

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN BARBADOS – THE DIVISION OF YOUTH AFFAIRS

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Research is a critical part of developing policy and programmes for young people. In this chapter, Richard Carter from Barbados provides an analysis of youth policy in his country. This chapter provides insights into the policy and administrative infrastructure that makes it possible for the Government to conceptualise and implement programmes for young people. The main focus of the chapter is on the innovative research approaches in the youth development field – the research driven youth development model. This model uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to glean information and data about young people. Within this he discusses the School Leavers Tracer Survey, The National Youth Survey and the Issue Specific Social Surveys. He also goes on to discuss the role of civil society organisations – NGO and youth organisations. This chapter underscores the importance of youth participation in informing policy and programming for young people.

The socio-historical context

Barbados is the eastern-most island in a chain of Caribbean islands stretching from the Florida peninsula in the United States of America to Venezuela and the Guianas in South America. The island was first settled by Amerindian populations journeying northwards from South America but by the time the first English settlers arrived in 1627 the Amerindians had long moved on to the larger islands in the northern Caribbean.

From its settlement in 1627 to its political independence in 1966 Barbados is almost unique among Caribbean islands, as it never changed colonial hands. This factor has been extremely important in the sense that it created a degree of political and institutional ‘stability’ that was quite unusual in the turbulent imperialist history

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of the Caribbean and Barbados earned the reputation from very early in its history as a peaceful, ordered colony.

Slavery effectively began with settlement and with the extensive cultivation of sugar cane plantations by the mid 17th century. Barbados soon became a typical Caribbean slave society and remained that way until emancipation in 1834. Even with the end of slavery there was little real change in the power relations between the white planter elite and the black masses over the next century. The unavailability of land for peasant farming meant that the ex-slaves had little alternative but to continue in plantation labour and with no political means by which to advance their social condition.

This pattern only began to change after widespread riots in the late 1930s gave rise to a number of social and political changes: the emergence of the trade union and of mass-based political parties; the beginnings of a social welfare system; the granting of universal suffrage and of universal, free secondary education. In addition, the early post-war period saw the gradual diversification of the economy from sugar monocrop into light manufacturing and tourism. A wave of immigration opportunities in the UK and North America eased the pressure of what had been, from the early days of settlement, an extremely dense population.

Barbados, therefore, entered independence in 1966 with a reasonably well-developed social and political infrastructure and with an economy sound enough to support the quest for self-determination of its people. Barbados is a small country by any measure. Though its surface area is just 166 square miles (431 square kilometres), its resident population stands at approximately 265,000. With a population density of over 600 persons per square kilometre, Barbados is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. It has, however, been classified by the World Bank as an upper middle-income country and ranks among the top 30 countries in the world on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.

Barbados is, therefore, atypical in many respects as a small, Third World country. With a life expectancy of 77 years, a literacy rate of 98% and universal access to health, education and a range of social services, its profile is more consistent with a developed country. The country has also moved along demographic transition, such that the youth population is actually on the decline in proportion to the total population. However, Barbados also faces many of the challenges and the demands, among its population, experienced by the developed countries of the world. As almost everywhere else, its young people confront the problems of unemployment, crime, drugs and HIV/AIDS and like young people everywhere they are ever more stridently demanding a direct participatory role in decisions that affect their lives.

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National, regional and local structures for young people's involvement

Policy, legislation and structural avenues

Deliberate and specific policy focus on youth as a social group is a relatively new element of Barbados' social policy programme. This focus effectively had its genesis at the beginning of the 1990s with the establishment of the National Commission on Youth (1991) against the background of an increase of social problems in the latter half of the 1980s involving youth and the subsequent intense public debate concerning this phenomenon. In 1995 Government established the Youth Affairs Department and for the first time a specific governmental agency existed with direct responsibility for the development and implementation of policy for youth.

The work of the Youth Affairs Department is effected through three main programming channels:

- The Barbados Youth Service;
- The Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme; and
- The Youth Development Programme.

The Department works with governmental and non-governmental organisations, the private sector and international agencies, to create and sustain the enabling environment needed, in the words of its operating theme, for *'building tomorrow today'*.

The Barbados Youth Service is a one-year structured programme providing personal development skills, disciplinary training and attitude building to young people between the ages of 16 and 22 years. The programme is delivered through a three-month residential phase followed by two day-release phases focusing on skills development and work orientation/job attachment, respectively. The scope of training provided through the Barbados Youth Service is quite comprehensive and includes academics, sports, cultural arts, and even technical and life skills. It is a voluntary service scheme for young people.

The Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme provides a package of programmes and services directed at tackling the issue of youth unemployment through the support of young and emerging entrepreneurs. It targets young people between the ages of 16 and 30 and offers a network of resources including:

- direct technical assistance;
- mentorship;
- entrepreneurial development training;

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- accounting and marketing services; and
- facilitation of access to financial assistance.

The delivery of this programme involves an interesting partnership between public and private sectors, members of the latter being involved as mentors and as technical partners in the delivery of the programme.

The Youth Development Programme constitutes the ‘eyes, ears, hands and feet’ of the Youth Affairs Department – collecting information on the needs and requirements of young people and youth organisations and then developing and delivering programming directly to young people at the community level. Through this initiative, which represents a personalised approach to youth programming, this island is divided into 32 districts – each serviced by a Youth Commissioner (Field Officer) whose responsibility it is to interact directly with young people in the district. Apart from forming the research arm of the Department, the Youth Development Programme is responsible for mobilising young people towards positive youth development, programme planning and delivery and facilitating the access of young people to available social services.

At the NGO level there is the usual variety of youth groups, clubs and organisations representing the range of interests of young people. Some of these are more or less loosely organised at a national level, particularly sporting, religious and uniformed groups. However, the majority of these groupings are relatively autonomous, community-based associations mobilised around common interests such as sport or cultural activity.

The history of a national youth council as an umbrella agency for youth organisations dates back some 40 years in Barbados, with the formation of the Barbados Youth Council. This agency fell into abeyance in the mid-1990s but was subsequently reconstituted as the Barbados Youth Development Council in 1999. As had been the case with its predecessor, the Barbados Youth Development Council is officially recognised by Government as the representative agency for youth organisations. As such, the Council receives a subvention from the Government, is consulted by the Youth Affairs Department on policy and programming issues and itself initiates dialogue with the Department on issues relevant to youth development. In fact, since its establishment, the Council has worked in collaboration with the Youth Affairs Department on elements of research and programming, both at the community and the national levels.

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The underlying principles

The establishment of the Youth Affairs Department took place in an environment characterised by rigorous social investigation into the circumstances of young people. The National Commission on Youth, under the chairmanship of a leading sociologist at the University of the West Indies, had carried out its work primarily through a range of social research techniques and its report clearly showed the value of direct consultation with young people in understanding and responding to their social reality. In a similar vein, the Institute of Social and Economic Research – the main social research arm of the university – independently undertook a comprehensive National Youth Survey using a sizeable sample of the youth population.

Box 1. The Rationale for the Participatory Approach of the Division of Youth Affairs¹

It is widely acknowledged that social planning is one of the most demanding of the range of practical sub-disciplines, which has emerged within the social sciences in the post-war period. The comprehensive assessment of social problems, the accurate identification of social need, the translation of social need into broad social policy and the formulation, implementation and evaluation of social programmes constitute major individual challenges to the practical application of social science theory and methodologies to the resolution of social concerns.

Although it poses a number of methodological challenges for the social planner, the participatory approach to social programming carries considerable advantages over other approaches, which do not actively involve all stakeholders. These advantages include the widening of the perspective on the social problem beyond the academic/technical, offering greater scope for networking and institutional building as well as a facilitation of the implementation process. It is this issue of the difference in perspective between social planner and client that is of particular importance when that client group is young people.

Although the so-called ‘generation gap’ is sometimes exaggerated, the fact remains that considerable social distance exists between contemporary youth and their parental generation. Social planners are, therefore, in general terms, somewhat removed from the social reality of young people – perhaps more so

¹ A Participatory Approach to Social Programming – The Case of the Division of Youth Affairs in *Going Public*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1997)

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than any other social group. It then follows that 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. It is the recognition of these facts that has informed the participatory approach to the design and delivery of social programming in the Division of Youth Affairs.

Box 2. The Rationale of the Research Driven Approach²

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. It is the sheer necessity of getting maximum value for each unit of resource input 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,

² *The Research Driven Approach as an Imperative in Youth Programme Development* (Carter, 1999)

begin to lose their meaning. They are the philosophical principles which underpin (or ought to underpin) the development and delivery of youth programming at every level from international to national to community.

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 intervention 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.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the work of the Division of Youth Affairs has been under-girded by two fundamental guiding principles – it has consistently sought to ensure that the process of programme formulation and implementation has been participatory and research-driven. The rationale for the participatory approach has been articulated in a paper produced by the division which argues that in a context where so much social distance exists between planner and client group, such an approach is a *sine qua non* for effective programme formulation (see Box 1). In a similar vein, the Director of Youth Affairs, in a paper produced for the Commonwealth Youth Programme, argues for a research-driven approach to youth programme development on the grounds of functional necessity and philosophical consistency (see Box 2). The division therefore developed and employed a variety of mechanisms to give practical effect to these principles in the development and implementation of its programming.

Structural avenues for youth participation

The School Leavers' Tracer Survey

The School Leavers' Tracer Survey is conducted as an annual exercise by the Division of Youth Affairs. One of the main objectives of the survey is the collection of baseline data on the educational/training, extra-curricular and occupational status and aspirations of students who are about to leave secondary school. The data generated serves the dual purpose of guiding the planning activities of the division and

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directing the response of the Youth Development Programme to these young people based on their status and aspirations as indicated in the survey.

The survey targets all young persons of school leaving age in Barbados and is conducted in two phases. Phase one involves the completion by each student of a questionnaire that is sent to the school during the final term of the academic year – usually around April. The survey instrument collects basic bio-demographic information as well as information on the status and aspirations of the student in relation to education, training, extra-curricular activity and occupation. The completed questionnaires are then processed by the division using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which has the versatility to manage biographic information as well as statistical analysis.

The second phase of the survey is essentially a follow-up that is conducted in September/October when examination results would have been received and school leavers would be making (or have made) their choices in respect of post-secondary education/training or employment. This phase of the survey is conducted by the field officers of the Division (the Youth Commissioners) who personally visit the home of each school leaver in his assigned district to determine their status and to provide guidance, direction (and motivation, if necessary) in respect of available education, training and employment opportunities.

Typically, therefore, the Youth Commissioner will either record that the young person is now employed or engaged in some post-secondary education or training activity or will advise that person, *based on their own stated aspirations*, as to how they can access opportunities. To assist in the interventions by the Youth Commissioner the division publishes biennially a *Directory of Post-Secondary Education and Training*, which is a comprehensive guide to available opportunities in Barbados.

The School Leavers' Tracer Survey has proven to be an extremely valuable tool in proactive youth intervention. It is well known that the hiatus, which many young people experience in the transition from school to higher education or work, is potentially problematic. Particularly with those young persons for whom the transition is not a seamless or easy one the possibilities of involvement in non-productive or even anti-social behaviours are considerable. The personalised approach adopted by the division whereby a Youth Commissioner comes directly to the young person's home to guide that individual in educational or occupational choice has moved many young people away from idleness and apathy and the problems that can derive therefrom.

The School Leavers' Tracer Survey generally sees approximately 10% of school leavers being referred by the Youth Commissioner to education, training or

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employment opportunities and ensures that such young persons do not fail to advance their own personal development due to ignorance, apathy or lack of motivation. The role of the division is simply facilitatory – matching needs as identified by young people with socio-economic opportunity.

The information generated by the School Leavers' Tracer Survey is also used to inform a number of agencies. Copies of the Report on Findings are sent to the Planning Department of the Ministry of Education, the Guidance and Placement Unit of the Ministry of Labour and to the Principals and Guidance Counsellors of secondary schools. Through the findings these agencies are made aware of the needs, interests and aspirations of young people and can effect programming based on concrete information rather than perceptions. In a similar manner the division itself can respond to the needs as identified in terms of extra-curricular interests, training and other programming.

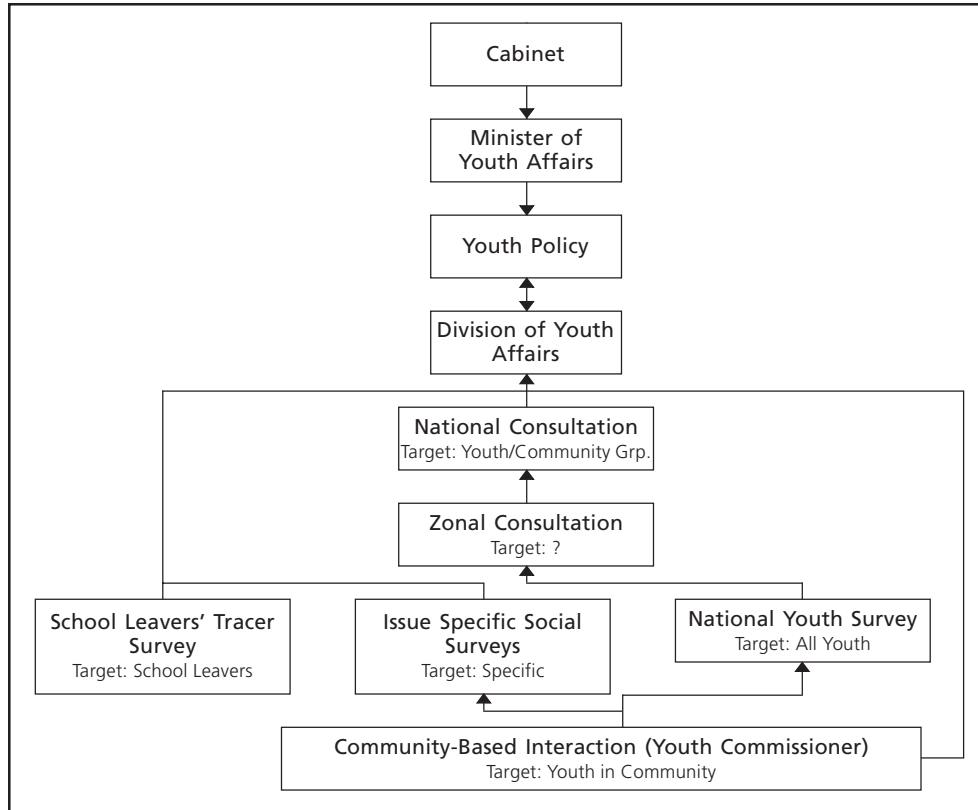
The School Leavers' Tracer Survey, therefore, gives young people a voice in the identification of priorities for action by the division. It ensures that the resources of the department are mobilised specifically in the areas of interest identified by the young persons themselves rather than being rooted in the 'technical expertise' of its officers. Furthermore, because it is an annual exercise, it ensures that the ideas and needs of *today's* youth determine *today's* programming – an issue that assumes ever-greater importance in the contemporary age of rapid social change in the society in general and among young people in particular.

Issue-specific surveys

Aside from the School Leavers' Tracer Survey, the division remains faithful to its research-driven approach to programme development in the sense that surveys are often used to collect information in respect of any new initiative about which it is considered there is insufficient information or for which the views of young people need to be sought. For example, if the division is planning to deliver a community-based or national workshop a sample survey of the respective youth population would generally be conducted to determine what young people consider to be the issues that should constitute the subject matter of the workshop. In this way, young people do not simply *participate* in decision making; they actually *determine* the course of action for the division.

The division has also adopted the policy of building formative and summative evaluation into its programme delivery. Whether it is a module of training under the Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme, a phase of the Barbados Youth Service or a workshop or training activity of the Youth Development Programme – each one is

Box 3: Structured Avenues for Youth Participation



evaluated by the participants, with a view to increasing its efficiency and relevance. Over the relatively short life of the division a number of modifications have been made to programming on the basis of recommendations, whether implicit or explicit, coming from participant evaluation. Some of these modifications have had to do with qualitative changes to the programming itself but equally important have been a number of modifications to implementation methodologies which young persons identified as improving efficiency of delivery.

Some areas of policy development are so far-reaching in their implications that the division seeks the input of the entire target population rather than engaging in a sample survey. Such a case is the proposed introduction of a National Youth Service of Barbados which is recommending that all young people on leaving school be required to perform a minimum number of hours of community service as well as a more intensive service programme for unattached young people or those committing certain categories of minor offences. The division has launched a national survey targeting all final-year students to determine their attitudes to the

idea of national service and to hear their suggestions as to how it should be organised and delivered.

Zonal and national consultations

The division recognises that in the development and implementation of youth programmes the unit of analysis may often be the ‘group’ rather than the ‘individual’ and hence the social survey may not always be the most appropriate means of determining participants’ input. In this regard the Zonal and National Consultations have been a feature of the division’s programming from its inception, seeking at a zonal and then at a national level to distil the needs, issues and recommendations of youth organisations and organised youth.

The consultations are managed by the Youth Development Programme and their organisation follows the four zones into which the island has been divided for administrative purposes under that programme. Zonal consultations are held at least annually and seek to bring together representatives of all youth organisations in a given zone to discuss issues of relevance to youth development and to provide inputs to the programme formulation of the division. As indicated in Fig. 1, the issues and agenda of the zonal consultation may be derived from specific surveys undertaken by the division for that purpose or may be determined through the regular interaction with the Youth Commissioner at the community level.

Issues from the four zonal consultations are generally fed to the national consultation for further discussion and refinement. The discussion at this level involves the Barbados Youth Development Council as the umbrella agency for youth organisations as well as national bodies of other organisations that work with young people. Even here, the agenda is usually jointly set by the division and the Barbados Youth Development Council.

There is clearly a limit to the effectiveness of formal consultations in reaching even youth organisations and channelling their ideas into the process of programme formulation. The level of physical representation at consultations is generally below 50% of existing organisations in the community and the level of actual participation in discussions and programme development is nowhere near as full as it can be. There is no well-developed culture of youth advocacy in Barbados and the youth movement has been on the decline both in terms of number of organisations as well as membership over the past three decades. This, therefore, remains one of the main challenges for the division as it does for the Barbados Youth Development Council – the development in both quantitative and qualitative terms of the organised youth movement in Barbados.

Community-based interaction

As useful as they are, youth surveys and consultations with organised youth have their limitations in terms of reaching young people and effectively incorporating them into the process of programme formulation and delivery. As indicated, the absence of a strong culture of youth organisation and advocacy in Barbados limits in both quantitative and qualitative terms the potential impact of the group consultation. In any case, whereas groups may be able to effectively articulate and advance group needs they are, almost by definition, inefficient in representing individual needs and perspectives. Surveys too have their weaknesses, particularly among a youth population that is highly mobile and whose perspectives and issues are in an almost constant state of flux. It is therefore in this context that the community-based, personalised approach to youth programme formulation and delivery assumes such pivotal importance in the operation of the division.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Division of Youth Affairs is the centrality and degree of emphasis placed on the personalised approach to programming. This approach is based on the premise that Barbados was small enough to be broken down into manageable cells for the purpose of intervention with young people. There was also the strong body of research evidence that showed considerable levels of cynicism among young people in respect of governmental intervention. For most youth who had had little engagement with mainstream formal institutions Government represented a faceless, impersonal amalgam of red tape and empty promises that was quite detached from their socio-cultural reality and experiences. It was, therefore, determined early in the planning for the Division of Youth Affairs that the building of trust with young people in face-to-face interaction with youth officers at the community level was the way to approach the challenge of youth programming in that environment.

As one of its first tasks, the division organised the island into 32 districts³ of roughly equivalent population size, being careful to maintain the geographical integrity of community as far as possible. This allocation was based on data showing the geographical distribution of the youth population obtained from the Statistical Department and meant that each district held approximately 2,500 young people in the target age-range 15 to 30.

In the selection of Youth Commissioners, two critical selection criteria were used, successful candidates had:

- to be resident in the district to which they were being assigned; and

³ The number of districts (32) was determined simply by the number of posts of Youth Commissioner approved by the Government.

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- to have a demonstrable record of working/interacting with young people in the community in some capacity.

These criteria were considered important because first of all knowledge of, and geographical access to, the community were critical requirements of effective functioning for the field officer. Secondly, the experience of working with and among the young people of the assigned district was considered pivotal to the building of the trust on which the programme would eventually rest. Though it was not a specific appointment criterion, there was a definite bias towards youth in the selection of Youth Commissioners who were generally under 35 years of age. Interestingly enough, absolutely no academic qualification was required of the Youth Commissioners although those selected were immediately enrolled in the Commonwealth Youth Programme's Diploma in Youth and Development.

As indicated earlier, the Youth Commissioner has generally functioned as the 'eyes, ears, hands and feet' of the division (see Box 1) but in general terms their most critical task has been to forge a relationship of trust with the young person in the community through which the process of youth programming can be effected. Even so, in spite of selecting persons who were known within the community and who had been active in youth and community work, there was still a period of adjustment during which the Youth Commissioner had to establish his legitimacy and gain acceptance as a 'government officer' by the young people. Nevertheless, the process was considerably accelerated by the fact that the Youth Commissioner was himself a young person and that he already had some level of presence in the community.

Box 4. The Role of the Youth Commissioner⁴

- To assist/work with youth related governmental and non-governmental agencies.
- To facilitate the realisation of the creative potential of young people by mobilising, guiding and channelling their access to the wide range of governmental and non-governmental services.
- To identify, collect and maintain basic information on all young people in the target age-range.
- To promote, mobilise and extend the activities and membership of youth groups and organisations in the district.

⁴ Source: Youth Development Programme Brochure – Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture

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- To maintain a directory of all available services and programmes relevant to the needs of young people.
- To work with young men and women who are not members of an organised group.
- To maintain a directory of youth and community organisations.

Through giving a ‘face’ to Government’s youth programmes in the community and through the personalisation of interventions with young people, the division has been able to effect a level of youth participation in programme formulation that would have otherwise been virtually impossible. Young people could now voice issues, concerns and preferences *directly* to programme planners uninhibited by the sterile bureaucratic procedures that often accompany such attempts at ‘client participation’. The environment is one in which young people are themselves sovereign: the interaction takes place on their ‘turf’; there is no intimidation of an expert or a lengthy, incomprehensible questionnaire and there is actually the capacity for dialogue and negotiation as to the shape a programme should take.

One of the very practical and effective ways in which interaction has facilitated youth participation in programme formulation is in the development of community projects. The division articulated the general policy guideline of developing a range of projects specifically targeting marginalised or ‘at-risk’ youth at the community level. The policy input of the division effectively ended there. The development and distillation of project ideas, the formulation of the project and the implementation strategy were all effected at the community level by young people themselves, in consultation with their Youth Commissioner. Individual community projects only came to the division at the final design stage for funding approval and then returned to the community level for implementation and evaluation. This particular sub-programme has seen the development of a number of innovative projects with high levels of youth participation, especially among a segment of the youth population traditionally characterised as disengaged and apathetic.

The National Youth Survey

The first activity of the Division of Youth Affairs following the organisation of the island into administrative districts for the Youth Commissioners and before any programming activity was started, was the conduct of a National Youth Survey. As suggested earlier, the rationale for the National Youth Survey was that in the absence of hard, reliable information the division would be engaging in programme

formulation and development based solely on the perceptions of its technical staff. As a new division with no existing empirical base on which to proceed, the division took the (technically correct but politically difficult) decision to defer its programming in favour of a national survey to collect information on the needs, issues, concerns and status of the *entire* youth population that constituted its target group.

Barbados maintains a relatively efficient system of registration of its population and the division was able to obtain a listing of all young persons in the island aged 15 to 30, presented by address which effectively constituted the respondent population. This listing was then used by the Youth Commissioners to locate young persons and administer the questionnaire, which had been designed by the technical staff of the division. Completed questionnaires were coded by the Youth Commissioners and submitted to the division where they were keyed into a central database using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) programme.

The National Youth Survey has been useful at a number of levels. At the macro level, it facilitates the generation of a statistical profile and situational analysis of the national youth population, which, due to the versatility of the SPSS programme, can be disaggregated on any variable in the survey. For example, the profile can be organised by gender, religion, educational level, geographical district or any of the range of social variables that may be informative for policy formulation. One of the immediate uses to which the database was put was to determine the level of interest in a range of sporting and cultural disciplines for which the division was planning to deliver training to young people. By organising the data by Youth Commissioner's district, the division's personnel were able to determine the disciplines for which there was greatest demand and to organise the programming appropriately.

At the more micro level, the database allows the division to conduct electronic searches of the entire⁵ youth population for any characteristic or set of characteristics in a matter of seconds. As a practical illustration, the Labour Department contacted the division after a bilateral project with the United States had created hundreds of job opportunities in tourism related occupations. The division was able in a matter of a couple of minutes to search its entire database for persons who either had training or an interest in tourism and who were unemployed. The cross-referenced listing with names and telephone numbers was printed and sent off to the Labour Department within minutes of the request. A number of similar searches have been made through the database where opportunities have arisen calling for particular skills,

⁵ This is, of course, limited to those young people who have been interviewed.

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qualifications or characteristics and effectively, young people have been able to say – ‘I am interested’ on the basis of the survey having been done.

The division has recently completed its second National Youth Survey and has determined that it will conduct the survey at five-year intervals given the rapid pace of social change in the society at large and among young people in particular. This pattern of surveys will not only update the database and allow the division to remain current but also facilitate the analysis of patterns or trends in youth issues over time.

Youth participation in Barbados – a summary assessment

Youth participation like youth empowerment is one of those terms that is now so extensively used in such a wide range of contexts as to become virtually useless as an analytical concept. The Barbados Division of Youth Affairs has viewed ‘youth participation’ as a functional prerequisite for the effective development and implementation of programmes for the development of young people. It has determined that even though the majority of its staff are relatively young people themselves, they cannot presume to know the *what, where, when* and *how* of youth programming. The only way to bridge this knowledge-gap is through the direct involvement of young people themselves.

In Barbados, therefore, the concept of youth participation has meant the full range of mechanisms and strategies to ensure that as far as possible the identification of need, the development of programme responses to those needs, and the implementation and evaluation of those programmes are effected *by* and *through* young people. This is by no means an easy task to achieve through a governmental agency, such as the Division of Youth Affairs, for the challenges of political expediency on the one hand, and youth cynicism on the other. To its credit, however, the political directorate in Barbados, based on its own demonstrated commitment to information-based social planning, has generally facilitated and encouraged the participatory approach to youth programming. As for the young people themselves, they have responded positively, as is the case in contemporary youth culture, to those initiatives that are consistent with their experiential reality and that are genuine in their assessment.

The commitment to ensure the involvement of young people before, during and after planning does have its costs. It means, for example, that the expenditure on programming in its narrow sense is proportionately reduced in relation to administration. It also means that the development and delivery of programmes are

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delayed until the process of 'participation' is effected. However, the division is satisfied that these costs are more than outweighed by the substantial benefits of programming that will most efficiently meet the needs of the target group, thereby minimising the wastage of the scarce resources available for youth development.