with homework. We tell the community about malaria and its effects and how they can protect themselves against it, providing mosquito nets, particularly for young children babies and their mothers.”

DEVELOPING SKILLS – EARNING A LIVING

Many young people start to work too early - in Africa, half of children working combine school with work. They can't afford to stay at school, they can't get more than informal jobs, so they get stuck because they can't acquire new skills that will earn them more income. It's a struggle for so many, yet we know that earning a living helps a young person to mature and to become more independent, and to learn positive skills and attitudes.

Listen to the words of Semaan from Lebanon

“When I got to 13 years old, I had to quit regular schooling as my parents were unable to pay the fees. I attended a technical school to train as an electrician but again I was unable to pay for a full-time course. I took small odd jobs when they were available but without a regular job I was always awaiting opportunities to work. My parents needed me but I couldn't offer them any help because I wasn't in a stable situation myself. Then, the director at the technical school where I trained told me that the vocational training centre was offering courses in Mechanics. That was back in 2004. I had felt

hopeless, and now I have hope. I learned so much more than I could have imagined. Importantly, I learned that life is not easy – we must not give up. After my training, I found a job in a factory close to where I live. I feel like I am beginning to take my first responsible steps in life. I am gaining the experience I need to go further, and feel happy that I am realising my potential. The experience has been like a bridge that took me from being nowhere to somewhere very important.”

LEARNING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE – GOOD HEALTH

A 15 year old boy living in North America has a 90% chance of surviving to the age of 60, but a 15 year old boy in Africa has only a 50% chance. Why? The main reason is the spread of diseases such as AIDS. In the worst hit countries, the chance of reaching the age of 60 is only 20%. It's the leading cause of death among young people in sub-Saharan Africa.

For young people, adolescence is a time to experiment and take risks. If you are poor, you are likely to take more risks and to suffer greater consequences. Risky sexual behaviour is just one example of risks that are more likely to be found among poor young people – they are in a weaker position to negotiate and they are more likely to be forced to trade sex for money or goods.

You work with your young people to give them the information and skills to make and act on good decisions about their behaviour. All young people deserve support in this way. In one Life skills programme in Zimbabwe, quoted by the World Bank, the project concluded: ‘girls walk with their heads high and boys complain that they are more difficult to seduce these days’. Empowering young people in this way doesn't mean that life is without its struggles, but the benefits are considerable.

Listen to the words of Emma from Madagascar:

“My mother worked hard to support my two brothers and me, so we could get an education. But life was difficult. When I wasn't at school, I hung around with friends. We would wash other people's linen to earn enough to buy food each day. Now I am being trained as a peer educator in my community. On Sunday afternoon, I go out with friends. It's an opportunity to talk to them about things like puberty and adolescence, HIV and AIDS. I hope that together we can continue to educate young people on the issues and choices they face”.

BEGINNING A FAMILY – FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

In most parts of the world, becoming a parent takes place during youth. More than half of girls in developing countries become mothers by the age of 25. And pregnancy-related deaths are a significant cause of death among young people in developing countries – in some places up to 20% of all female deaths.

The ability to plan safe childbearing and raise healthy children depends on education, knowledge and nutrition. A poor young woman will be underweight and will give birth to underweight children who are at risk of dying in infancy and of being vulnerable to disease when they grow up. So all young people, but especially the poor, need youth-friendly services – to increase information and improve decision-

making about parenthood. Empowering young women brings substantial benefits in health and family and community well-being.

Listen to the words of Fabiola from Colombia:

“As a child I spent a lot of time moving around, living with different relatives. I didn’t get a chance to have an education and at 15 I fell pregnant with my first child. My husband had problems with alcohol and would hit me and my children. My son ran away, saying it was better for him to be on the streets than at home.

“My friend told me about support she had received when she had problems with her children and it inspired me to go. Initially I was nervous, and it took time to trust the course leaders.” When I felt depressed, people would listen without judging me and help me to find new solutions to my problems. My children are no longer on the streets – instead they are studying. We no longer solve things by fighting, but try to talk to each other. I have learnt to value myself as a woman. The bond between me and my children is so much stronger. Now they have security at home they don’t want to run away.”

EXERCISING CITIZENSHIP – MAKING A CONTRIBUTION AND FEELING SECURE IN SOCIETY

In your work with young people, you are supporting their personal and social and spiritual development and you are then preparing them for the rights and obligations of citizenship.

Young people need a route for civic engagement and organisations like YMCAs provide space for young people to develop a sense of belonging and build self-confidence and leadership skills. This is as important for young people in developing countries where social and political structures may be fragile, or hostile towards young people, or where it is difficult for the voice of young people to be heard.

Listen to the words of Andres from Colombia:

“My life was that of a normal child. It didn’t seem important to me that I was a young person in Colombian society, I was just looking after number one. There were few opportunities to participate in the community. So I believed that everything that was happening around me was of little importance- I didn’t think about what the local government or what people in general could do, like improving things so there wasn’t so much drug addiction and juvenile delinquency. In my town there are neither opportunities for work or recreation/participation for young people.

“A friend asked whether I wanted to help set up a drama group working with young people on low incomes. I decided to see for myself how it would be to work with these people and if I could do something for them. Now am coordinating a youth theatre group, called Angeles del Mundo - Global Angels, with young people in my area.

“These days I see the importance of young people in our society. We can make a change even if there are people who do not have faith in young people – there are young people who are keen to approach local government and people do not think we are ready.

“In previous years I did not have a spiritual longing like I do now. It has taught me to be more human and flexible on lots of issues in Colombian society such as childhood and juvenile issues of our time. I have learnt the importance that we are all human, and without this experience I’d be the kind of guy where nothing would affect me in the least, not the kind of people that struggle and strive for a better tomorrow.”

CONFLICT AND SAFETY

In the world today there are 300,000 under 18 year olds – ten per cent of all global combatants - either fighting in wars or recently demobilised. On top of that, the United Nations estimates that 50 states have actively recruited another 500,000 children into military and paramilitary forces.

We cannot imagine the personal, social and economic traumas that face young former combatants: injury, exposure to disease, sexual abuse, drug addiction, social isolation, physical impact such as the effects of amputation, poverty, a lost education.

Think about the Middle East – where so much of the world’s attention and tension itself is focussed. A quarter of the population are young people, and they are particularly vulnerable in times of conflict and more likely to participate in fighting.

Your young people – and the 1.3 billion young people of the developing world – are going through the same journey of changes and challenges and choices as they approach adulthood: to learn, to develop skills, to adopt healthy lifestyles, to form relationships and start families, to become good citizens. It’s the same journey that each of us has made, or is making, but the circumstances of that journey, and the chances of success, are vastly different around the world. The chances of a successful journey are shaped by whether you are living in the best of times or the worst of times. Your chances of success are shaped by global forces which form such a prominent part of the landscape of their lives.

I believe that your young people are more aware of the journeys being made by other young people in different parts of the world; they are more aware of the unfair circumstances in which so many young people have to make that journey; and they feel the injustice – the basic unfairness – of a world where so many have to struggle.

We have looked at a global picture from two perspectives: From an overview of the global forces that seem to shape the world as it is; and from the perspective of young people as they make their journey towards adulthood. As we reflect on these perspectives, I return to a question I posed earlier: are there reasons to be hopeful?

- There are visions for a better future. In 2000, the members of the UN adopted millennium development goals that aim to put an end to extreme poverty by 2015. It is a vision of world with less poverty, hunger and disease, greater chances of survival for mothers and their infants, better-educated children, equal opportunities for women, and a healthier environment.
- There is clarity about the cost of some of the most important changes (though of course money alone does not secure peace and prosperity): It has recently been estimated by Jeffrey Sachs that an annual expenditure of
 - \$19 billion could eliminate starvation and malnutrition
 - \$12 billion could provide education for every child on earth
 - \$15 billion could provide access to water and sanitation
 - \$23 billion could reverse the spread of HIV and malaria
 Such resources, he suggests, exist but are being put to less productive use: For example, this \$70 billion represents 10% of the USA's annual military budget.

- For the YMCA there is the inspiration and challenge of Christian faith:

In one who created all things and all people of equal value, and who invites and challenges us to value people in the same way;

In one who came among us and identified himself with the poor – and who invites and challenges us to do the same;

In one who faced up to controversy and conflict, who turned his face towards Jerusalem and challenged the powers of his day, and who perhaps invites and challenges us to do the same;

In one whose sacrificial actions and self-giving love shows us the very nature of God and the very nature of what it means to be truly human;

Of one who promises the coming of a new heaven and new earth, and who invites us to work for that new world too.

- And there is the strength and energy of youth that wants and speaks out and acts for a better global future. They have a stake in that future. And there is a challenge: how might we help young people to better understand the global forces that shape their lives, to ally themselves with young people making the same transitions to adulthood as they are, though in vastly different circumstances and with less chance of success, and to find their voice and make sure that it is heard?

Is real life going to be the best or the worst of times, not just for the young people of my own affluent corner of the earth, and not just for the young people of Europe for whom you have a mission, but for the young people of the whole earth, young people who have the same hopes and fears, face the same challenges and personal transitions, who are of the same value in the eyes and heart of the one who made them, and whose liberation from poverty and injustice will make us truly free and truly human too?

Chris Roles, Y Care International, May 2007