Re-examining the Notion of Youth Policy and Policy Development through the Lens of the Current Cultural Context

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[Salutations]

Let's talk about our approach to youth policy development in the Commonwealth.

We talk about youth, peace and security, yet most of our policies don't address structural violence.

We talk about youth poverty, yet most of our policies don't address youth economic empowerment in a holistic manner.

We talk about youth empowerment, yet most of our policies don't address issues of social injustice.

We talk about youth civic engagement, yet most of our policies don't address the issues of social exclusion.

And so, I stand before you today with a critical question as it relates to youth policy development in the Commonwealth:

What are we doing?

[brief pause for effect]

It's a broad question, yes, but it is also a simple one because it asks us to reconsider our perspectives on youth policy and approach to youth policy development. In the post-truth, critical theory backlash era, reconsideration, re-examination and re-conceptualization are more important than ever if we want to successfully **co-create a sustainable and peaceful common future** for our world. So, in the interest of forging that future, I invite you to spend the next few minutes with me on a journey of inquiry.

When I ask, "What are we doing?" what I am really asking is: **Are our current conceptualisations of youth policy and approaches to youth policy development truly serving the needs of our diverse youth population in today's ever-changing world?**

As we embark on this brief journey, I am reminded of the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "There are all too many people who, in some great period of social change, fail to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands." Youth policies have long been regarded as a crucial component of youth development, but it is time to reevaluate their effectiveness in light of our present socio-political and socio-cultural contexts.

Let's start by examining what we mean by "youth policies". They are often described as an essential component of the youth development ecology. Indeed, the Commonwealth Youth Programme, several practitioners and scholars (CYP 2008, 2007; Denstad 2009; Dunne et al. 2014) describe a youth policy as a guiding framework which defines, delineates and articulates the youth development agenda of a country, municipality, agency or institution. Several other theorists and commentators contend that comprehensive, integrated and evidence-based youth policy instruments play a pivotal role in facilitating youth empowerment.

Indeed, most of the discourse on youth work alludes to the objective of empowering young people. But what *is* youth empowerment? Is it a token reserved for selected young people based on some preconceived notion of eligibility? In the public policy space, it appears the concept of empowerment relies on an army of professionals distributing empowerment to young people. Charles (2021) posits that the classical elite theory of power (Jennings et al. 2006; Jennings 2006) or derivatives of it seem prevalent in the youth development space. Another critical issue for youth policy development is based on Wu, Ramesh, Howlett and Frtizen's (2010) observation that public policy processes are often plagued with irrationality, inconsistencies and discordance. They opined that the emphasis on policy is usually on the role of public sector officials seeking to navigate the political, technical and institutional challenges of policy environments (Wu et al. 2010).

Do existing youth policy development processes allow for a sufficiently robust interrogation of the policy environment? It would seem to me that defining the public policy environment and truly understanding the nuances and complexities of youth experiences are essential elements of the policy development process. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction." It is time for us to examine whether we are on the right track.

In our world today, we are witnessing an emerging global development paradigm characterized by the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a privileged few. This paradigm is marked by unbridled revisionism, distorting the very concepts of solidarity and pluralism. We must confront this reality and question how our youth policies are influenced by these dynamics. It is not enough to celebrate incremental accomplishments; we must recognize the urgent need for a re-examination, even a recalibration.

Youth is not a homogenous construct. It is a diverse tapestry of experiences and aspirations, influenced by social class, intersectionality, and the web of identities that define our young people's livelihoods. Therefore, we must ask ourselves: Are we truly defining youth priorities based on these dimensions? Are we comprehending the intricate interplay of social factors that shape the lives of young individuals? It is essential to embrace a nuanced understanding of youth if we are to develop policies that are truly effective and inclusive.

In considering the role of the State in youth policy, we must critically assess whether it acts as a facilitator or a hindrance to the emancipatory needs and priorities of working-class youth and those living in marginalized communities. Our approach must shift away from a centralist model, where the State sets the policy development process, invites youth participation, and then monopolizes ownership of the policy. We need a more emancipatory and empowering model, which embraces a youth-led grassroots approach that empowers young people to shape their own destinies and emphasizes shared ownership of the policy.

While much emphasis has been placed on youth civic engagement, it is time to explore more transformative and grass-roots approaches that are grounded in the principles of social justice. Rather than focusing primarily on how we assist young people to navigate the dynamics of the evolving socio-political context, perhaps youth policies should emphasise solidarity among the

diverse populations of youth, the deconstruction of prevailing structural inequalities and the reconfiguration of the existing power structures.

Is youth policy merely an administrative instrument or should it be an emancipatory political tool? I contend that youth policies must be conceptualised and treated as socio-political instruments to facilitate social justice outcomes for youth development and create more emancipatory environments for youth empowerment.

As we come to the end of our exploration, I must re-emphasize the urgency of the need to revisit the conceptualizations and purposes of youth policy and the processes of its development. I contend that the efficacy of both deficit-based and positive youth development approaches is diminished in the prevailing socio-political environments. Perhaps the time is opportune to re-introduce and accentuate the concept of critical consciousness in the youth development discourse and emphasize a social justice approach to youth and policy development.

All of these questions must drive the emerging global youth development discourse. Indeed, this conversation should take centre stage at the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting in London this September. It is through dialogue and collective action that we can forge a more sustainable and inclusive future. Together, let us challenge the existing paradigms, break free from illusion and contemporary myths, and pave the way for a future where youth policies are transformative, responsive, and rooted in the realities of young people's lives.

Thank you, and may our collective efforts lead to a brighter and more inclusive Commonwealth.