

Young people

The forgotten majority



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A nation for young people

Guyana should be a nation of young people and for young people. Nearly seven out of every ten citizens are classified as 'youths' and children. Half of Guyana's population (about 50.9 per cent) is below the age of 24 years. More than one-third (about 36.9 per cent) is between 25 and 54 years of age.

Young people are the nation's future but they face monumental challenges. The spate of suicides among adolescents, the rising number of teenage pregnancies, the large number of school dropouts, the unavailability of new job opportunities, the reports of their being victims of police brutality and torture, the huge prison population (of which young people are said to comprise 75 per cent) and the predicament of juveniles in the New Opportunity Corps are evidence of a dangerous and deteriorating social situation.

Guyana, despite being home to the head office of the Commonwealth (Caribbean) Youth Programme which serves seventeen states in the Caribbean and Canada with a population of over 38 million seems unprepared to provide leadership to the young. The government's feeble observance of the International Year for Youth from August 2010-August 2011 indicated an institutional inclination to inaction and lack of interest in youth issues.

The United Nations *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond* states, "the capacity for progress of our societies is based, among other elements, on their capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of youth in the building and designing of the future. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilise support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account".

The Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport publicly announced on several occasions over the past decade that the National Youth Policy would be reviewed. The problem is that he has promulgated no such 'Policy.' The result has been that there is nothing to guide the present administration's actions towards young people who continue to face difficult lives in the land of their birth. These difficulties are manifest in three major crises – employment, education and empowerment.

The employment crisis

Joblessness among young people in the Caribbean Community, at an average of 23 per cent, is higher than many other developed and developing countries. The majority of young university graduates in Guyana, unable to find employment, are forced to migrate or remain out-of-work.

The *National Employment Report* published by the International Labour Organisation estimated that, based on Guyana's *Household Income and Expenditure Survey*, which was last undertaken over a decade ago, about 44 per cent of the population of working age are "not economically active." That *Report* indicated also that young people suffer most owing to the fact that school-leavers are inexperienced and have a long wait before they find their first job. The fact is that, in addition to persons said to be 'unemployed', many who would like to work do not actively seek jobs simply because they have abandoned hope of finding suitable occupations. Others, though nominally 'employed', earn wages that condemn them to living beneath the poverty line.

Unemployment is the central issue affecting young people in Guyana. This country is sitting on a 'time bomb' of youth unemployment. The government's delay in dealing with the jobs crisis and its disregard for measures to defuse it may detonate a social explosion which could have dangerous consequences.

The Report of the CARICOM Commission on Youth Development – *Eye on the Future: Invest in Youth Now for the Community Tomorrow* – noted, among other things, that the primary education

dropout rate was “at a staggering height.” Guyana, if its young people are to lead successful lives, must reduce the primary and secondary school dropout rate, increase the matriculation rate and provide new economic opportunities for school-leavers.

This situation has arisen, in part, because the ‘one-size-fits-all’ education model has failed. For many students, it has little relevance to them and to the needs of the communities in which they live.

The economies of most regions, for example, are based on farming and fishing. There is also a great need there for the expansion of public physical infrastructure such as airstrips, bridges, roads and stelling. The education system therefore, should emphasise agricultural, engineering and technology so that school-leavers could be equipped with the skills to enable them to live and work comfortably in their areas of residence. It does not.

The government is aware of the mismatch between education and employment. Its response, in the absence of a coherent policy, however, remains hopelessly haphazard. Five government ministries – the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs; Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Labour – jostle to offer a variety of usually unrelated, short-term training courses all aimed at unemployed, out-of-school young people. They all promise, but do not provide, the long-term careers that youths desperately seek.

The PPPC administration’s unplanned, eclectic responses to the youth unemployment crisis – the President’s Youth Choice Initiative and the President’s Youth Award: Republic of Guyana, copied from the British Duke of Edinburgh International Award for Young People, have never provided employment.

The Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, for example, launched a billion-dollar Youth Apprenticeship and Entrepreneur Programme (YAEP). The programme, actually a six-month attachment, targeted youths to be trained in culture, education, governance, health and sports. The Ministry of Culture Youth and Sport conducts the Youth Entrepreneurial Skills Training (YEST) programme for out-of-school, unskilled and unemployed youths that claims to prepare participants for entry into other institutions of learning, employment and self-employment.

The Ministry of Home Affairs offers training in what it calls “life skills” and vocational pursuits under its Citizen Security Programme (CSP). The Ministry of Labour, through its Board of Industrial Training (BIT) conducts a two-year apprenticeship programme now called the National Training Project for Youth, Empowerment (NTPYE) for youths who have not completed high school.

The United States embassy, not to be outdone, plunged into the youth training labyrinth. The Embassy, in March 2012, launched a three-week cultural and leadership exchange programme called the Youth Ambassador Programme (YAP) sponsored by the US Department of State, focused on youth citizen diplomacy, service and volunteerism.

Programmes proliferate but progress has been scant. Despite the ferment of initiatives – CSP; NTPYE; PYCI; PYARG; YAEP and YEST – there have been few new job opportunities. Too many Guyanese youths still leave school unskilled, enter the workforce for the first time and are obliged to resort to the informal sector for employment in low-paying occupations. Four out of every ten youths face a jobless future. Programmes such as the President’s Youth Choice initiative (PYCI) and the President’s Youth Award Republic of Guyana (PYARG) have failed long ago. They had little impact on youths over the years.

This country’s unemployed young people feel that they are in an employment cul-de-sac. The ILO Report also stated that 77 per cent of educated persons of working age migrate because of the lack of employment opportunities. They feel that they have become entangled in a web of bureaucratic programmes which generate lots of certificates and diplomas but provide few jobs.

The education crisis

The single biggest problem at the national level, with dire implications for the future, has been the growing number of illiterate and innumerate youths. The Ministry of Education reports that nearly 7,000 children drop out of our primary and secondary schools every year. Young people who do not complete their basic education satisfactorily will find it difficult to get jobs.

Youths find themselves facing a grave employment crisis which has been made worse by the crisis in the public education system and the failure of the PPPC administration to promulgate and pursue a coherent and comprehensive national youth policy.

The PPPC administration, for more than two decades, has badly damaged the national primary education system. More than 50 per cent of children at the National Grade Six Assessment tests fail all four subjects; sixty per cent of children in grades 2 to 4 cannot recognise or read a single word and 40 per cent of nursery, primary and secondary school teachers remain untrained.

The majority of young university graduates in Guyana, unable to find employment, are forced to remain under- or un-employed or to join the throng of thousands who emigrate every year. There must be new opportunities for our young people. They must be given an opportunity to be educated as engineers to build bridges and roads to open our vast hinterland and to develop schemes to exploit our hydro-electrical potential. There must be an opportunity for geologists to develop our bauxite, diamond, gold, manganese and quarrying resources. There must be an opportunity for biologists, botanists, zoologists and agriculturists to expand food production. There must be an opportunity for young people to investigate and implement systems for the sustainable development of our country. There must be an opportunity to improve communication and human learning. There must be an opportunity for manufacturers, shippers and builders to drive our economy forward at a faster rate.

These opportunities will not be fully exploited and this country cannot be developed by chance or by conjecture. They cannot be achieved by the woefully impoverished, the ignorant or the illiterate. They cannot be achieved while so many primary school children cannot qualify to enter secondary school or when thousands of children drop out of our primary and secondary schools every year. They can be achieved only by an educated population.

Education is an entitlement. Primary education has been compulsory in Guyana for 138 years. The Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana states: "Every citizen has the right to free education from nursery to university..."

The PPPC administration, however, presides blithely over a broken public school system that is continuing to fail the most vulnerable section of the population – the young people. The chaos in the country's primary schools continues to contribute to the high rate of delinquency and the low standards of performance. The atrocious results at the essential annual National Grade Six Assessment examinations are evidence of a diseased and disordered system. A sort of 'education apartheid' is emerging that is dividing our student population more deeply than ever before.

The empowerment crisis

The Commonwealth Youth Programme defines the concept of a national youth policy as *"a practical demonstration and declaration of the priority and directions that a country intends giving to the development of its young women and men. A national youth policy specifically represents a gender-inclusive statement that encapsulates the elements of vision, framework and realistic guidelines from which strategies and initiatives can be developed to facilitate meaningful youth participation and development within a country"*.

The PPPC Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport, soon after he was appointed in 2006, publicly announced that the National Youth Policy – which had been promulgated in 1994 – would be reviewed. The Minister later admitted to the National Assembly that the PPPC Administration still did not have a functional National Youth Policy. The Minister also chairs the National Youth Commission (NYC), established in March 2002. He claims to have had consultations for a five-year action plan for the Youth Development and Empowerment Programme (YDEP). That is still to be seen.

The PPPC administration still has no National Youth Policy. The priority should be to ensure that everyone gets a sound education to prepare him or her for satisfying employment. A Partnership for National Unity, on the contrary, has a plan – the *Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment*. That *Plan* will:

- *ensure that every primary school child starts the school day with a healthy breakfast at school;*
- *ensure that no child is prevented from attending school because of parental poverty;*
- *ensure that every primary school child is transported to school by boat or bus; and,*
- *reward every family that keeps its children in school.*

The current ‘hodgepodge’ responses to the youth unemployment crisis have never had and will never have the capability to provide satisfactory employment for the thousands of young people leaving school every year. Jobs are scarce. Young school-leavers simply do not have the skills to equip them for the world of work. The economy simply is not providing employment opportunities for them.

Young people want permanency not ‘ad hoc.’ They do not want to be placed on a hinterland ‘dole.’ They want long-lasting careers. They want education and training. They want technical and agricultural institutes in every region, not just on the coastland. They want regional branches of agricultural credit and development banks. They want a sound, serious education which could prepare them for a productive life.

Young people wake up every morning to the dreary reality of broken schools, an underfunded university and a brigade of jobless dropouts. The truth, of course, is that the PPPC administration simply does not furnish the funds to confront the most serious challenges facing families. These are:

- *the low quality of education at the primary and secondary levels along the coastland and in the hinterland as well as at the University of Guyana;*
- *the unavailability of jobs for young school-leavers everywhere;*
- *the daily threats to human safety; and,*
- *the threats of disease to public health.*

These are the micro-economic fundamentals by which people live every day – having to stare at our schools, hospitals, police stations and the unfriendly face of an uncaring state. Young people worry about the everyday issues that confront them.

Our country needs to make a great leap ahead from the scrawny projects to a robust, inclusive and purposive, country-wide service to correct the deficiencies in the education and employment of our young people.

The original Guyana National Service had its origins in an attempt to solve the problem of youth unemployment in the mid-1960s. Robert F Landor, a UN consultant, whose main concern was with the problem of poverty and vocational training among young people, presented a study to the administration entitled “*Problems of Unemployed Youth: Youth Corps*,” on 7th February 1966. Accepting and adopting Landor’s basic premises, the administration formally established the Guyana

Youth Corps on 1st January 1968 as a means of solving the youth unemployment problem.

It was only in 1973, after years of experimenting with measures to solve the problem of youth unemployment, that work started on the establishment of a more ambitious scheme to take the place of the Youth Corps. Forbes Burnham, the Prime Minister, introduced the *State Paper on National Service* in the National Assembly on 20th December 1973.

The Service's principal objectives were to ensure that all Guyanese within the formal training system were made aware of the new values of an independent society; to provide additional training, especially in the development of skills relevant to our development programme; to put emphasis on the practical approach in training and provide the opportunity for on-the-job learning and to accelerate the process of additional training, through National Service itself and also through existing institutions and new centres.

The national service could be proud of its 25-year record. It was a rare, but well-deserved achievement for the Service to be presented with the Medal of Service, a national award, for its contribution to development in 1979.

During its existence, the Service trained over 20,000 young citizens, nearly 37 per cent of whom were students of educational institutions – the University of Guyana; Guyana School of Agriculture; Georgetown Hospital Nursing School – and Public Service Ministry's scholarship winners. In the midst of all the controversy, a fact that is frequently overlooked is that the majority of persons who entered the Service – about 52 per cent – were 'basic' pioneers – ordinary young men and women for whom training in vocational and technical skills, along with other values, provided a foundation for employment and self-esteem.

It has always been felt, at least from the time of Landor's pioneering report, that there was a need for some system for educating young people to fit them for employment. Those were the Service's initial objectives. The PPPC's disestablishment of the Service at the dawn of the new millennium was a grave error of judgement. It extinguished any expectation that the disadvantaged young people for whom the Service was established could escape from the predicament of alienation, unemployment and poverty in which they find themselves today.

A Partnership for National Unity will continue to work towards ensuring that the young people of this country get the opportunity to enjoy 'a good life' in the land of their birth through our Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment. Young people are the trustees of our nation's future and they deserve to be given the best opportunities to be educated, employed and empowered.

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