

Youth and *Diakonia*

Youth as Target Group in *diakonia*

Current Challenges

- **Education:** Nearly half of the world youth population never reaches upper secondary education.¹
- **Unemployment:** “The youth unemployment rate, a measure of the percentage of young people who are looking but unable to find work in the youth labor force stood at 13.5 per cent in 2005”². Compared to 6.4% for the overall global unemployment rate. The difference to the adult population is even rising. 85 million youths are unemployed. 300 Million are “working poor” defined as earning less than USD 2 a day. That is about half of the employed youths.³
- **HIV and AIDS:** Even though the prevalence rates among youths are slightly declining, they are still the group that is affected the most.⁴
- **Gender Inequality:** In many cases, children and youth are the most affected groups. Generally, among those girls and young women are even more affected. Therefore, *diakonia* with youth needs always a gender lens.

Lack of participation of as pivotal problem

Children and youth have to be appreciated as stages of life with their own dignity and beauty. Certainly, children and youth share the same problems like other people in their family and their context. However, in some cases only young people are affected by certain problems or to a higher degree. Therefore, participation is the guiding concept in *diakonia*. Children participate in getting food, health care and education, youth can increasingly influence their environment and speak up, and young people are able to make the transition from formal education to the labor force.

Young people as agents of transformation

Youth as an asset

For transformational *diakonia*, it is crucial to shift the perspective and discover youth as an asset.

“The time has never been better to invest in young people living in developing countries [...]. The number of people worldwide aged 12-24 years has reached 1.3 billion, the largest in history. It is also the healthiest and best educated - a strong base to build on in a world that demands more than basic skills.”⁵

Everyday *diakonia* and diaconal formation

The basis of all diaconal action is the spontaneous help that all baptized are called to. Therefore, diaconal formation is part of all Christian education. However, it must not be reduced to a simple “helper-formation”. Young people should discover the systemic reasons for current problems and realize that not everything can be solved on an individual level. With this in mind, young people are through their energy and their sense for justice an everyday asset to *diakonia*.

Education – formal and non-formal

LWF churches have a long-standing role in formal education. This has to be continued to address the global educational crisis. However, especially in the field of non-formal education young people are an asset. This has been discovered in peer-education about HIV

and Aids. It can be utilized in many other areas as well. Youth-led groups are very strong in collaborative learning and are powerful in producing a high level of commitment among the learners. The strength of non-formal educational settings has to be much more recognized and churches should strive to lift its scope and quality even higher.

Volunteerism

Globally, many young people volunteer. They help without monetary compensation in not-for-profit sectors including social action and *diakonia*. The numbers are impressive:

An US study finds “an estimated 15.5 million teenagers participated in volunteer activities through a formal organization during 2004, contributing more than 1.3 billion hours of service. That translates into a rate of 55 percent - more than one and a half times the adult rate of 29 percent“.⁶

The European numbers are generally lower but still about a third of the young people volunteer in EU countries. In developing countries number are difficult to find but studies suggest generally high numbers, especially in faith-based organizations.⁷

In many Northern countries, there is a growing interest of spending a „gap-year“ after high school volunteering, including in a developing country. Governments expand their programs in that area; churches are involved in differing degrees.

Many studies suggest that young people are eager to volunteer and to be active in diaconal contexts - if the framework is right. Instead of pay, they need non-monetary compensation: Good training, real accompaniment, participation in decision-making, and a meaningful certificate for their work. This way volunteering becomes non-formal education. The South African Volunteer Service lists employability even as a specific goal.

Social advocacy

A certain number of young people are involved in political action for the marginalized. A specific example with direct diaconal connection is the „changemakers“. This is a youth-led advocacy group affiliated with church-development agencies. Originating from Norway, the movement has now spread to all Nordic countries. Churches and church-based youth organizations are in a good position to facilitate this kind of movements.

Theses

- Transformational *diakonia* has to focus on youth. Only this makes it sustainable.
- Set the motivation right: Discover youth as an asset.
- Stronger participation (e.g. in the labor market) can only be achieved by higher participation on all levels.
- Both mainstreaming services for youth and youth-led action are necessary.
- Employment opportunities are at the core of many problems and churches have a stronger role to play (strengthening employability; employment opportunities).

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26 November 2007

¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2005. Global Education Survey. Montreal, p. 9.

² International Labor Organization. 2006. Youth Employment Trends 2006, Geneva, p. 4

³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴ UNAIDS/World Health Organization. 2007. 07 AIDS Epidemic Update. Geneva.

⁵ The World Bank (ed.). 2006. World Development Report 2007. Development and the next Generation. Washington, D.C., p. xi

⁶ Corporation for National and Community Service. 2005. *Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering*. Washington, DC., p.2

⁷ Cf. Leila Patel et al. 2007. Five-Country Study on Service and Volunteering in Southern Africa. Research Report. Johannesburg, p 27 and *passim*.