

YOUTH, DEVELOPMENT, AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Summary

This article is about life-support systems for youth. Because it is not possible to explore this issue on a global basis, it will have more emphasis on some of the more developed countries such as Canada, the USA, and Australia. However, the problems and issues facing youth have a more general application. In today's societies, youth are sometimes ignored, sometimes neglected, sometimes abused, sometimes exploited, and more often underestimated. They often come in conflict with parents, guardians, other caretakers, and prevailing value systems as they struggle to find their way in a world that seems less caring and even more ruthless for vulnerable people. Their lifestyles are often subject to criticism as they are different from their parents. Like adults, they face formidable barriers in gaining a sense of identity, autonomy, and achievement, even

with support systems that are set up to help them. They are often seen as dependent and passive rather than contributors and active participants in the lives of their communities and societies.

However, more young people than ever are affected and even dying as a result of substance and other kinds of abuse, poverty and homelessness, violence, accidents, suicide, and HIV/AIDS. But they are also soldiers in the front lines of wars and sole-support parents for younger dependent children as well as community leaders. Young people continue to struggle for control of their lives.

At the same time, institutional support systems for many youth do not exist in any significant way; and the systems that do exist often do not challenge them enough and do not effectively engage them in practice. This article is about all of these issues. It is also about examples of how youth are involved in development, and how more sustainable support systems can be developed for and by youth, in partnership with adults. It is about the transitions from school to work, and from home to households, from dependency to becoming independent and interdependent. It is about youth families and youth experiences. It is also about challenges that youth face and some ways that these may be overcome.

1. Introduction

1.1. Life-Support Systems for Youth

In looking at life-support systems for youth that are intended to be developmental and sustainable, it is important to examine “life-support system” in the context of the *Encyclopedia of Life-Support Systems* (EOLSS). This publication defines a life-support system as “any natural or human-engineered system that furthers the life of the biosphere in a sustainable fashion. The fundamental attribute of life-support systems is that together they provide all of the needs required for continuance of life. These needs go far beyond biological requirements. Thus, life-support systems encompass natural environmental systems as well as ancillary social systems required to foster societal harmony, safety, nutrition, medical care, economic standards, development of new technology, and other aspects. The one common thread in all of these systems is that they operate in partnership with the conservation of global natural resources.” In theory, anything is possible, even developing viable life-support systems for youth.

However, in the context of the EOLSS definition of a life-support system, one may ask to what extent are there life-support systems for youth, and how can better systems be developed? What are development and sustainability as they refer to youth? Developing life-support systems for youth, given the diversity of youth and their economic, political, and social circumstances and needs, on a global basis is fraught with difficulty. Taking this into consideration, what are the realities for youth today; what are the policies, institutions, programs, and services meant to serve their needs? What are life-support systems for youth and how can they be developed and sustained to help meet the survival, safety, social, achievement, and self-esteem needs of youth? Alternatively, how can life-support systems provide for meeting the needs of young people on an effective, developmental, and continuous basis?

1.2. Development and Sustainability

This article focuses on development and sustainability related to the category of youth. It is necessary to examine the concepts of development and sustainability. Both of these concepts may be defined in various ways and are open to a variety of interpretations. What, essentially, do the concepts of development and sustainability mean, and what do they have to do with youth?

1.2.1. Development

As stated above, development is a concept used in a variety of ways and at different levels, such as at the individual or the personal development level, and at the group, community, and societal levels. In psychosocial terms, humans are said to go through certain identifiable stages as they progress through life. The psychologist Erik Erikson is renowned for his conception of “ages and stages” in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society*. He proposes that identity and social needs are important developmental needs for youth as they struggle to gain a measure of independence and sense of self, while meeting their needs to be socially accepted.

However, when we look at development in a wider sense it is a contested term, one that can be thought of as socially constructed. While development is a process, is it a process of growth and change? If so, one might ask, what is the end result of such a process? What is the end result of change? Development has often been used as a term to denote progress and modernization, with the inevitable question of who benefits from development activity? For example, economic development is supposed to be a good thing for everyone, but some people benefit more than others or to the exclusion of others. In this sense, development can be thought of as being inequitable (at least in the short term). Many conventional notions of development are open to question, as the mirror concept of development is under-development. In development studies, under-development is seen as a pejorative term, and is often replaced with the term “less developed.” This latter term is relatively more acceptable but still implies the imposition of values and lifestyles from Western and/or developed countries; less developed countries (LDCs) are, by inference, inferior to the more developed societies of the West. It is these notions of imprecision, inequity, and superiority-inferiority that move some writers to question even the utility of using concepts such as development.

Estava states in his 1999 chapter on development in *The Development Dictionary* that “in saying ‘development’ . . . most people are now saying the opposite of what they want to convey. Everyone gets confused. By using uncritically such a loaded word, and one doomed to distinction, they are transforming its agony into a chronic condition. From the unburied corpse of development, every kind of pest has started to spread. The time has come to unveil the secret of development and see it in all its conceptual starkness.”

Notwithstanding these limitations, Midgley in his 1995 book *Social Development: The Development Perspective in Social Welfare*, provides a social development perspective that is useful in viewing development as it relates to youth. He notes that social development is a dynamic process of positive change and betterment, and has three

aspects: a preexisting social condition that social development seeks to change; the process of change itself; and the end state in which social development goals are accomplished. He lists the following aspects that help to clarify and describe social development:

- Social development is process-oriented
- The process of change involved in social development is progressive in nature
- The process of social development is inextricably linked to economic development
- Social development has an interdisciplinary focus that draws on the insights of various social sciences
- Social development is interventionist
- Social development goals are fostered through various strategies, and linked to beliefs and ideologies
- Social development is concerned with the population as a whole and is, therefore, inclusive and universalistic
- The goal of social development is the promotion of social welfare

With reference to building life-support systems for youth, these ideas are useful to keep in mind. Development can be thought of as a process of change to increase the well-being of young people. The process involves both social and economic development; it includes youth as full participants; it requires an interdisciplinary focus; and it is inclusive, as it does not treat youth as a separate enclave but as an integral part of a whole.

1.2.2. Sustainability and Sustainable Development

Sustainability has a number of meanings. The most common has to do with the environment; and at the simplest level, one could examine how youth are involved in efforts to sustain the environment. In the context of environmental development, the most widespread meaning is one that emerged from the 1987 Brundtland Report of the World Commission for the Environment and Development (*Our Common Future*). The report stated that sustainable development is one “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet the needs of others.”

This approach to sustainability is now incorporated in the goals of a number of organizations worldwide, such as the Youth for Intergenerational Justice and Sustainability (YOIS) International Network. YOIS International Network emerged out of a European Youth Conference in 2000, and is an independent lobby organization of young and “still-young” people for the rights and interests of future generations as well as of today’s youth. Their vision is one of intergenerational justice and sustainability. They view “generation justice” as being achieved “when the possibilities for development of each generation are at least as big as those of the previous one.” They note that the “sustainability principle” originally comes from forestry. It refers to a sense of balance suggesting that people should not cut more trees than are able to grow again.

The contribution of organizations such as YOIS is to reinforce the idea of sustainability as having economic, social, and environmental aspects. It also stresses that the measure of a society is how well it has achieved intergenerational justice *and* sustainability. This

conception links past actions with the present situation, and examines what is the current result of past actions. In this sense, harmful or negligent actions or activities in the past could lead to policies that attempt to compensate present generations for the activities of past generations. In many parts of the world governments and private enterprise implement large-scale projects such as, for example, diverting waters, building dams, cutting trees, and expropriating housing for freeways or other public mass transportation. Sometimes these actions are carried out with environmental or social impact assessments; more often they are not. How do we assess responsibility in these examples and how do we determine fair and adequate compensation? Compensation can then be included as one of a number of public policy goals. It is difficult, but not impossible, to develop the principle of compensation in intergenerational terms.

For the purpose of this article, sustainable in relation to youth development is taken to mean that development has the capacity to be sustained over time. The concept of intergenerational justice *linked with* sustainability means that sustainability of development can be measured in a real sense only if the process of change results in intergenerational justice that can be maintained over time (see *Human Resource Development: Ethics and Justice Needs for Sustainable Development and Economic Security and the Environment and Environmental Security*).

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Biographical Sketch

Robert Doyle is a consultant in social development. He has a Ph.D. in social work and community development from the University of Toronto, Canada. Professor Doyle is an adjunct professor of the University of the Sunshine Coast and Charles Sturt University, Australia, a visiting fellow at the Vietnam Institute of Sociology in Hanoi, and an associate of the Australian Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. He is a former professor of social work and social welfare, and director of the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University. He is also the president of Global Concerns Company Limited, based in Bangkok to provide educational, training, and technical assistance services in strategic human resource management, organizational change, and community development in the Asia-Pacific. Professor Doyle has organized major national and international conferences in four countries, including the first and second International Conference on Community Development in Asia-Pacific. He has practiced in a variety of areas, including social development, mental health, and social planning. Professor Doyle has been a senior program director in the community sector, manager (executive director) in the public sector, a coordinator of neighborhood services for the City of Toronto, and social worker in a community mental health agency. He has also taught at five universities in Canada and Australia in the areas of organizational change, social policy and planning, and community development, as well as having been a special lecturer in Vietnam. Professor Doyle has been a consultant in five countries, including Bermuda, Thailand, and Vietnam, particularly in the areas of indigenous-managed services, capacity building and community development, access and equity, youth services, case management, and community services organizational assessment.