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"Young People at the Centre of Sustainable Development"

Youth Voice and Youth-led Activity: Mainstreaming Youth Concerns in Politics

(DRAFT)

FUTURE FOREIGN POLICY
THE UNIVERSITY THINK TANK ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Statement of Main Recommendation

This paper will put forward three ideas to empower young people across the Commonwealth. These come in response to the Commonwealth Youth Programme's call to "engage young people in decision making, as partners in democracy and development" (2007: 12), and to set up "appropriate mechanisms for youth participation in policy-making" (ibid: 13). In particular, they attempt to meet the Commonwealth Youth Strategic Plan's 2008-12 definition of youth mainstreaming, where: "a youth perspective is integrated into policies, programmes and projects in various development sectors" (2008: 24). Indeed, too often have youth-empowerment schemes operated parallel to formal power structures, but not within them (Farthing, 2012). For instance, within the Commonwealth, while the Youth Caucus and Parliaments are huge leaps forward, they are only a first step towards mainstreaming youth concerns in politics. They carry influence, but do not sit at the core of individual national governments.

Therefore, to help embed youth-concerns within government structures, I suggest the following:

1) The Commonwealth should encourage the adoption of open primary elections throughout all of its member states. In other words, Commonwealth electorates should be able to choose who can run for office. The experiences of open primaries in the United States and Latin America suggest that they produce candidates who are more representative of the wider electorate and their concerns than closed selection procedures. This is crucial, as the wider electorate in Commonwealth countries is overwhelmingly youthful, due to the demographic structure of its member states. Therefore, selection processes in which youthful populations detain the largest electoral weight are more likely to produce youth-oriented candidates. This would help place youth-concerns at the centre of politics.

2) Recognising that "for young people, the democratic deficit is sometimes about voting rights, but just as frequently it is about styles of communication and consultation" (Afari-Gyan, in Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment, 2007: 19), I suggest that open primaries be complemented with improved youth-consultation mechanisms. The Commonwealth could help member-states run national-youth surveys on a yearly basis. Based on the Overseas Development Institute's *MY World* project, these surveys could allow young people to define their own priorities, as opposed to letting others do-so. Furthermore, I suggest that these priorities could be integrated into the policy-making process through a "Youth-Duty act", similar to the former "Gender Equality Act" in the UK, which would ensure that all government policies are designed with attention to youth-priorities.

3) Finally, to ensure that Commonwealth youth do not suffer from a communication deficit, which is detrimental to the mainstreaming of their concerns, I suggest that the Commonwealth help introduce 'youth slots' or 'youth-hours' on mainstream media outlets. Similar to 'Women's Hour' on British radio, or to panel-type shows such as Question Time on BBC television, young people could have programmes dedicated to their concerns on mainstream media, alongside youth-operated stations already set-up across the Commonwealth. This would help broadcast a youth message into mainstream debate, as opposed to running it in parallel on youth-dedicated stations. Further, it would help dispel negative stereotypes about youth, and encourage an inter-generational debate. The latter could help challenge some of the cultural obstacles to youth-development, such as the primacy of elders.

Background to the Proposals

These three proposals are designed to reinforce "Youth Voice" and "Youth-led activity" across the Commonwealth. They take their cue from the Commonwealth Youth Programme of 2007-2015, which called for ways to "engage and empower young people" (2007: 4). In particular, they were designed to meet the Youth Programme's definition of empowerment: "creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others" (ibid: 15).

Often, this vision of empowerment is co-equated to participation (Farthing, 2012), in other words, involving young people in projects where they can express their concerns. However, it has often been found that what is understood as youth-participation is often governed by adult-agendas (Cockburn, 2008). The state or elder individuals tend to set "the terms of engagement for young people's participation and outline what they would like them to do" (Farthing, 2012: 78). In other words, there is a danger that attempts to 'empower' young

people become nothing more than symbolic concessions: "gathering their thoughts on policy X or service Y does not empower them, rather it simply placates them and increases the likelihood that young people will comply with policy X or use service Y appropriately" (ibid: 78).

Therefore, if young people are to act on their own terms, they must be able to define what these terms are, and must not let others do-so. Further, after having defined their terms, these must be taken seriously, and must not run parallel to existing political agendas, but must be placed at their heart. This is the driving purpose of this policy-paper: finding ways for young people to define their priorities and how they want to deal with them; and finding ways to place these priorities at the centre of the policy-making process.

One way of achieving these goals is taking the power of political agenda setting and candidate nomination away from political elites – as they may not understand or share the concerns of young voters. Instead, this power should be placed in hands of the electorate – which in Commonwealth countries, is predominantly youthful.

The idea of open-primaries, then, fits this definition of youth-empowerment particularly well. Taking the power of political nomination and agenda setting away from party elites, and giving it to ordinary voters – the majority of which are young in Commonwealth countries – helps foster the conditions under which young people can define their own priorities. Further, it not only meets the needs of youth-empowerment, but also increases youth participation in politics, and helps mainstream youth-concerns at the very core of political parties and agendas.

Further, to help young people define their priorities, they should be consulted outside the electoral process. They should be able to constantly communicate and remind the powerful what their priorities are, and never let anyone else speak for them. In addition, pressure should be constantly brought to bear on governments to address their concerns, potentially making it a legal-duty –and not only an electoral promise. The idea of yearly national-youth surveys follows this vein, as it would serve as a pressure-mechanism on governments. It would also ensure that young people constantly have a chance to express their priorities, keeping that power away from political machineries seeking to impose their own agendas.

Finally, to ensure that their priorities are well-circulated and well-known, it makes sense to encourage youth-voices and youth-programmes onto mainstream media. This would not only ensure that youth-concerns are placed at the heart of national-debate, but it would also foster a dialogue between generations, and make young people feel more involved in the political process, thereby encouraging their participation.

To summarise: youth-empowerment could stem from a two-pronged approach: letting youth define their priorities; and once defined, helping young people place their priorities at the heart of national political debates. I now present each policy in turn.

1.Open Primaries

This policy aims to empower young people in the Commonwealth by using open primaries. In other words, it seeks to give Commonwealth electorates – dominated by young voters - a say in who should run for office, and what their policies should be. By virtue of their sheer demographic weight, young people throughout the Commonwealth would be able to influence political agendas, thanks to a more representative candidate selection system. To emphasise this point, I first provide evidence that open primaries lead to the selection of more representative policies and candidates; and then demonstrate the importance of young people in the Commonwealth's electoral demographics.

Advantages of Open Primaries

It is generally acknowledged in political science that open primaries are one of the most representative candidate selection systems (Kaufman *et al.*, 2003; Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006; McSweeny, 2010; Thompson, 2010). Instead of having a small committee of party grandees, or registered party delegates choosing candidates for local, parliamentary or even presidential elections, open primaries allow all registered voters to choose who can run for office. In the UK for instance, the system of closed primaries used by the major parties (where only party delegates and members can vote), mobilises at most 0.5% of the registered electorate (McSweeney, 2010). Similarly, at local levels, candidates are selected by closed party committees. Neither system can be considered a representative form of selection. Candidates, and the policies they stand for, are decided without the input of the vast majority of voters. On the contrary, in the US, open primaries can mobilise more than a quarter of the electorate (Thompson, 2010). By involving a greater number of voters, open primaries involve a greater cross section of the population.

In addition, experiences from Ghana suggest that holding closed primaries facilitates vote-rigging. There have been allegations that delegates were selling their votes to MP's seeking re-nomination (*The Globe* (Ghana), 2012). Open primaries, on the other hand, would make vote-buying near impossible due to the large size of the electorate – especially if campaign funds are capped and controlled by independent oversight bodies.

Furthermore, not only do open primaries involve a more representative cross-section of the electorate, they also lead to the selection of candidates whose policies are more likely to reflect major public concerns (Kaufman *et al.*, 2003; McSweeny, 2010). Of course, this does not mean that the entire electorate is thinking the same thing, but it means that the candidates they choose are selected for their focus on widely-held concerns, as opposed to partisan positions. In essence, political agendas become set by the majority of the electorate, not by party elites.

Crucially, though, successful primaries rely on a certain number of conditions. First, steps must be taken to prevent clientelism, and to prevent richer candidates from gaining an unfair advantage simply because of their wealth (McSweeny, 2010). For example, funding for campaigning must be subsidised, or capped by official electoral bodies – as it was in the UK's first open primary elections, held in the constituencies of Gosport and Totnes. Secondly, political parties must be well organised and well-funded, with subsidies if necessary, to prevent party splits and chaotic voting procedures (Bruhn, 2010). Evidence from Mexico (ibid.), but also in Commonwealth countries such as Ghana and Kenya (*The Globe* (Ghana), 2012; The Guardian (UK), 2013) , suggests that poorly organised political parties, low barriers to entry, or lack of central funding and independent oversight can encourage venomous party splits, clientelism and fraud. While it is hard to define what constitutes a well organised party, the example of the US Democratic and Republican parties suggests that they survive divisive primaries because of strong ideological cohesion, rather than imposed party discipline (McSweeny, 2010). Further, 'no sore loser' clauses must be added, to prevent those defeated in primaries from standing as independents.

Finally, a common concern in open primaries is "strategic cross-over voting" – i.e. voting for a weaker candidate in the party you want to lose. However there is no evidence that such practices are widespread, or have ever blighted a primary (Stephenson, 2011).

Youth Demographics in the Commonwealth

This policy is premised on the fact that electorates throughout the Commonwealth are predominantly youthful. The sheer number of young people voting makes them the dominant force in most Commonwealth elections. Indeed, the Commonwealth Youth Programme itself states that half of the Commonwealth's population is under 24 (The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007). In countries like Nigeria, the figure is 60%; in India 48%; Ghana 58%. However in more developed Commonwealth countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada or Australia, the figures are 30%, 28%, and 31% respectively (CIA World Factbook, 2013). Not only that, but their populations are ageing at a faster rate than other Commonwealth countries, meaning that young voters are largely outnumbered. This does not invalidate the case for open primaries, however, because young electorates remain a large enough constituency to significantly impact election outcomes. This is all the more true as open primaries are generally credited with increasing youth participation (Kaufman *et al*, 2003). Further, for primaries conducted at constituency levels, concentrations of young voters, typical of university-towns for instance, would be large enough to significantly impact voting outcomes.

To help introduce open primaries, I suggest that the following steps should be taken:

- The Commonwealth should encourage the adoption of open primaries over the medium term throughout its member states.
- The Commonwealth should fund and conduct research to study best practices in primary elections. There are a number of successful open primaries, most obviously in the United States, but also in Latin America, France (for the Socialist Party), and more recently at the constituency level in the UK. Poor practices, such as the recent primaries in Kenya, and the closed primaries in Ghana and Nigeria, also need to be analysed, so as to not be repeated.
- Research needs to be carried out on the resilience of political parties to primary elections; The Commonwealth needs to advise (but not intervene) in the reorganisation of weaker parties.
- Before any steps are taken to mainstream primaries across the Commonwealth, pilot schemes should be run at local/regional/parliamentary elections in countries where research has shown that political parties are sufficiently well organised to sustain them.

- The Commonwealth could act as an independent oversight body for primaries; should encourage the establishment of such bodies where existing electoral commissions are weak; and should help subsidise primary-elections in countries where financial constraints are significant.
- In countries which are politically and financially ready to run open primaries, the Commonwealth should assist in their implementation.

2.Youth-Surveys and 'Youth Duty Acts'

My second suggestion is to introduce yearly national youth-surveys in Commonwealth countries, which allow young people to define their priorities, preventing others from doing so in their place. This would complement open-primaries by ensuring that political parties are made aware of the priorities of youthful electorates. Further, I suggest that the results of each yearly survey be taken into account at the policy-making level, with a legal duty to make sure youth-priorities are addressed in any new government initiative. Helping youth define their own priorities, and facilitating their inclusion in policy-making should help mainstream their concerns at the heart of politics.

Benefits of Surveys

Anxious that the post 2015 development agenda, after the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), should reflect grassroots concerns, the UN and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) set up a consultation tool called *MY World* (http://www.myworld2015.org/). The purpose is simple: let individuals around the world express *their* development priorities, to make sure that these are fed into the deliberations of the UN High Level Panel on Development. Instead of confining development policy to the ivory tower of think tanks, NGO's, International Institutions and governments, *MY World* is allowing the beneficiaries of development to voice their concerns directly to policy-makers. The Commonwealth could do the same thing for youth.

To ensure maximum response, *MY World* has a web-page, but also a mobile-phone option, and paper-ballots distributed on the ground. The data is then disaggregated based on variables such as age, gender, level of education and so forth, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the results. So far, the response has been successful (around 55 000 at time of writing) and emerging trends have already been presented to the UN High Level Panel's Monrovia meeting in January.

While the format is an options-survey as opposed to an open questions (to facilitate the analysis of data), it does provide an 'add your own priority' option. The danger of course is that in drafting the options, an outside agenda be imposed. For *MY World,* careful planning and research has to go into the selection of options to make sure they are reflective of public concerns. The UN conducted an "extensive analysis and consultation exercise" and several pilot schemes. If this clause is well addressed, a large scale survey conducted by an independent body has the potential to allow respondents to speak for themselves. Similar successful examples include the British Social Attitudes Survey (http://www.britsocat.com).

Mainstreaming mechanisms – the benefits of legal obligation

Calling for a 'Youth-Duty' may sound like a radical measure, but the principle is not new. There exist in the UK, and across the EU (Council of Europe, 1998) various mechanisms to mainstream gender-sensitivity in policy-making. In Britain, such a measure was introduced in 2007 as the 'Gender Equality Duty' (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2013), which stated that gender-specific needs, and gender-specific impacts had to be taken into account when designing new policies. Since then, this practice has been integrated in the 2010 Equality Act. In essence, there is a legal obligation to take into account the specific needs and concerns of disadvantaged groups in any new legislation. This increases the transparency of the legislative process, and, at the very least, guarantees basic legal protection for disadvantaged groups (ibid). While such efforts do not represent a 'cure all' solution, they are important step forward in making sure that marginalised groups are placed at the centre of policy making (Council of Europe, 1998). There is, however, a danger that these initiatives end up as a form of 'box-ticking' – and steps must be taken to ensure that the legislation is robust enough to guarantee real, as opposed to cosmetic protections. Well-designed, however, a 'Youth-duty' act could help cement the concern of young people at the heart of politics in their countries.

Introducing youth-surveys at the member-state level across the Commonwealth would empower young-people to define their own priorities. If they, as opposed to political parties or think tanks and NGOs, are able to outline their concerns, they will further increase their ability to set the political agenda. No politician would be able to speak for them – they will have spoken for themselves. This mechanism would then complement

the introduction of open-primaries, as candidates running for election would know which concerns to focus on, and would not be able to set an agenda of their own.

Further, if it were legally required that these concerns be taken into account in policy-making, through a Youth-Duty act, it would help cement youth-priorities at the heart of government. No youth-oriented policy could be designed without explicitly addressing the concerns outlined by the youth-survey. By taking part in a grass-roots consultation exercise, young people would be able to impact the very heart of the policy-making process. As a result, this policy fosters both political participation and encourages youth-mainstreaming.

Based on *MY World's* success, I suggest that the Commonwealth should:

- Conduct research into *MY World* and other similar surveys to ascertain best practices
- Approach member states with the idea, and run national-consultation exercises to identify dominant youth concerns to be included in potential surveys
- Run pilot surveys in willing member-states
- Help individual member states design nation-wide surveys for young people after successful pilot schemes.
- Entrust the survey scheme to an independent body (for instance, the Commonwealth Advisory Bureau), to ensure that survey results are not tampered with for political reasons.
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Finally, while it would be tempting to create an over-arching, Commonwealth-wide system, it would not accurately reflect the varying conditions in different member states. Following *MY World*, it would be available in different formats (online, mobile phone and paper-ballot) – since levels of IT literacy and access vary widely across the Commonwealth.

In relation to a Youth-Duty act, the Commonwealth could:

- Conduct research into similar legislation, such as 'Gender equality duty' in the EU, to ascertain best practices
- Run local/regional youth-duty pilot-schemes, for local policy-making bodies (such as town halls or regions)
- Help member states in designing effective youth-duty acts, and ensuring the resources exist to combine the output of youth-surveys with youth-duty legislation.

3.Mainstreaming Youth Media

My third proposition is to encourage the introduction of 'youth-hours' or youth-programmes on mainstream broadcasters in Commonwealth countries. The hope is that by broadcasting youth concerns and priorities on mainstream, as opposed to niche media, young people can place themselves at the heat of national political debates, promote dialogue and understanding between generations, and encourage youth-participation through greater media exposure.

Youth-media schemes already exist throughout the Commonwealth, such as in Jamaica, where the 'Youth Vibes' radio station was explicitly designed as a platform to empower young people (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2008). However, by its own admission, this programme does not encourage mainstream media to allocate air-time for young people. Instead, it builds a separate niche for youth-media. While it is important that youth gets a dedicated space to express its concerns, academic research suggests that these sorts of initiatives only have a limited mainstreaming impact (Bessant, 2003). It has often been found that similar projects have been used to placate youth-concerns, as opposed to placing them at the centre stage (Farthing, 2012). On the other hand, the power of mainstream media remains undeniable: public opinion is influenced by it, and it influences public opinion (Herman and Chomsky, 2008). Shows like 'Women's hour' on BBC radio have helped place gender-debates at the centre of British media, while panel-debates such as Question Time give viewers both the opportunity to scrutinise policy-makers and power-holders, while remaining popular mainstream shows (BBC, 2005). There is therefore a case to re-approach efforts to introduce youth-programmes on various mainstream media outlets – as well as granting them their own space. Youth-media must not be allowed to run parallel to mainstream media – it must be at the heart of it if it is to provoke debate and raise awareness.

It is hoped that by introducing 'Youth-hours', and youth-dedicated programmes on the mainstream media of Commonwealth countries, young-people will be able to broadcast their concerns to a wider audience. This policy adds to the open-primaries and youth-survey initiatives by providing young people with an opportunity

to communicate their priorities on mainstream media, further encouraging political attention to their concerns, and putting pressure on policy-makers to take them into account. Further, placing youth-voices at the heart of national media and political debates could help dispel negative stereotypes about young-people, and provide a platform for inter-generational dialogues. Indeed, instead of confining young people to their own dedicated media-niches, juxtaposing them in mainstream media outlets will broaden their reach as more diverse audiences tune in. This might provide a first step to overcome the rigid socio-cultural barriers which often inhibit the empowerment of youth.

To facilitate the introduction of youth-shows on mainstream media across member-states, I suggest that the Commonwealth should:
- Conduct research into the institutional barriers to the inclusion of youth on mainstream media, and find ways to over-come it
- Conduct research into the most popular group-specific and political shows across various media
- Approach the BBC, one of the most popular broadcasters across the Commonwealth, and explore the possibilities of jointly-developing youth-dedicated programmes
- Help youth-organisations lobby mainstream broadcasters, and provide technical and financial assistance to increase their appeal and chances of success.

Additional thoughts

On a more general note, to facilitate the sharing of best-practices, and to keep track of emerging youth-policies throughout the Commonwealth, I suggest that the Secretariat develop an online-database, where all existing policies and future proposals would be compiled, summarised and explained. This suggestion is inspired from the ODI. In an effort to compile all the policy-proposals relating to the post 2015 development agenda, it developed an online blog: http://post2015.org/. Specifically, it has a 'tracking' tool (http://tracker.post2015.org/), where new policy-proposals are uploaded and summarised as they emerge. As a creative-commons project, it allows guests to consult the policies, draw inspiration from them and to keep track of the post 2015 development agenda's progress. To develop new youth-oriented policies, the Commonwealth could run a similar project. It could facilitate the sharing and development of new ideas for a large range of stakeholders, while keeping track of the nature, and geographical-origin of new proposals.

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