SHAPING THE FUTURE FOR YOUTH

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Introduction

So much has been said in response to the perceived and real challenges of the new millennium that it appears that the topic is suffering from an unintended intellectual weariness. Writings are pervasive on the global realities that are forcing economic restructuring, cultural homogeneity and social re-adjustment in the contemporary Caribbean. We seemed to have overlooked the fact that the new millennium is itself a chronological mark whilst the realities which confront us have been evolving for decades and are rooted in an experience that is historical and has been unfolding for centuries. This process has been characterized by events and phenomena that have always been interrelated and occasioned by social eruptions arising from its contradictory essence. The new millennium represents the continuity of history rather than an instant of a new configuration. As Wilson Harris is fond of saying, it is the confluence of the river of time and not the stasis or frozen moment.

This evolution of history is reflected in the changing character of the state that in itself has redefined the interrelationship between state, civil society and the individual. It is this redefinition that has forced a focus on new forms of governance and on the emerging character of the state. Like any other sector, the future for youth has to be reconfigured and will be determined by the character of the state and its relationship with civil society.

Crisis of the State

Many theorists have identified current trends as representing a ‘dismantling of the state’, ‘retreat of the state’ and ‘the decline of the state.’ Whatever the merits and demerits of these arguments, it is clear though that the state has experienced a reduced capacity which has resulted in a questioning of its very legitimacy. And it is ironic that the neo-liberal paradigm which so forcefully articulated the scaling back of the State should simultaneously seek to incorporate a renewed focus on poverty as a “non-welfarist” but inclusionary responsibility of the State. Whatever the debate on what constitutes legitimacy in political systems, the reality is that the relationship between the state and other actors is changing. Attitudes to the functioning of the state are now characterized by open deviance and, in most cases, subtle rejection through deviance and opposition to traditional social norms and values. And it is among the poor youth - urban as well as rural - that this finds its most poignant expression. Gordon Rohlehr (1993:26) has explored this in his identification of ‘the culture of dread’ and ‘the culture of terminality.’ The former he asserts embodies an “immense power... a power that seems able to communicate worldwide with some need or perhaps some energy of affirmation that runs through youth of the global village.” The latter he posits as
the extreme variant of the culture of dread in which all pastoral values are squashed and a post-modernist, *fin-de-siècle nihilism* assumes its final posture.

The manifestation of this crisis of the state is adequately reflected in the analysis of Bgóya and Hyden (1987) as:

firstly as actor in the international arena - the sovereignty dimension; secondly, as determinant of power relations - the accountability dimension; thirdly as executor of policy - the delivery dimension. As international actor, the state is perceived to be “besieged” by a plethora of “externally induced and controlled interventions” by both private and public agencies. As determinant of power relations, the state’s practice of “unlimited government”...has set itself from civil society.....As executor of policy, the state finds itself “overloaded” with an agenda of expectations and demands which are not met by current levels of output nor, indeed, can be met on the basis of existing levels of potential for capital accumulation and reinvestment(cited in Rivière 1990:2)

It is clear that the capacity of the state to exercise sovereignty has been compromised by the internationalization of decision making which has forced many states to pursue policies and practices not consistent with domestic needs or popular demands. This has highlighted to citizens in practical terms the limits of the state and reduced confidence in the power of the state. For youth, the imposition of structural adjustments programmes in the Caribbean has ushered a reduction in allocation for social programmes particularly in a number of critical areas despite persistent calls for greater focus on social development. For youth, it is increasingly apparent that the priorities of governments are not internally determined but externally induced. The inability to establish an agenda coterminal with the needs of civil society or better yet the capitulation of the State in areas of social development under conditions of structural adjustment is a real life object lesson to the most unlettered young person of that reality.

However, it is in its delivery dimension that the state has faced the greatest challenge to its legitimacy. Citizens expect that the state will provide for their basic needs and, more so, will provide for their prosperity and security. The inadequacies of the state in that regard has propelled the formation of non-governmental organizations that claim to function to satisfy those needs. As citizens develop greater confidence in the capacity of other social formations to meet their needs, the acceptance of the state in its traditional formation is reduced; and as they increasingly come to question the orientation of the state - asking fundamental questions about whose interest is represented by the state the very legitimacy of the state is progressively eroded.

For youth, the inadequacy of the state in its delivery dimension is acutely reflected in three critical areas. Firstly, the rate of unemployment among youth highlights that the state is not able to provide opportunities to engage youth in productive activity at a desirable rate. Secondly, the educational aspirations of youth are not matched by enrollment in educational institutions at progressively higher levels. Thirdly, the sporting and recreational needs of youth are not satisfied which results in divergence into other activities a lot less noble than that desired. The energy and imagination of youth
is insuppressible and the failure to facilitate a productive lifestyle on the tripod of employment, education and recreation will inevitably result in the rechanneling of that energy into the chasm of resistance, frustration and anarchy.

It is not surprising that many young people express little confidence in political processes and the functioning of governments. The consequence is a corresponding decline in the state as a determinant of power relations and forces a retreat of the state. It is in that context that there is diffusion of power and civil society emerges to occupy that political space. Charting the future for youth must be seen in the context of a state that no longer has the capacity to deliver on the traditional expectations of citizens.

Rise of Civil Society

Civil society has been defined and debated many times and constitutes a thesis in itself. However, there are relevant understandings that illustrate the relational setting that must guide the future for youth development. From a sociological perspective, Shaw (1994:15) identifies civil society as “a complex of culture and institutions which mediate the relation of social groups to the state, and in which individual citizenship is grounded...” Of relevance is Diamond’s view that “civil society is the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.” Diamond further makes the point that civil society ‘involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere’ and is ‘an intermediary phenomenon, standing between the private sphere and the states.’

From the above, civil society can be seen as resultant action of citizens acting as individuals and through institutions hence the relevance of Shaw’s conception of ‘a complex of culture and institutions.’ Therefore the significance of the action of youth as individuals, through youth organizations and as a movement can be understood for an appreciation of civil society.

The area of greatest interest in understanding the relevance of civil society is in the capacity of groups to propose alternative policies, offer policies where none exists and their ability to deliver programs to clients outside of the state apparatus. The functioning of these groups has become extremely popular and many of them appear as alternative agencies of government. Free from bureaucratic and political control these groups have found it easier to function and are quicker to respond to the needs of their members.

In recent times however, we see an almost accelerated decline within civil society of organized groups and the concomitant rise of individualism. Perhaps underlying that trend is the possibility that the eroding legitimacy of the state is now causing an erosion of the terrain of civic organization itself. In other words loss of confidence in the state and its institutions leads logically to loss of confidence in the institutional capacity of civic groups and a cynicism about their ability to impact the trajectory of the state. In that context, we are all reduced to the individual factor in which one of two things happens. Either the individual will stand in an ahistorically absurd posture against the ‘failings of society’ - the last expression of the optimism of the will in the face of death of spirit. Or, the individual will succumb to a
paralyzing acceptance of powerlessness leading perhaps to millennial fundamentalism, finding salvation in some post-terrestrial utopia.

The increasing strength of civil society lies not only in its capacity to mobilize people or to fill the vacuum created by the shortfalls of the state but also in their link with an emerging global civil society (A link that is increasingly and exponentially becoming stronger as the technology of communication becomes more pervasive). Shaw argues that although such a development is in its early stages, the growth of common expectations, values and goals - the beginnings of a common world culture and especially a political culture - is an indication of its emergence. As indicated earlier, this process is facilitated by a global communication system that intermeshes with economic and political globalisation to create a commonality in people's values, expectations and goals.

It is the link of civil society with this emerging global commonality in concepts such as human rights, gender equality, democracy, lifestyles and the environment that is strengthening civil society to face the state. The strengthening of the youth movement through civil society through its interaction with an emerging global civil society can be analyzed at two levels - the normative and the institutional.

The normative level is facilitated by the dissemination of information and exchange of information through the media and by fraternal organizations. The global communication network now allows individuals to learn of events, views and activities of others across the globe. People can now truly think locally and act globally. The effect is to provide youth with the information capacity to act, as well as a frame of reference against which they can assess their own work and the performance of the state.

The other level of strengthening operates through organizational and program support provided to social groups by international funding agencies. Such assistance has enabled these groups to establish an institutional base for their functioning as well as enhance their organizational capacity. It has also enabled them to bring in resource persons to assist in their programming where such expertise cannot be found locally.

The strengthening of the youth movement as part of civil society by its linking with an emerging global civil society characterized by a homogeneity of norms, values and organizations does not mean that the actual strength of the state is diminished and will eventually become immaterial. Instead the state is required to embrace civil society in a new partnership that addresses the future of youth (and I must hasten to add that the reasons for this embrace can be debated indefinitely). Can it be the imperative of preservation of legitimacy or is it in a more Poulantzian perspective, the dynamic will lead to the total reshaping of the nexus of relationships that is the state?

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In contrast to earlier periods, traditional notions of youth development are under severe scrutiny and question. Norms and values that were accepted are now symbols of an old order under duress. In addressing the future of youth, it is necessary to reflect on the changing characteristics of youth and focus on the roadmap that leads our youth to their future.
Social Status of Males and Females

In other literature this phenomenon has been described as the “marginalisation of the male’ and represents the increasing decline of males to aspire and achieve high standards of performance. It is evident from many sources of information that females are less distracted and disoriented than their male counterparts. The consequence of this phenomenon is that we find males are becoming underachievers in academic performance and career advancement.

The higher standards of performance by young women and the consequent social advancement have led to a new depravity in the reaction of young men to the successes of young women.

Influences on Behaviour

The attitudes and dispositions of youth are increasingly becoming homogenized with that of other young people from other countries. Fads, attitudes, music, fashions are becoming elements of a common culture shared by this generation with different motivations. The impulse for the acceptance, in most cases, uncritical, of this culture is the desire for collective identity as diffused by television and peer pressure. It is often lamented that the family, church, and schools, all traditional modes of socialization have rapidly declined in their influence.

This new homogenized culture which has bred an unbridled materialism among youth increasingly places pressure on parents and guardians to satisfy the demands of contemporary youth. In most cases, the inability of parents to meet those demands serves as the excuse for delinquent and in some cases criminal behaviour.

So often behaviour is copied after patterns seen through the television, movies, or internet websites. It is a feature of this generation more than any other to be influenced by technology and in particular through computer-based learning - both positive and negative. It is also worth noting that these characteristics are being exploited by multinationals seeking to ride the wave of this globalization of youth culture by seeking to nurture their products as the desirable and fashionable icons of that generation X. Read “Nike” or “Pepsi.”

Worst for the contemporary Caribbean society is the validating influence of television through which portrayals of violence and antisocial behaviour has reached the level of unprecedented glorification of the most bestial and deprave values.

Views on Social Issues

A noticeable feature of all successive generations is the changing perception and acceptance of social practices. Similarly, this generation is marked in its acceptance and tolerance of practices that were considered taboo in the past. It is not too difficult to judge the changing attitudes of youth to the use of marijuana, the use of violence to settle differences, and respect for authority. All symbols of authority from policemen to priests to teachers are at risk of irrelevance and are empty stimuli in determining the behaviour of youth.

It is a disturbing reality that violence and the consequent diminution of human values and respect are pervasive elements in the
culture of a significant proportion of youth. We are witnessing in some communities the evolution of a sub-culture that celebrates the transience of life with an existentialist emptiness.

Civic Responsibility

Governance requires a commitment to service the structures of decision-making, accountability and implementation. A feature of contemporary youth is a disengagement with social action arising out of civic responsibility. There appears little motivation to participate in community initiatives and activities that seek to build social cohesion. This is a worrying feature, as the sustainability of democratic institutions requires a committed polity that is as accepting of responsibility as it is demanding of rights, that recognizes accountability as being both an individual as well as an institutional necessity.

Commercialization of Social Existence

Associated with civic responsibility is the established ethos of community consciousness that has historically contributed to mobilizing communities to identify and engage in shaping social life without depending on remuneration. The realities of unemployment failing to satisfy ontological needs and induced wants have created a persistent demand for payment for services. This quest for survival is predicated on a practice of hustling that has vulgarised notions of community service. Volunteerism has now become a dying concept. If the state has ‘lost its heart’, then how can community ‘sustain its soul’?

Many young people are slowly living the death of community and basking in the falsity of the commodification of the self-help, believing that every effort, even for their own advancement, has a price which society must pay.

Demassification of Society

Another noticeable feature of youth development is the declining numbers of youth willing to join or become active members of traditional participatory structures. What is also significant is that whilst formal youth groups are also undergoing decline, the informal gatherings through which peer pressure is exerted are in ascendancy. In this gathering there is a noted absence of formalism, stated hierarchical structures or conscious agendas for social action.

This denial of organization is the accompanying partner to the rise of individualism and is rooted in a wider societal cynicism of the effect of these organizations. The age of traditional mass-based organizations is at its end and new modes of interaction are necessary that are reflective of the emerging social landscape. The form of civil society’s interaction with government becomes uncertain as the collective voice gives way to an articulation, highly fluid and at variance.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Promoting youth development in the context of rapidly changing social, political, cultural and economic realities must take into account the features of that new milieu. Of concern is the emergence of a new political culture that recognizes and facilitates the role of a strengthening of civil society and the diminishing role of the traditional state.
Establishing Youth Priorities – Embracing Agendas

Having accepted the new political juxtaposition of state and civil society, it is imperative that there is consensus on the role of youth in national development. That role must be defined by an acceptance of a priority in favor of youth. Accordingly, youth must be allowed to perform the vanguard role in shaping a new future. The building of consensus does mean national agreement on a plan of action and perhaps, more important, the institutionalization of a philosophy that promotes the pivotal place of youth. The agenda of youth must be reflected in the national agenda.

In shaping that agenda government and civil society must engender an embrace, which locates the redefined roles in the context of partnership. Such an embrace is not positioned on a notion of unlimited power of the state but of its facilitating role. The agenda must pay regard to the strength of civil society and accord it an accompanying right to express the aspirations of citizens. Governments can no longer see themselves as the sole expression of the will of the people.

Government and Civil Society must listen to the voices and self-definition of youth. It is in the success of empathetic communication that the hope of youth can be restored and marginality be retrieved.

Rebutting Hopelessness

The decline in capacity of the state coupled with the rising expectations of youth have led to increased frustration. Youth still expect to be provided with employment, educational opportunities, recreational facilities, and other social needs. These aspirations are perennial and youth are never bothered to relate them to the economic situation of their societies.

As societal frustration increases it is apparent that a social environment of hopelessness is created which feeds upon itself. Youth confidence in the future falters and it becomes more difficult to convince youth of the virtues upon which social order rests. It is crucial that civil society and government decisively address the motivation of youth and overcome the existentialist emptiness that guides life.

It is vital that government and civil society focus on rebutting the hopelessness that is bred in the sub-cultures of mostly poor urban communities. Social decay and deterioration of youth must be seen as a retrievable process that requires the partnership of government and civil society.

Re-inventing Youth Structures

The earlier contention of a process of demassification of society can be justified by the growing disinterest of youth in groups and community organizations. As stated, this pattern is also of concern to the broader civil society as the actions of citizens become manifested in individual action. It is the collective consequence rather than collective action that faces the state. It becomes more difficult for civil society to co-ordinate and force the state to respond to citizen concerns. On the other hand, it can be advantageous to civil society as the state feels pressurized due to facing a disaggregated entity that is more difficult to control or diffuse.
It is to the benefit of government to relate to an entity that is a collection of voices and opinions than to relate to individual concerns. The challenge is to structure these organizations and encourage activities that will attract youth. These organized structures can serve to mobilize the energies and potential of youth to contribute to national development. But, more importantly, young people must find avenues of self expression that allow for a sympathetic exploration of their pain, their search for self and their desire for belonging.

Programmatic Responses - Collaborative Engagements

Beyond determining priorities, it is necessary that government and civil society collaborate in developing and implementing programmes which are reflective of these priorities. In the context of declining resources, every effort must be made to avoid duplication and utilize resources in the most efficient and optimal manner.

As partners it is expected that the logistical capacity and operational efficiencies can be used to promote the agenda of youth. Engagements are based on mutual respect and on a demonstrated will to collaborate and cooperate. It cannot be seen as an attempt to ‘depoliticise the political’ by civil society or a ‘marriage of convenience’ to buffer the shortcomings of the state.

Institutional Strengthening

Institutional strengthening must take account of both sides of this new social equation. On the one hand it means reshaping the capacity of the state to deliver in a different modality in which civil society is partner in policy formulation as well as policy execution. On the other hand, it involves nurturing and developing the capacity of youth groups, organizations and indeed - considering the temper of the times - individuals, to make decisive interventions in the transformation of social existence.

Conclusion

The future of youth must lie in overcoming the elemental loss of possibility that is embodied in the social conditions that confront us in the Caribbean. A new form of governance encompassing a role for both Government and Civil Society is a prerequisite for that new trajectory in our development.
References


