Introduction

The clichés and self-serving statements are well-known to youth workers and politicians alike: "Youth are the future"; "The most important social group in the society"; "Youth represent the energy and creative potential of the society"; "The next generation of leaders"; "Young people make up more than half the population of our country." Youth workers know these statements well because they hear them so often and because they often ring so hollow; politicians know them well because they are often indispensable elements of any speech on youth issues and they create the impression of action. The great irony is that whereas these statements are all true, the sense of urgency for youth programme formulation which they seem to engender is so often lacking from those responsible for policy formulation.

Of equal importance is the fact that youth programme formulation, when it does occur, is often driven by factors such as political expediency or crisis intervention rather than by a determination of appropriate response based on logical and systematic social inquiry. The unfortunate consequence of this is that so much of our youth programming is either rejected by the very young people for whom it is intended, or fails to maximise its potential impact on their social condition. In either case the wastage of resources which are already scarce in so many of our societies and the further alienation of an already cynical youth population hardly constitute the intended results of social policy intervention.

This paper articulates the simple thesis that a research-driven approach is an imperative for youth programme formulation. Ironically, although it is a thesis that is by no means new and one that receives strong support at the conceptual level, the evidence is that a substantial proportion of youth programming has its genesis in the perceptions of policy makers and in the interests of politicians rather than in the needs of youth. It is a scenario that we can continue only to our own eventual peril.

The Research Imperative

I have argued elsewhere that since considerable social distance exists between contemporary youth and social planners who are generally removed from the social reality of young people "...to plan social programmes for youth without their participative involvement is to encourage low take-up, indifference or even alienation among that prospective client group" (Carter 1997). The reality is that social programming for young people can only become participatory if the
quantitative and qualitative gaps which exist in the knowledge of the social planner are filled. Simply put, one cannot even begin to plan for, much less plan with, young people if one does not have basic information about their social circumstances.

One of the most critical factors which demands a research-driven approach to youth programme development is the simple fact that such an approach considerably enhances the efficiency of resource utilisation and the possibility of maximising impact. Anyone who has had any significant level of involvement in youth programme planning and implementation knows that the availability of resources is the largest single obstacle. It is also well known that, perhaps more so than for any other social group, youth programmes frequently suffer from wastage due to low levels of participation by the target group, low rates of completion of the programme or simply misdirection of programming objectives. It is the sheer necessity of getting maximum value for each unit of resource input - whether financial, human, technical or physical - that constitutes the principal imperative of the research-driven approach to youth programme development.

A participatory approach to youth programme development, which is of necessity research driven, ensures that the what, where, when and how of youth programming are determined in full consultation with the client group - the young people themselves. Quite often these critical issues about structure, location, timing and implementation framework have been determined either on the criterion of political expediency by the policy maker or the "technical expertise" of the technocrat. There is enough evidence among the countless youth programmes which have either failed outright or have seen their potential under-realised that both approaches are flawed.

Apart from the functional necessity for the research-driven approach, there is also an important philosophical rationale for the involvement of young people, through research, in programme formulation and implementation. The reality is that it is in the operationalisation that concepts such as involvement, empowerment and participation, so often used in discussions of youth programming, begin to lose their meaning. These are all fundamental and defining concepts in the operational philosophy of the Commonwealth Youth Programme. They are the philosophical principles which underpin (or ought to underpin) the development and delivery of youth programming at every level - international, national and community. Yet, careful examination of youth programming shows these principles to exist more at the level of rhetorical ideal than objective reality.

The fact is that one cannot speak about involvement, empowerment or participation in the context of youth programme development without research. For how else can the problems of young people be identified in the first place? How else can their input into the development of appropriate interventive methodologies be secured? How else can the critical processes of impact assessment or formative and summative evaluation be effected? How else but through the systematic collection, analysis and utilisation of information from young people themselves through research.
The Diversity of Research Methodologies

One of the most common misconceptions about the research-driven approach to social programming is that it involves exclusive resort to survey research. The fact is that the very dynamic and complex nature of the target group (youth) requires that research methodologies be flexible and complementary so as to properly inform social planning. In this regard, the full range of data collection methods including documentary research, observation research, content analysis, focus groups, informal interviews as well as social surveys may be employed.

In spite of the obvious criticisms of colonialism, one of the important legacies of the colonial experience with Britain which many of the Commonwealth countries share is the attention paid to the collection of basic socio-demographic information by colonial officials. As a result most Commonwealth countries have a long tradition of censuses and the production of official reports on a range of social issues such as health, education, employment and poverty. The social planner in the Commonwealth, therefore, often starts with the advantage of having a broad range of reasonably accurate official data at his disposal on which to base the development of a sociodemographic profile of the society and more specifically, a situational analysis of the youth population.

Even where there are sound census data and official reports on social issues, the social planner may still need to collect supplementary information due to the recognised weaknesses of official statistical data. For example, since the census is generally a decennial exercise its reliability as a planning instrument deteriorates over its ten-year life. This is of particular importance with respect to youth which tends to be an extremely fluid social group regarding issues such as internal and international migration, levels of education and training, occupational status and the like.

Flexibility in data-collection methodologies is also required because of differences in research rationales and definitions that often exist between the social planner and those producing official documents and reports. This problem is further complicated by the fact that "youth" as a social group is not a meaningful category for most of these official documents and hence age categorisations normally relate to such socio-legal factors as age of majority, age of criminal responsibility and age of consent. The social planner often finds that such categories are inconsistent with the age definitions of youth employed and that age disaggregation of the data is not possible. In these circumstances the planner may have little alternative than to complement the official report with his own research.

In many ways nature and scope of the research process for the social planner of youth programmes is a function of the scope of the programmes. For a Youth Department which sees its role broadly as the development of young people, the packaging and dissemination about existing programmes may be as important as developing new programmes. The former may involve the production of a directory of social services or training opportunities based entirely on desk research; the latter may involve the design and implementation of a comprehensive national programme of technical/vocational training requiring everything from
economic analysis and projections to manpower resource planning and long-term evaluation research.

For the social planner involved in the development of youth programmes, therefore, the research process must take on its broadest interpretation as the collection, analysis and use of information to inform planning. Content analysis of the musical preferences of young people could determine the most appropriate jingle; observation of their leisure practices would suggest what “carrot” should be used in those programmes which must first secure the interest of young people; a questionnaire distributed to prospective school leavers could assist in the development of proactive responses to their needs before they become “lost” among the thousands of other young people about whom little is known (see Figure 1).

From Data Collection to Programme Formulation

In simplest terms, the fundamental objective of youth programme formulation is to facilitate the development of young people. The central thesis being advanced here is that the research process is pivotal to the realisation of that objective. The identification of what needs to be done, the formulation of how it should be done and the determination of to what extent it has been done are all issues which must, at some level, be addressed through the research process.

The effective and efficient delivery of social programmes depend on a number of opportunities and conditions, specifically:

- Availability
- Knowledge
- Attitude
- Access
- Utilization
- Perception

Research has shown that apart from the issue of availability, knowledge constitutes one of the most critical factors in the delivery of social programmes. This is particularly true for vulnerable social groups or those which are generally removed from the mainstream of social institutions such as youth and the elderly. Youth programmes sometimes fail to reach their intended clients simply because young people are unaware of them. The age specificity of their social interaction, their selective use of the media (through which programmes may be advertised), together with their generalised suspicion of, and aversion to, governmental bureaucracies often create the situation where programme availability exists simultaneously with unfulfilled need.

One of the critical functions of research, therefore, is to generate and disseminate information so as to ensure that lack of knowledge does not constitute an obstacle to young people’s efforts to advance their socioeconomic condition. In this regard, the collection of information on social services and programmes available to young people and the dissemination of this information through “youth-friendly” directories or through the social networks widely used by young people could have a considerable impact on the level of “take-up” of social services for youth.

In similar vein, facilitation of networking among young people themselves is an effective way of maximising social programme utilisation. It is clear that young people are
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more effective communicators of programme availability than formal channels but more importantly, research and experience has shown that positive peer influence can be critical in expanding the usage of youth programmes. Hence, the generation of information about youth groups and organisations, youth fora, and youth networks may be as valuable as producing information about the services themselves.

Perhaps the most-often cited rationale for research in the context of youth programming relates to the identification of needs. The social distance referred to earlier that exists between social planners and young people precludes an approach to youth programme formulation that is based on “expert” knowledge or armchair theorising. In addition, the rapid pace of social change and the associated changes in the values, perceptions and preferences of young people mean that not only are there substantial changes in the needs of young people over time but also that considerable differentiation may exist in the orientation and needs of younger as against older youth. It has always been problematic to treat “youth” as a relatively homogeneous social group; it is now even more problematic given that age-based differentiation in needs can be as great as that which exists across social class, race or ethnic groupings.

All of this means that the social planner can no longer trust his “instincts” regarding the needs, aspirations, issues and concerns of young people. In fact, he can no longer be certain that the specific needs as identified by young people five years ago remain the needs of young people today. It is for this reason that there is so much emphasis on consultative and participatory planning in the National Youth Policy formulation process as articulated by the Commonwealth Youth Programme.

Apart from the very important qualitative data that can be generated regarding youth needs, issues and concerns, the research process can yield vital information on the appropriate interventive strategies to be used in youth programme formulation. Young people themselves are often the best persons to advise on which approach would work and on which arrangements would most likely be accepted by youthful target groups. Sound youth programmes have been known to fail simply because they had been inappropriately packaged; valuable information intended for young people has been lost because the wrong messenger or medium was used; important services for youth have failed to reach them because of flawed timing or location. As has been argued elsewhere in this paper, the resources available for youth programming are simply too scarce for any of these scenarios to obtain due to lack of thoroughness in the research and consultative process.

It is generally accepted that certain basic socio-demographic data are virtually indispensable to the process of youth programme formulation and delivery. One could hardly plan programmes effectively without some knowledge, however rudimentary, of the size of the youth population or its distribution on critical variables such as race, sex and geographic location. Similarly, depending on the nature of the programmes being planned, information on such issues as educational attainment or occupational status may be just as important. Such data also have wide application in terms of impact assessment since quantitative indicators of youth status before exposure to a particular programme may then be
compared to similar indicators after exposure in order to gauge the impact of the programme.

It is in this particular context that the proposed Youth Development Index (YDI) is instructive in respect of the use of the research process in youth programming. As articulated in Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) and Youth Development Index (YDI) - CYPCOM (99) 6 it is expected that the YDI will “...facilitate the continual analysis of the situation of young people and inform strategies for youth empowerment” (p. 5). It is therefore anticipated that the development of the YDI will feed directly into the processes of impact assessment and evaluation. This constitutes a significant development in the context of youth policy formulation given that systematic evaluation (both formative and summative) remains perhaps the most important weakness in youth programming across the Commonwealth. Apart from its utility in the process of impact assessment and evaluation, the YDI also has the potential to directly inform policy formulation and programme implementation and ultimately lead to the mainstreaming of the research process for youth programming.

Managing the Research Process

This paper is written with the full understanding that Youth Departments tend to be poorly funded and inadequately resourced in the context of governmental agencies. So whereas it is likely that there will be general acceptance of the principle of a research-driven approach to youth programme development, it is also likely that many will have serious reservations about their capacity to pursue this principle in their day-to-day operations.

The extent and nature of the resource requirements will vary with the nature and complexity of the research process. At one end of the spectrum, survey research requires a much wider range of resources since it will involve everything from the design of a survey instrument, to sampling, fieldwork, coding, data entry, data analysis and the presentation of the survey findings. At the other end of the spectrum, content analysis or documentary research may simply involve the systematic recording of pertinent information from an available source, which in some instances can be executed without the researcher ever leaving his desk.

One of the most obvious requirements for the research process is personnel, primarily for the exercise of data collection. Wherever possible, data collection should be conducted by field officers of the Youth Affairs Department. Aside from the obvious advantages associated with reduced costs, data collection conducted as part of the regular functions of field officers has the additional benefit of promoting direct contact with client groups and reducing the “faceless bureaucracy” image of the Youth Department which is anathema to the building of trust among young people. In cases where the survey research project is large or where the Youth Department is not particularly well endowed, it may be necessary to contract out the fieldwork phase or the entire research process. In general terms, however, a substantial element of the research that may be useful for youth programme formulation does not require large amounts of manpower.

The technical resource requirements of the research process will also be determined by the nature and complexity of the research to be undertaken. Clearly a certain degree of technical skill is required in the conduct of
research. Even relatively straightforward documentary or observation research require that basic methodological principles be understood and procedures followed if the data generated are not to be compromised. On the other hand, sampling and the design of survey instruments can be extremely complicated exercises requiring specialist technical knowledge. In physical terms, access to the computer is a critical tool in the analysis, organisation and structure of information generated by research although a simple data management programme would serve the needs of most Youth Departments.

It will be necessary for Youth Departments engaged in programme oriented research to foster and develop such networks as would facilitate the process. For example, such networks should be established with the Statistical Department or its equivalent and other agencies involved in the collection of information that may be of value to youth programming. Hence if it is known that crime, reproductive health issues, unemployment and drug abuse are major social issues for youth then a deliberate attempt should be made to network with the relevant agencies responsible for these issues. Apart from facilitating access to the data generated by these agencies, such networking is critical to ensuring that the collection and presentation of the data is youth planner friendly in terms of the categorisations and variables employed. In international terms, a number of agencies such as the UN and The World Bank also collect data for their own reporting processes and there may be excellent opportunities for the exploration and exploitation of linkages with these institutions.

The Role of CYP

It has been suggested here that resource shortages of Youth Departments across the Commonwealth have been one of the main reasons why philosophical acceptance of a research driven approach to youth programme development has not translated into operational reality. It is unlikely that this problem will be resolved in the short term especially since the pressure on these departments to respond to the ever-expanding range of social problems confronting young people continues to mount. Clearly there is a role for the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) in the facilitation of this process both in terms of responding to the resource challenges as well as promoting some level of standardisation across the Commonwealth.

As has been indicated earlier, one of the most important resource requirements in the research process relates to the technical expertise involved in data collection, management and analysis. It is in this regard that the Commonwealth Youth Programme has the capacity, through the considerable breadth of its membership, to respond to the technical resource needs of national Youth Departments. There are a number of ways in which this may be effected such as:

- the development of tool-kits outlining the basic operational procedures for data collection, management and analysis;
- the Organisation and delivery of training workshops through the regional centres;
• the fostering and facilitation of intra-regional networking between Departments with the technical knowledge and those seeking it.

Through this and similar approaches, one of the main obstacles to the process can be handled without the large-scale expenditure of financial resources.

The issue of standardisation in the presentation of youth-related data has always been an important one and now assumes special significance with the proposed Youth Development Index. In the absence of some level of methodological consistency, a YDI, which is essentially a composite of a number of socio-economic indicators, becomes useless as a benchmark for comparative analysis internationally. In fact, even the utility of the YDI as a tool for programme evaluation at the national level becomes compromised if issues of standardisation of data collection instruments and replicability are not addressed.

It is understandable and even desirable that some degree of national specificity obtains in the process of data collection: the nature, extent and complexity of the data required will vary considerably at the regional, much less at the pan-Commonwealth level. Nevertheless, it is important that, even outside of the obvious scenario of the YDI, countries are able to share research findings and programme evaluations. The ease with which this can be done depends on the extent to which countries are “speaking the same language” in research terms. CYP therefore has an important role to play in encouraging basic levels of standardisation in the collection and treatment of data and demonstrating the considerable benefits to be derived from such standardisation at the regional and international levels.

In the final analysis therefore, the research-driven approach will for a number of reasons be an imperative in the process of youth programme formulation. The critical factors of efficiency and effectiveness will require that this approach be followed. And those who now have the responsibility for planning programmes for the development of young people should consider that these youth will, in fact be the next generation of social planners - who will have responsibility for their social condition as elderly citizens. It should be a sobering thought.
Figure 2
Structured Avenues for Youth Participation

CABINET

MINISTER OF YOUTH AFFAIRS

YOUTH POLICY

DIVISION OF YOUTH AFFAIRS

NATIONAL CONSULTATION
Target: Youth/Community Group

ZONAL CONSULTATION
Target:

ISSUE-SPECIFIC SOCIAL SURVEYS
Target: Specific

SCHOOL LEAVERS' TRACER SURVEY
Target: School Leavers

NATIONAL YOUTH SURVEY

COMMUNITY-BASED INTERACTION
(YOUTH COMMISSIONER)
End Note

'I am indebted to Godfrey St. Bernard for an articulation of these conditions in his preliminary paper *Youth Development Index - Some Initial Thoughts on Methodology*.