

Young people leading tomorrow's change today

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Young people take the lead in a UNICEF-sponsored community mobilization program against Ebola in Liberia. Young people in Ebola-affected countries were commended for their work in the fight against the disease by youth ministers of the 18 Commonwealth member states in Africa. Photo by: [Martine Perret / UNMEER / CC BY-ND](#)

Young people are often heralded as the leaders of tomorrow, yet in reality they are already leading important change today.

In my work in the Commonwealth, a family of 53 nations, I regularly come across young people who are passionate about strengthening their societies, driving development, and championing democracy. Yet much of their work is undervalued or underappreciated.

People under age 30 make up over 60 percent of our 2.2 billion population. In recognition of their achievements, Commonwealth Day — today, March 9, 2015 — is devoted to the theme “A Young Commonwealth.” This theme, which will guide activities by more than 80 Commonwealth organizations throughout 2015, acknowledges that young people play a vital role in nation building.

The younger generation, particularly those in their late teens and 20s, many of whom are struggling to find meaningful employment, have aspirations that deserve to be heard. They are often the first to recognize a problem or feel its effects — from joblessness to the rise of extremism. Young people are also often best able to propose and implement solutions that shift the needle and have an enduring impact.

On Tuesday, March 10, the [Commonwealth Secretariat](#) will announce the winners of the [2015 Commonwealth Youth Awards for Excellence in Development](#). These awards showcase the efforts of leading young people from Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean whose work has made a real difference to people in their community, country or region.

This year's 16 finalists include a young man from Tanzania who founded a microventure capital fund and entrepreneur network that is helping young businesspeople turn enterprising concepts into realized and profitable ventures. Another, a young woman from Pakistan, at the age of 16, established a women-led organization that educates girls about human rights and political participation and empowers them to challenge domestic abuse and child marriage. Others are youth activists: One from the Bahamas runs a talk radio program for young people; another from New Zealand, following the devastating Christchurch earthquakes, used social media to mobilize thousands of students to act on disaster risk reduction.

The pan-Commonwealth winner of the last Youth Awards, Priti Rajagopalan from India, launched a pioneering waste management program to train students across 200 schools and more than 40 universities in separating organic waste and composting. She also trained women and children in rural India to make and maintain their own solar-powered goods and water purifiers and sterilizing equipment for midwives. These outstanding young people are proof, if proof were needed, of the capacity and contribution of the younger generation.

In the Commonwealth, we recognize the positive and active role of young people in supporting development, peace and democracy, as well as in promoting tolerance, respect and understanding. This commitment to youth is set out in Article 13 of the Commonwealth Charter.

At a practical level, we empower young people and promote youth participation so that young leaders have the opportunity to interact with ministers and heads of government to relay their experiences, advocate shared positions and influence the policy decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. We will see this process in action when the Commonwealth Youth Forum takes place on the eve of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta in November.

It is the shared belief of the Commonwealth's young leaders and ministers and our heads of government that the post-2015 global development framework must place heavy emphasis on the importance of youth development and inclusion. Development objectives that do not include clearly defined targets for the economic, social and political empowerment of young people risk casting aside their hopes and needs and, critically, would miss an opportunity to recognize young people as agents of change.

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— Deodat Maharaj, deputy secretary-general of the Commonwealth

Last month in Yaoundé, Cameroon, youth ministers of the 18 Commonwealth member states in Africa commended the “remarkable work” being done by young people in Sierra Leone and other Ebola-affected countries. Ministers resolved to support young people's efforts to play a leading role in disaster relief and recovery during times of crisis, and recognized that the youth of today “should be seen as an opportunity and a resource, not as a threat, and that investment in youth development is critical to meaningful, constructive, intergenerational collaboration.”

Our youth ministers in Africa also agreed on a step which promises to be of great significance. The ministers stated that contract bids by youth-owned enterprises should be given more serious consideration in government procurement processes. This shows that governments are increasingly willing to give youth-led organizations a chance to compete against the rest, and to prove that they are the best.

Young people have proven capabilities, and are contributing to national life — whether they work in private enterprise, public sector or with voluntary organizations. They should be seen not only as the beneficiaries or as passive recipients of support. Rather, they should be recognized in their own right as champions, custodians and innovators in development.

The common refrain — that “young people are the leaders of tomorrow” — is true, of course, but it can do this rising generation a disservice. We should remember the example set by Priti Rajagopalan, and this year's Commonwealth

Youth Awards winners — because young people are leading tomorrow's change today.

Want to learn more? Check out the [Youth Will website](#) and tweet [#YouthWill](#).