



Photo courtesy of the International Youth Foundation

Unite for Sight, founded by college sophomore Jennifer Staples of the U.S., works in villages and refugee camps worldwide.

Where in the World Is Service-Learning?

Three Propositions for a Global Movement for the 21st Century

When I recently asked a group of post-collegiate service leaders how many desired to someday work in other countries, every hand in the room went up. American youths know that they live in a connected world and they want to be part of it.

by James C. Toole, Ph.D.,
President,
Compass Institute

So where in the world is service-learning in this interconnected globe?

- In Vietnam, 12-year-old Ha Thi Lan Anh founded the Junior Reporters' Club to produce the twice weekly "Children's Aspirations" radio program to offer youths' perspective on critical issues. Over the past seven years, more than 1,000 trained youth journalists in 39 chapters have produced more than 700 radio programs with a potential audience on the national radio station of 30 million listeners.
- In Great Britain, 17-year-old Mohammed Mamdani founded the Muslim Youth Helpline in his bedroom at his parent's London home as a personal response to the problems of "alienation and isolation" felt by Muslim youths (himself included) in Great Britain. Today it is a thriving, organization with an \$800,000 yearly budget. (See www.myh.org.uk/faithbased.htm)
- In Palestine, 21-year-old Ramzi Aburedwan, having grown up in a refugee camp throwing rocks at soldiers, established music schools to teach both classical and Arab music to more than 3,000 youths in refugee camps in Palestine, Gaza, and South Lebanon. He sees music as a form of healing for those who are impoverished and surrounded by violence. (See www.alkamandjati.com)

There is a pattern here that transcends geography, cultural context, issue, age, faith, and gender. What these youths possess in common generates three propositions about the future of service-learning.

Twenty-year-old Muhamed Mešić, the youngest-ever city councilor in Tuzla, Bosnia, is part of a wave of young leaders changing his country's political landscape.

Proposition #1: Youth Service and Youth Leadership Represent an Emerging Global Movement

Globalization is often mistaken as a purely economic phenomenon. In reality, it is a complex and multifaceted process that brings together not only markets, but also health, environment, cultures, education, ideas, and much more.

The core ideas that give life to service-learning are globally contagious and timely. If we need evidence of their spread, the three opening examples come from the International Youth Foundation's new book "Our Time Is Now" that captures the portraits of 33 youth leaders from 20 different countries. What emerges from the stories is a global vision of passionate, competent, and confident youths acting as catalysts to improve their communities.

Proposition #2: Youths Possess a Strong Desire to Participate in a Global Service-Learning Community

What is provocative about "Our Time Is Now" is not only the quality and geographic diversity of the youth projects. It is also that youths in Albania and Argentina are simultaneously combating citizen apathy, that youths in India and the Philippines are struggling to clean up their environment, and that youths in Thailand and Mexico are involving other youths in service-learning.



Photo courtesy of the International Youth Foundation

Available from the NYLC Resource Center at www.nylc.org/ResourceCenter. For NYLC Materials Excerpted from Existing Documents: Excerpted from "The Generator, Summer 2006" Copyright © 2006 National Youth Leadership Council. All Rights Reserved.

“If you want to change the world,
you have to study.”

Photo courtesy of the International Youth Foundation

Tang Kun teaches other Chinese students about HIV/AIDS prevention.

That means that global youth change-makers and citizen organizations can communicate and learn from each other. Two young women in Kenya and India, for instance, are collaborating to adapt each others' methods to better address the health needs of young women in their respective countries. Still, there is a large unmarked blank space between international programs. Since the most vital issues today cross national boundaries and since technology makes international communication inexpensive, there is great opportunity and desire to build new collaborations.

Proposition #3: Civic Education Should Include Preparing Youths for Service in the Global Village

What should civic education look like in a connected world? In “Our Time Is Now,” six dimensions of leadership emerge. These dimensions provide not a recipe for youth-driven social change, but the naming of the main ingredients for global civic education.

1. Personal Leadership. This is critical because serious change-makers will initially face skepticism or disinterest. Youths must at first sell not only an idea or a program, but also themselves. Civic education therefore must involve both “inner” work (the person you are) and “outer” work (what you accomplish).

2. Visionary Leadership. Youths are uniquely well adapted to play this role. They see the injustices, inconsistencies, and absurdities more quickly because they hold a different vantage point on society. Seinep Dyikanbaeva dreamed of people with disabilities being given respect and opportunities in Krgyzstan. Stella Amojong dreamed of preventing teenage pregnancies and HIV/AIDS in Kenya. Having a dream alone, however, is very different than becoming a change agent, which makes the other five leadership dimensions critical.

3. Knowledge Leadership. If you want to teach music to Palestinian children, it helps, like Aburedwan, to have studied to become an internationally renowned musician. Vimlendu Jha started “completely clueless” about the pollution of India’s Yumana River, but spent weeks cloistered in the library. The message is clear. If you want to change the world, you have to study. The organizations all realized that if they did their homework, as Thi Lan Anh Ha explained, “Then it will be harder for people to say no to you.”

4. Political Leadership: Innovative or transformative ideas are often born as orphans. Nobody initially recognizes them or claims them as their own. The goal of political leadership is to mobilize public will — to turn orphan ideas into mainstream thought. These youths accomplished this in multiple, inventive, and culturally specific ways. Afghanistan’s Sadiqa Basiri advocated for female education by inviting mullahs and women to her home and quoting Mohammed’s command in the Qur’an that all people be educated. On a personal note, she also told stories of female Afghan refugees in Pakistan who were unable to secure jobs, housing or food because they couldn’t read.

5. Organizational Leadership. These youths possess many of the qualities identified with “social entrepreneurs” (those that use an entrepreneurial mindset to create social — rather than business — products and services). Their qualities include being resourceful, opportunistic, technologically savvy, strategic, culturally relevant, big picture thinkers, personally organized, and accountable.

6. Societal Leadership. Perhaps what is most important to understand about societal leadership, is that it is necessary both to change the world (reality) and how people see the world (perception). The first changes essential life conditions, but the second creates an environment in which much more can happen. Tang Kun understood this. He implemented a peer education program to prevent the spreads of HIV/AIDS (i.e. the structure), but his deeper goal was to reduce the stigma and discrimination experienced by those with the disease in China (i.e., the culture).

The stories in “Our Time Is Now” confirm not the “great people” theory of history, but that we are all called to lives of purpose and action. Governments, schools, NGOs, international organizations, and foundations are left to explore how they can support a growing global movement so that more youths can learn from one another and write their own stories of social innovation and progress. ■

This article is adapted with permission from James Toole’s “Reflections on How Youth Can Change the World” in the book “Our Time Is Now.” To read and download the entire original chapter, see www.youthactionnet.org, click on the book illustration, and then scroll down to “excerpts.” To purchase the book, visit www.amazon.com.



James C. Toole is President of Compass Institute and a Teaching and Research Fellow at the University of Minnesota.