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The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), is a part of the Youth Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, an inter-governmental membership organization of 54 member states that have come together to establish a spirit of democracy, human rights and good governance in the Commonwealth regions. For CYP, professional youth work is a key dimension of enabling, ensuring and empowering young people (Harare Commonwealth Declaration, 1992). CYP considers youth work as integral to participatory nation building, particularly in the context of the dynamic role youth workers can play in addressing young people’s welfare and rights in a responsive manner and providing an interface between young people and decision-making processes at all levels.

The CYP took an important step in professionalizing youth work in member states when it initiated the Diploma in Youth Development in 1973 which is now implemented by leading universities across Commonwealth countries. Since then, CYP has broadened its initiatives in the field by creating complementary programmes to strengthen mechanisms and procedures of professional youth work in Commonwealth countries such as setting up Youth Worker Associations, and developing competency standards for youth work.

Now, moving forward, the CYP is working to consolidate these processes through a rights-based concept of youth work that is responsive to the requirements of young people and their expectations from youth services, while, at the same time, reflecting Commonwealth Values and Human Rights conventions to the fullest. This concept will be the basis of work with member governments and other stakeholders to strengthen mechanisms and procedures to professionalize youth work.

1/ The CYP is represented by four regional Centres in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.
2/ Initially a residential programme, now the Diploma has been devolved to partner institutions in Commonwealth countries at the request of member governments for wider access to the public of this specialist programme.
3/ Human rights as the foundation of democracy and development; equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief; empowerment pursued through education and participation; equity or fairness in the relationships between nations and between generations, and protection of vulnerable groups; democracy to allow everyone the opportunity to express their opinions and to allow citizens to participate in decision-making; Development based on principles of sustainability; Diversity of views and perspectives in both national and international forums; dialogue and co-operation, building common ground and consensus, Peace, without which these other values are unobtainable.
Youth workers can be generally defined as professionals working with young people in a range of settings. Youth workers, worldwide, can be found working in clubs and detached (street-based) settings, within social/welfare services, sports/leisure centres, schools and, over the last decade or so, in museums, arts facilities, libraries, hospitals, children’s homes and young offenders’ institutions.

Across the world, yet in differing contexts, youth workers can be found working directly for the government or local government, often involved in community development and community learning situations, capacity building, providing forms of accredited and non-accredited learning. However, more and more, they are deployed by voluntary and non-governmental organisations, in issue-related work (drugs, sexual health, homelessness, parenting etc.). Many such organisations will be more focused on less directive and informal practice.

Globally, youth work is a very diverse profession in terms of social tasks and employment situations. In recent years, with transnational economic and political changes, what youth workers do worldwide is becoming more similar. The gradual reduction of State-sponsored national youth services globally, alongside cuts in State funding for welfare and capacity building services is likely to see a growth in the role of non-governmental and voluntary organisations in youth work.

Worldwide, youth workers have traditionally been seen as a group of secondary or ‘para-professionals’ in relation to those in occupations like teaching and social work; their work has been understood as something of a luxury rather than a necessity. While youth workers do have distinct skill sets that are informed by a range of theory and practice, claiming guiding principles and values, these do change over time, context and sometimes, even from person to person.

Writers, academics and practitioners have reasoned this is because youth work is ‘no one thing’, but a combination of roles. However, others, looking to give the practice a greater level of integrity, purpose and perhaps status, have looked to provide youth workers with a more definite grounding. This has, in some places, led to attempts to rename youth workers as ‘youth support workers’, ‘youth development workers’ or ‘informal’ and/or ‘community’ educators. But these titles have proved to be transitory and provide no clearer indication of the professional role youth workers play.

There is very little critical literature relating to youth work and youth workers. Most of what is written promotes and rationalizes models of practice which are mostly based on heresy and stories, romantic and/or unconventional political views, guesses and assumptions. Such material often results in workers preaching homespun morality. This reflects forms of adult authority which are underpinned by instruction and domination. We need to move away from this by avoiding simplistically telling youth workers how to operate “on” young people. If we are to be of service to young people we are going to need to understand ourselves more as servers (servants) than authority figures; we exist professionally to work with young people to develop their influence and authority, rather than merely to extend our authority over them.
The professionalization of any service is a process rather than an exact science. What professional youth work is in any national situation needs to be shaped by, and evolve out of, cultural and social contexts; each country may have different sets of institutions, processes, procedures and criteria to make professionalization possible. It is hoped, then, that the ideas presented in the Concept Note will not be taken as merely a plan to be implemented, but as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue that will, by response and adaptation, result in professional youth work customized to the context of respective countries and cultures. The vision is not conformity to one model of professional practice, but a diversity of interpretations adhering to a set of shared values and principles that may develop and adapt over time and place.
The focus of youth work is on:

1/ The social and political education of young people.

This is not usually simply forms of instruction, but includes a range of approaches, mostly developing learning opportunities out of everyday experience, including leisure and social pursuits, but also calling on more formal methods when appropriate. This also refers to the fostering of critical thinking in young people who are able to analyze their own social and political context in order to be able to act on them including analyzing class, gender, religion and other identity-related dynamics.

2/ The wellbeing of young people

This includes attention to, and working with, young people, their parents, guardians and carers to understand, relate to and make use of their rights, promoting and having concern for young people’s welfare, while extending appropriate professional care.

The overall aim of youth work is to enhance the life experience of young people and their contribution to society as active, involved, useful and valued citizens.

The central purpose of youth work is defined in the CYP Diploma’s tutor training manual as “...to empower young people to play an assertive and constructive role in the strengthening and regeneration of their communities”.

Youth work involves relating to, and taking a level of responsibility for, other people’s children and the life direction of young people. Therefore, it is fundamentally concerned and primarily focused on care. However, this care needs to be expressed in a suitably professional manner, which includes an appropriate level of detachment; youth workers are not ‘big brothers/sisters’ neither are they ‘friends’ (although they might be ‘friendly’), nor is the youth work role a parenting one. So, a professional detachment needs to be developed in terms of care (see section 4.1 Professional Care on page 14). Given the cultural and national differences in legal requirements, age groupings and social and cultural expectations connected with the care of young people across countries and cultures, this care role needs to be set within a framework of Universal Rights which can complement and underpin existing national legislation, practice, ethical and care standards/requirements. This means that youth workers not only need a working knowledge of childhood and Human Rights (including women’s rights, disability rights etc), but also the ability to interpret this knowledge and the associated principles into practice (see section 4.5 A Rights Based Approach on page 20).

Youth work premised on Commonwealth Values and universal Human Rights Conventions needs to achieve a number of outcomes in terms of the delivery of practice and social development. These outcomes include creating opportunities for young people to develop their individual and interpersonal capacities for personal and social benefit. This process serves to help young people become more aware of themselves, but at the same time they provide part of the means to make themselves understood by others to be a valuable resource in terms of their nation’s life and the betterment of wider global society. This, being achieved within a framework of equality and democratic principles, requires the professional youth worker to be a ‘social and political educator’ (See section 4.2 Social and Political Education on page 16).
At the same time, young people are portrayed as a group to be personally or socially lacking (in deficit); deficient in terms of education, morality or even the civilising effects that can only be accessed with the aid of the ‘informal educator’ or ‘youth development worker’.

Youth, as a population group, are commonly depicted by way of assumptions, developed out of social fears, often inflamed by the media, about declining personal standards and/or moral degeneracy. The whole age group is frequently portrayed as in need of ‘support’, ‘help’, being beset by vaguely described psychological problems such as ‘lacking self esteem’ and ‘attention deficit’. As such young people are contradictorily represented, sometimes at the same time, as both a threatening ‘enemy within’, the seed of moral and social degeneracy, and as a relatively incapable or infirm group, in need of extensive adult and professional patronage.

This is a deficit model, which relies on convincing workers and young people that they (young people) have innate insufficiencies, that there is something inherently impaired in the condition of youth. This perspective is covertly oppressive, having its basis in what Franz Fanon, a psychiatrist, philosopher, activist and writer, working in the North African context, saw as the propagation of a ‘colonial mentality’; that some population groups have ‘inborn’ inadequacies that need to be treated or compensated for by way of forms of social discipline or reformation. South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko saw that convincing people that this lack was real was a means of the continuance of coercive domination. As he remarked; the most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Echoing this is Bob Marley’s plea, repeating Marcus Garvey’s counsel to emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, recognising that none but ourselves can free our minds.

The CYP believes that a new concept of youth work should reject such a deficit model, and promote instead, one that is diametrically opposite - a model which lays emphasis on young people as personifying the vibrant hope and potential of any society; a model based on Human Rights and a recognition that the individual is confirmed in their humanity by their contribution in and to their community, their nation and the world.

Capturing the essence above, this concept note will define Youth Work as “the informal social and political education and empowerment of young people within a matrix of care, including enhancing young people’s participation in issues that affect their lives.”
Youth work, then, needs to adopt a distinctly empowering philosophy in keeping with the principles and mandates of the Commonwealth. The ethos and rationale of the CYP, articulated in the principles laid out in the CYP Diploma, lays the foundation for this new vision. The Commonwealth’s knowledge base in youth work regards young people as stakeholders in society, and also places a positive emphasis on youth, seeing this stage of life as a well of human resource with enormous potential; it understands young people to be the custodians of all possible futures and the section of society that can preserve the best of the past.

Youth work is held back from developing as a profession because it is unable to clearly and succinctly articulate exactly what it aims to do and how it intends to do it. This does not mean youth work is intrinsically complex, but it does indicate that following authoritarian, directive models of practice is a problem.

There are many reasons for this. On the one hand, States have looked to youth work to respond in pragmatic ways to demands driven by socio-economic necessity, developing a comparatively cheap, relatively flexible work force. On the other hand, historically and culturally, youth work has been shaped by moral, spiritual and political motivations, aimed at producing a more ethical and/or questioning population. This is what Indian scholar and author Shehzad Ahmed has described as ‘Education versus Idealism’: the State looks to youth work to respond to regional, national and/or global conditions (largely economic); at the same time, youth workers focus on aims, primarily driven by personal values/feelings/points of view and/or often poorly informed political objectives. As such, youth workers have sometimes found themselves in conflict with management and State policy.

The CYP, as part of its initiatives to professionalize youth work, aims to propose a model of practice that avoids the replication of this antagonism. This means building a pragmatic vision of practice that harmonises broadly-based professional ethical concerns, State policy and the requirements of young people. This needs to be undertaken by encompassing models of development and education that to some extent arise from and are relevant to the modern context.

This concept note, then, is informed by enabling attitudes and values as exemplified by the likes of Julius Nyerere, Mahatma Gandhi, Nawal El Sadaawi, the principles incorporated in the philosophy of Ubuntu (see Box 1 opposite) and similar ideas and theories.
THE CYP, AS PART OF ITS INITIATIVES TO PROFESSIONALIZE YOUTH WORK, AIMS TO PROPOSE A MODEL OF PRACTICE THAT AVOIDS THE REPETITION OF THIS ANTAGONISM. THIS MEANS BUILDING A PRAGMATIC VISION OF PRACTICE THAT HARMONISES BROADLY-BASED PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL CONCERNS, STATE POLICY AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE. THIS NEEDS TO BE UNDERTAKEN BY ENCOMPASSING MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION THAT TO SOME EXTENT ARISE FROM AND ARE RELEVANT TO THE MODERN CONTEXT.

**BOX 1 – EMPOWERING THINKING**

**Nyerere’s ideas of Ujamaa**

1/ The advancement of social, economic, and political equality through the enactment of basic democratic practice; challenging all forms of discrimination and prejudice.

2/ Villagization - looking to make the best use of and developing local resources.

3/ The encouragement of self-reliance within a framework of interdependence – promoting a consciousness of how individuals are reliant on groups, while groups are dependent on the cooperation of individual members.

**Gandhi, My Views on Education**

1/ The focus of practice being on the development of the whole person.

2/ Look to draw out the best qualities of people.

3/ The development of the personality/culture being as important as forms of academic learning and acquisition of skill.

4/ Practice to aim to be self supporting.

**Ubuntu**

1/ Listening to and affirming others with the help of processes that create trust, fairness, shared understanding and dignity and harmony in relationships.

2/ Consciousness is about the desire to build a caring, sustainable and just response to the community (village, city, nation or global family).

3/ Emphasis on our common humanity and the ethical call to embody our communal responsiveness in the world, offering an alternative way to re-create a world that works for all.

4/ Learning how to live together with respect, care, dignity and justice and to re-organize resources accordingly.

5/ Sharing ideas and resources and making basic services, such as food, housing and access to health and education accessible and visible to all.

The political underpinning of *Ujamaa* and the attitudinal disposition of Ubuntu confirm and mirror the values and conduct of social education.

**Nawal El Saadawi**

1/ Encourage thinking (use of the brain) rather than instruction-following.

2/ Promote understanding that education is not separate from politics.

3/ Develop a comprehension that we need to advance from old-fashioned ways; need for intellectual renewal.

4/ Advocate independent thought; doubt is the servant of knowledge. Truth will withstand all tests. Doubt is the first step towards knowledge.

5/ Work to discover personal creativity from inside; we are all born creative.

Youth work provides care in a context of professional detachment. Box 2 below illustrates the character of professional care.

**BOX 2 – EMPOWERING THINKING**

Nursing perhaps provides the clearest examples of ‘caring detachment’. For instance, my father passed away a couple of years ago. My family and I rushed, from all over London, to his bedside at the hospital where he died. My mother was already with my father, understandably very upset after close to 60 years of being with him, which added to the general grief we were all experiencing. However, the nurses did not gather round my father’s deathbed, crying and attempting to share in our feelings of loss and relative helplessness. One went and made tea, two others started to look after my father’s body, disconnecting life support systems, cleaning him up a little, doing what needed to be done professionally.

All the time they were reassuring us, as individuals, as a group and a family; they were attentive and respectful, without being intrusive or pretending they were ‘one of us’. Collectively the activity of the nurses were thoughtful, showing that they knew what they were doing; they provided a strong scaffold of professional behaviour at a time when my family and I were exposed and vulnerable emotionally and needed their surety and sensitive but sensible, at points quite firm, support. The nurses never lost their focus; they were not family members; they were not there to mourn, but to extend the necessary and appropriate care expected of professional nurses (carers). The level to which they succeeded in doing this, without intrusion, was a measure of their professionalism. As we, my family and I, were free to fall apart, they ‘kept it together’ so, eventually, we could re-group and effectively pull ourselves together and deal with the situation.

This is managing care: it is a concern for the welfare and wellbeing of others, but it is tempered by appropriate objectivity and thoughtfully sensitive detachment. This is not disinterest, but neither is it presumptuous. This is what youth workers need to do in their work.

**Nursing Vs. Youth Work**

A young person, Nurul, approached a youth worker, Farah, asking to talk to her in private. After they found a suitable place to chat, Nurul told Farah that she wanted to go swimming with her friends, an activity that Farah had arranged, but that she couldn’t swim, and was embarrassed about this becoming known to everyone else. At this point, Nurul became quite emotional, saying she was unhappy about being ‘left out’ and being seen as ‘stupid’.

Here, Farah had several courses of action open to her; she was called upon to make a professional judgement:

1/ She could have told Nurul not to be so silly/emotional and that her friends would probably understand,

2/ She could have put her arms round Nurul and told her no matter what her friends thought she (Farah) would always like her,

3/ She could have promised to teach Nurul to swim herself,

4/ She could have found a class run by a qualified swimming teacher that Nurul might attend,
It is probably a mistake to think of ourselves, as professionals, as having ‘relationships’ with young people. Our work is ‘associative’; we have a professional association with our clients (young people). Unlike lawyers or politicians, we do not ‘represent’ our clients; we work with them in order that they might represent themselves better (as individuals and as a group). We are not nurses or doctors, so we are not looking to ‘cure’ or ‘treat’ people. We are not teachers, so we are not centrally concerned with forms of instruction, although our work might, from time to time include mentoring, leading or guiding, and we want young people to become more knowledgeable and aware. We are not counsellors, therapists or social workers, but this does not preclude us from making referrals to such professionals if we think this might be suitable or necessary (not to do so might be understood as being unprofessional). We are not police officers, however we should be aware enough to know at what point we need to involve the police in our work. An understanding of all this is encompassed in having the ability to extend appropriate professional care.

5/ She could spend more time with Nurul, working with her to explore her feelings and finding out what she might want to do about the situation. Just by starting to consider options, Farah showed professional care. However, how she proceeded would demonstrate her ability in terms of extending appropriate professional care.

1/ Farah might want to explore Nurul’s emotional response further. Was her response typical of her, was it ‘over the top’ and if so why might that be? How can Farah be sure that Nurul’s fears about the reaction of her friends are just related to swimming?

2/ Can Farah really commit to ‘always liking’ Nurul? What does ‘liking’ entail? Does Farah understand ‘liking’ in the same way as Nurul?

3/ Does Farah have the time/skill to teach Nurul to swim safely?

4/ Should Nurul’s parents be involved in any decisions about going to classes? How can Farah be sure that Nurul or her family might be able to meet the cost of swimming lessons?

For a youth worker, extending professional care is often not quite as straightforward as it might be for a nurse. However, appropriate care is a constant consideration in the role of the youth worker.
The vision and values illustrated in Box 1: Empowering Thinking may all be translated in to practice via an understanding of social and political education. This is the intellectual and personal means to interact and develop in the social context, according to Davies and Gibson, any individual’s increased consciousness of themselves, their values, aptitudes and untapped resources and of the relevance of these to others. Social education enhances the individual’s understanding of how to form mutually satisfying relationships. This involves a search for the means to discover how to contribute to, as well as take from associations with others. This might be understood to encompass the political underpinning of Ujamaa and the attitudinal disposition of Ubuntu. It is a means to promote the interdependence of individuals, groups and communities for the benefit and well-being of all.

It also reflects the role of the youth worker, working with groups of people, creating a collective consciousness, working for social change collaboratively with duty bearers to advance positive development at local and national levels. As part of this, a sense of personal responsibility can be generated and the motivation for betterment of the self, but also an understanding of how this will contribute to the positive development of society. For an example of this, see Box 3 opposite.

Thus social education facilitates fundamental political education (democracy, representation, advocacy etc.). First and foremost, the professional stance of social and political education requires practitioners, to personify, by way of their practice:

a/ The ability to take and manage responsibility,

b/ Deal with the consequences of action.

It would have been relatively easy for the youth worker in the above situation to have simply taken control of the group, instructing them about what they should do and how they should do it. Perhaps things would have happened faster, replicating structures of adult authority. However, this would have provided very little in terms of the development of these young people into responsible, socially useful adults; how could cultivating dependency in this way achieve such grand designs?

The central point of the work was not the creation of a soccer team. The youth worker, on finding out about something the young people wanted, alongside the young people, worked to use that momentum to create a situation whereby the group:

– Established democratic procedures to make decisions,

– Used their personal and collective influence to effect and change their situation,

– Negotiated a means of self-support as part of joint action,

– Called on and developed skills in collaboration and self-organisation,

– Fostered a sense of solidarity both in terms of their common cause and shared ambitions.

So, overall, the group, with the regard and accompaniment of the youth worker, learnt how to use their influence to take authority to achieve their mutual/agreed-upon goals, learning to be autonomous, considerate and collaborative individuals, while integrating themselves into their new social/cultural environment. In short, they discovered and used their own power and what interdependent action (rather than passive dependence) can achieve.

Leadership, management and organisational skill and experience were both generated and developed. Overall, this is an example of the kind of political education that can cultivate individuals and groups to be more useful to themselves, each other, their community, society and nation.
A youth worker came into contact with a group of young refugees. She identified that they had a common interest in playing football and that they wanted to form a team. The youth worker and the young people started by talking about a name and a motto for the team. This allowed for the group’s first self-designed democratic activity: names and mottos were discussed, nominated and voted on. Thus ‘Anand United’ (AU) was born, with the agreement that they existed to ‘Play by the rules for the good of all’.

Following this several tasks were identified that were necessary to starting the football team, which included organising training, team selection, arranging matches with other teams and identifying sponsorship to pay for kits and balls.

Within a year, AU were cooperatively organising three teams, sponsored by a local sports shop. Seven of the young people were taking coaching qualifications, while three were involved in training other young people involved in the teams, having gained basic coaching qualifications. The youth worker continued to keep in contact with the young people, but did not need to be actively involved beyond giving the occasional piece of advice when asked. But she also referred other youth workers to them, working on issues such as sexual health and clean water projects. Out of this several of the young people became involved in voluntary youth work themselves.

So, starting from a collective, fairly straightforward want of a small group of young people, the youth worker had worked with this group to meet their want, out of which arose a sense of responsibility for each other and others, which in turn provided a range of resources for the wider community/society. In the process the physical, academic, organisational, leadership, innovationary and collaborative skills of young people were developed and enhanced. These of course represent a pool of qualities/social capital that can be redirected and deployed in other aspects of personal, community and national life.

**Box 3: Social and Political Education**

A youth worker came into contact with a group of young refugees. She identified that they had a common interest in playing football and that they wanted to form a team. The youth worker and the young people started by talking about a name and a motto for the team. This allowed for the group’s first self-designed democratic activity: names and mottos were discussed, nominated and voted on. Thus ‘Anand United’ (AU) was born, with the agreement that they existed to ‘Play by the rules for the good of all’.

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Youth work, framed within a professional context of social and political education and Human Rights, is anchored to a raft of expectations of both practitioner and client. The expectation of the youth worker is that they will have the ability to make professional judgments aligned to the aims, objectives and desired outcomes of their practice. However, we need to have expectations of young people in order that they might detect interest in/care about their wellbeing and that they might develop the motivation to have expectations of themselves.

In the west, much youth work has failed because of expectations being seen as a burden on young people; that they should be largely left to ‘find their own feet’ without ‘pressure’ (as if pressure might be expunged from life). This laissez-faire attitude has effectively abandoned many young people in terms of their wider socialization; largely being left to their own devices, although supported by youth workers to take advantage of rights/entitlements/welfare benefits. However, because of the lack of expectations, many young people, having no real sense of duty (other than to themselves) and have been drawn into pockets of social selfishness, an ‘all against all’ attitude, which is ideal for the development of cultures of crime and disaffection (that is in some cases generations long).
The nature of professional judgement starts with the understanding that youth workers, as practitioners, are not neutral; they are obliged to make judgements. A judgement is different to an assumption or an opinion; a judgement is an opinion based on evidence, the more evidence one has, the more secure one’s judgement might be said to be. The more an opinion is made without evidence, the more likely it is that it will be prejudiced (a ‘pre-judgement’) or discriminatory.

It is important that youth workers are able to evidence professional judgement by demonstrating how and why they choose to do one thing rather than another. The following case recorded by a youth worker demonstrates this;

The group came into the club shouting and, what looked like play-fighting, with each other. Others looked a bit intimidated, backing away from the group quite quickly. I chose not to immediately reproach them about their behaviour, as when colleagues had done this before it had seemed to make matters worse. However, I had worked with a group previously that acted in much the same way, and I had noticed that engaging one or two of them in conversation had appeared to help the group acclimatise to the environment relatively straightforwardly. So, recognising Abidin, I commented how she had styled her hair differently and how I thought it looked good….

The worker, using a range of evidence drawn from their experience of practice, makes her professional judgement; it is a ‘professional’ judgement because it is based on practice experience rather than personal bias. Her judgement might have been good, not so good or even poor (depending, at least partly, on the outcome) but she had nevertheless used judgement because she had drawn on evidence; her action was not based wholly on supposition, feelings and what is sometimes vaguely called ‘instinct’, but on judgement built on evidence. This enabled her to make what might be considered to be an ‘ethical choice’ to take one course of action rather than another/others. This is something more than reflection, although reflection and consideration might be part of the process.

Youth workers, as social and political educators, need not only to be able to make professional judgements, but work with young people in order that they might make effective judgements (ones that can be acted on) for the development and betterment of society.
A rights-based approach to youth work entails a process of engagement with young people based on human rights. Within this process all rights should apply equally to all and young people are understood to be agents in determining the interventions that are best for them as individuals and collectives. The role of “duty bearers” is understood as being primarily the State with regard to ensuring these rights and this should be recognized and acted on.

The primary document that articulates basic human rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is also an important document for youth work as many young people are legally or socially considered to be children.

In addition to the UDHR and UNCRC, the CYP also upholds the rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and other internationally, nationally and locally relevant human rights instruments that have bearing on the rights of young people.

The statements by young people in Box 4 opposite demonstrate how they are able, through effective social and political education, and by taking and using their authority as growing citizens, to influence their immediate environment and also have an impact at national and international levels.

Further, at local, regional, national and global levels, the UDHR and the UNCRC and other instruments can act as a foundation to the underpinning care basis of youth work that might complement and reinforce existing local and national care frameworks/custom and practice. Importantly, this involves transparent practice that proceeds from and is informed by consultancy and negotiation with young people.

Article 19 of the UDHR says,

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children should be able to express their views

...freely in all matters affecting the child...

This is congruent with the attitudes and values encapsulated within the principles and practice of social and political education.
In a message delivered to the UN General Assembly Special Session delegates, Gabriela Azurduy Arrieta, aged 13, from Bolivia and Audrey Cheynut, a 17-year old from Monaco, on 8 May 2002 outlined a range of objectives premised on a notation that a world fit for everyone must be a world fit for young people. It was stated that this needs to be founded on respect for the rights, which is reliant on governments and adults having a real and effective commitment to the principle of children’s rights and applying the Convention on the Rights of the Child to all children.

The overall vision encompassed a range of provision relevant to youth work including:

– The provision of centres and programmes,
– Education for life that goes beyond the academic and includes understanding, human rights, peace, acceptance and active citizenship,
– Active participation - Increased awareness and respect among people of all ages about every young person’s right to full and meaningful participation,
– Involvement in decision-making and planning.

The message went on to make a number of points concerning the identity and reputation of young people asserting:

– They are not the sources of problems, but the resources that are needed to solve problems,
– They are not expenses but investments,
– They are not just young people; they are people and citizens of the world.

There was also comment by young people to

– Defend the rights of young people,
– Treat each other with dignity and respect,
– To be open and sensitive to difference.

The message was concluded with the statement; You call us the future, but we are also the present.
Central to the social educative response is the acknowledgement of the need for the professional to be able to listen to, and be taught about the wants and needs of young people by young people. This is led by an understanding that the motivations, desires and passions of young people will likely be the richest seams of their future accomplishments and social contribution. In this approach, young people take the lead in learning within social education. It is the job of the youth worker to respond to this in an appropriate and adequate manner. This stance allows the young person to enable and empower themselves. Such an approach proceeds from the presumption that young people have, in the form of their integrity as human beings, potential, ability, influence, authority and power and as such is counter to authoritarian assumptions of deficit. Conversely, the professional who sets out to enable or empower others relies on inherently dominating attitudes, as this attitude assumes a lack of power and ability on the part of young people to enable and empower themselves.

As seen in Box 5 opposite, many pertinent ethical and competency considerations from youth work fall out of the response of young people.
The following is adapted from the Declaration of Learner’s Rights and Responsibilities which was written by a group of six young people between the ages of 15 and 17. It is quite a formal model of young people taking responsibility for their lives and their learning based on a Rights agenda. The original document was presented at a Rights of the Child Conference in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada and to the Canadian Minister of Education in June 1995. It was again presented to the UN Conference Habitat II, Istanbul Turkey in 1996. The Declaration was also published internationally by UNESCO and many organizations in countries around the world have shared it with their communities. As citizen learners this statement asserted that young people had the right to:

1/ Allow their own experience and enthusiasm to guide their learning,
2/ Choose and direct the nature and conditions of their learning experience. As a learner they take responsibility for the results they create,
3/ Perfect the skills to be a conscious, self-confident and resourceful individuals,
4/ Be respected while taking the responsibility to respect others,
5/ Be nurtured and supported by their family and community, while their family and community have the right and responsibility to be their primary resource,
6/ Enter into relationships based on mutual choice, collaborative effort, challenge and mutual gain,
7/ Be exposed to a diverse array of ideas, experiences, environments, and possibilities, This exposure being their responsibility of themselves, their parents and mentors,
8/ Evaluate their learning according to their own sensibilities; also having the responsibility and right to request to be included in the evaluations of their mentors,
9/ Co-create decisions that involve and concern them,
10/ Openly consider and have the responsibility to respect the ideas of others, whether or not they accept these ideas,
11/ Enter a learning organization which offers, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical support, and operates in an open and inclusive manner,
12/ Equal access to resources, information and funding.
Based on the principles and practice implications outlined above, it is possible now to define the core characteristics of a professionalized youth work sector that will enable the delivery of the above paradigm.

For the CYP, the following dimensions are integral to a professional sector. The CYP will work with Youth Ministries and other relevant stakeholders to establish locally relevant policies, procedures and mechanisms implied in these dimensions to ensure quality and consistent delivery of services to realize a youth work sector as articulated in this Concept Note, as well as to ensure the welfare and status of youth workers themselves.

1/ Recognition of Youth Work as a distinct professional category in national policy and legislation,
2/ A professional association that ensures collective professional decision-making,
3/ A set of occupational standards for youth work as a basis to determine professional competence,
4/ Competency standards, qualifications and certification,
5/ Professional validation and practice supervision to ensure quality of training and practice,
6/ An ethical code of practice.
State recognition of Youth Work as a professional category in legislation and policy confirms the status of the occupation and makes it more likely that both State and non-State resources would be channelled to strengthen the sector. These commitments to professionalizing mechanisms could be articulated in national Youth Policies, in separate Youth Work Policies, or legislated in Youth Acts. Youth Work clauses in Youth Policy would be an official articulation of State commitment to youth work as well as function as the basis for action planning and resourcing the sector.

A professional association acts as guardians and facilitators of standards and ethical practice, and advocates for the welfare and status of youth workers, while working to develop professional/specialized knowledge, working closely with trainers and qualifying institutions.

A professional association is often seen as the first step in the professionalizing process in order to ensure collective decision-making on the nature and standards of the profession.

12/ See CYP Asia’s Companion Document: Establishing a Youth Worker Association, a 12-Step Guide and More (CYP, Asia, 2012)
The basic foundation for the practice of professional youth work is a set of measurable Occupational Standards against which professional competence can be measured. Occupational Standards outline what those involved in working with young people agree to be good practice. Occupational Standards can provide the core elements of qualification, but they also have many more uses.

Occupational Standards should be developed following widespread involvement and consultation across the sector and a period of piloting in a range of youth work settings. Perhaps a team of consultants, a steering group and colleagues from the youth work field might assist in this work. Agreed Standards should also be reviewed at appropriate intervals, for example, in four-year cycles.

Occupational Standards can bring everyone into the ‘learning cycle’. Unlike professional competency standards, which can be based on Occupational Standards, the latter are not set at qualification levels. Occupational Standards define the competence required by youth workers and can be used to develop and monitor these skills. Occupational Standards can, for example, be used to develop a set of skills and learning objectives, to be passed to the individual, their supervisor and training specialists as a ‘prescription’ for a development programme.

Occupational Standards should be drawn out of the key aspects of youth work which might be, for example, broken down into six distinct parts:

1/ Build associations with young people which young people can use to enable themselves to explore and make sense of their experiences, plan and take action,

2/ Facilitate young people’s learning and their personal and social development,

3/ Work with young people so they might organise and take responsibility for activities, events and projects,

4/ Work with young people in accordance with the core values of youth work

5/ Plan, manage and develop youth work,

6/ Support and develop effective, efficient and ethical practice.

Each of these aspects is broken down into a number of units making up the Occupational Standards. At the heart of all of the standards is the key purpose of youth work outlined above.

For example, one of the many standards youth workers would need to meet would be the ability to demonstrate that they can work with young people to enable themselves to use their learning to enhance their future development. Like all standards this would need to be evidenced according to uniform ‘outcomes’. So, to meet the standard, a youth work would be able to:

1/ Explore with and promote clearly to young people the benefits of ongoing learning,

2/ Encourage young people to constructively consider their experiences and to recognise the consequent learning points,

3/ Create appropriate opportunities for young people to think about their learning and experiences, including individual and group discussions,

4/ Provide active and sensitive support to facilitate young people’s ability to deal with any experiences and learning they find challenging,

5/ Work with young people in order that they will develop the ability of to take charge of their own review sessions,
Occupational standards form the basis for developing competency standards that inform the development of levelled qualifications in a systematic qualifications pathway for youth workers. These may range from level 2 – 7 and range from basic Certificate courses to PhDs and all qualifications in between. Qualifications need to be certified as recognized qualifications for youth workers in order to enhance their status. At the same time, a recognised, professional qualification for supervisors will need to be established.

Qualifications ensure extensive training, including the study and mastery of specialized knowledge, in order to ensure best practice and the continued development of delivery. A process of certification/licensing defines minimum qualifications for professional youth work practice while inculcating and confirming professional values, principles and knowledge.

Occupational Standards provide the foundation for the professionalization of youth work, but all other dimensions mentioned above need to be followed in order to create truly professional youth work mechanisms.

This concept note may be taken as the first step in this process in

i) Proposing a new paradigm of youth work that might be adapted to context and purpose

ii) Sign-posting the need to develop youth policy and occupational standards based on the same
Academic validation refers to the continual validation of courses and their delivery by academic and professional institutions. These require periodic quality assurance processes that ensure the relevance and responsiveness of courses to the needs of youth workers and young people.

Practice supervision ensures that academic and professional learning is translated into practice in the field, in management and in supervisory functions. This role is played by seniors and supervisors through mentoring and guidance, and periodic feedback on professional performance. CYP envisages practice supervision being introduced for front line practitioners, managers and supervisors to heighten and hone skills, practice and safeguarding awareness as well as provide quality assurance.

A code of ethics is a set of principles of conduct for an organization or collective that guide decision making and behaviour. It provides for an agreed and reviewable standard of professional behaviour. A Code of Ethics for youth workers would provide youth workers and managers with guidelines for making ethical choices in conducting their work, and in engaging with young people. A recognized Code of Ethics would demonstrate to the public that the youth service sector functions with occupational integrity, which is important in ensuring youth workers’ credibility. Youth workers would adopt a Code of Ethics to articulate a commitment to ethical behaviour and to officially declare the occupational principles and standards of their practice.

Image courtesy: Commonwealth Images
CONCLUSION

This Concept Note has offered a paradigm of enabling, ensuring and empowering youth work practice that can be tailored to specific contexts over time, place and culture. It also outlines the key dimensions of professionalizing the youth work sector.

Being able to say what youth work is, and what it might do, is necessary to lay the ground for the instigation of professionalization of practice, as you cannot professionalize that which is not defined and agreed on. It is the purpose of subsequent consultation to refine and reach consensus in relation to the character and function of youth work in respective countries, and on this foundation, move on to develop appropriate policies, a professional association, occupational standards, competency standards and qualifications, supervisory structures and training and the infrastructure (as suggested above) to build a vibrant and consistently evolving/adapting profession that is tailor-made to specific cultural and political contexts.

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