



The McLeod Group



CANADA AND THE WORLD

ENGAGING CANADIAN YOUTH: WHAT'S MISSING?

In 2015, Canada, along with the other members of the United Nations, agreed on a new global agenda to address poverty and promote development, known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of its principles is universality, embodying the shared responsibility of all countries to address these issues both within their own borders and around the world.

Canada's International Education Strategy is linked primarily to the Global Markets Action Plan developed by the Harper government, which focuses on economic growth and job creation in Canada.¹ The SDGs are unlikely to be met if Canada continues to orient its international engagement so heavily towards the pursuit of its narrowly defined self-interest.

If Canada is to play a meaningful role in implementing a new global agenda, greater emphasis will have to be placed on developing the next generation of Canadian leaders, people who can work across borders, cultures, languages, and values. As well, a deeper sense of global understanding and connection will be needed among the broader Canadian public. Finding new and effective ways to engage youth and young adults in global issues will be a key part of this challenge.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, 'youth' are those between the ages of 12 and 19, and 'young adults' are those between 20 and 29 years old.² In this paper we focus on both.

The youth and young adult population of Canada is diverse: 13.3% are immigrants and 4.9% Aboriginal.³ An important characteristic of young adults is their high rate of unemployment – a rate double that of the general population.⁴

The meaning of *engagement* itself, and how to sustain it, is somewhat elusive and the term is often narrowly defined. A broader conception is clearly needed.

And a question arises: What skills, knowledge, values and experiences are most likely to help young Canadians to engage in addressing these major global challenges, and how can they acquire them?

To explore this question the McLeod Group hosted a roundtable discussion, bringing together people with experience in youth programming from universities, secondary schools, and civil society organizations. The discussion, which influenced this paper, reviewed current initiatives and examined possibilities for improvement and growth.

The McLeod Group works to strengthen Canada's contribution to a better world.

The McLeod Group is made up of professionals with many years of experience in government, civil society and academia, working across the fields of international development, diplomacy and foreign policy. We work with others who value human rights, inclusion, equality and sustainable development to advance Canadian policy and action on international cooperation and foreign affairs.

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Giving or Going: Limitations of the Current Models

Current models of youth and young adult engagement are heavily focused on 'giving or going'. The *giving* model, used by a wide variety of Canadian NGOs for fundraising purposes, uses child sponsorship, other forms of fundraising and enthusiastic pep rallies to inform Canadian youth about their work and to elicit support. While fundraising is essential to these organizations, the charity approach has – at best – limitations, and in the worst cases it can perpetuate stereotypes of helplessness and impoverishment that are antithetical to the kind of long-term understanding and the development cooperation that is so badly needed.

The *going* model has an extensive and honourable tradition: Tens of thousands of young Canadians have gone overseas on long- and short-term volunteer postings, youth exchange programs, internships, work-study programs and the like. The experience is invariably an eye-opener for participants, as are all other types of overseas experiences. Need for the kinds of skills that young Canadians once supplied, however, has changed dramatically in most developing countries. The entry-level human resource gap has been filled by local students and local graduates. While many Canadian NGOs still mount useful placement and internship programs, these are harder and harder to justify in terms of their contribution to development. And the simple fact is that even if current placement numbers were to triple, they still would not come close to meeting the interest from young Canadians.

In its least useful manifestation, the *going* model joins the *giving* model, sending young Canadians to developing countries to spend a vacation helping to build a school or a clinic. However, 'voluntourism' is expensive and – in development terms – silly. The last thing African villagers need in constructing a new school is Canadian manual labour. They undoubtedly need the work themselves.

The truth is that if we are to truly engage Canadian youth in a more intelligent approach to the long-term challenges of international development, we have to realize that only a small number of those who want to can actually *go*. And we have to find something more than fundraising gimmicks to attract and hold the attention of those who stay in Canada.

Changing the Channel

It is time to change the channel from *giving* and *going* to a more holistic and coherent approach to youth engagement. It is easy enough to dismiss today's youth as 'hashtag activists' or 'slacktivists' because of low voter turnout and preoccupations with social media. However, a different model can be seen in youth engagement in the Occupy Movement, Idle No More and countless human rights and environmental initiatives in high schools and universities across the country. These initiatives, while sometimes contentious, demonstrate that young people care about important issues once they are cognizant of the problems, can identify a clear link to their lives and interests, and have found a platform which enables them to act.

At the McLeod Group roundtable discussion, participants agreed that in order to foster engagement, young people need to have a sense of *ownership* in the programs and activities that they are involved in. Like people of all ages, youth are more likely to become engaged if they are empowered to do so. This means giving them direct exposure to decision makers and allowing them to become involved in policy development and advocacy in ways that prepare them for the lives and careers ahead of them.

Informing and *educating* young people on the complexities of international issues is something that has to take place at all levels of Canada's education system. Greater attention must be given to the role of the media. The idea of engagement has to move away from the charity ethic and simplistic ideas, making clear connections between the local and the global.

The important issues of today – climate change, pandemics, terrorism and war – will become the urgent issues of tomorrow without a much better and more comprehensive approach to informing and equipping the next generation.

Youth Engagement: What is Missing?

- *Missing:* Any kind of coordination or even connection between Canada's long-term global development priorities and our provincially run educational systems.
- *Missing:* Programs that encourage young Canadians to make connections between the local and the global, between things that concern them here – the environment, the job market they will soon enter, for

example – and how these relate to Canada's role in the world: our trade, security and human resources policies.

- *Missing:* Programs about Canada's role in the world that treat high school and university students as future leaders rather than excitable fundraising targets.
- *Missing:* Programs that encourage young Canadians to challenge simplistic ideas: development is not about giving a person a fish; it is not about teaching the person to fish either. It is about why people *can't* fish: because of overfishing by foreign trawlers or because the fish have all died from pollution.
- *Missing:* Banning matching government support for NGO fundraising that perpetuates negative stereotypes among Canadian youth.
- *Missing:* Opportunities for young Canadians to engage in intelligent policy dialogue with Canada's international development community, including the federal and provincial governments, civil society, the research and academic communities and the private sector.
- *Missing or Inadequate:* Efforts to engage young people with diverse backgrounds, especially diaspora and First Nations communities.
- *Missing:* Programs that encourage more and better media coverage of development issues for young Canadians.

NOTES

¹ The *Global Markets Action Plan* remains in place under the new Liberal government. See <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/education/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

² Public Health Agency of Canada, *Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada, 2011*, www.phac.aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2011/cphorsphc-respcacsp-06-eng.php.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Louis-Philippe Rochon, "Solution to youth unemployment? Not 'work for free'", CBC News, November 8, 2014, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/solution-to-youth-unemployment-not-work-for-free-1.2828748.