

An analytical overview of the national youth policies and asset-building efforts of Turks & Caicos, Jamaica, Bahamas, and the Cayman Islands

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Abstract

In a Netflix film called *Hope Frozen*, a father freezes his deceased two-year-old daughter with the hope that technology and science will soon develop enough to cure her of a rare brain cancer when they revive her in the future. In the film, the father states that "without life, you have no opportunity." This statement is ironic as many are alive but live in communities that do not intentionally provide them with standards and opportunities to succeed. According to the 1994 United Nations Human Development Report, the foundation of human progress is the universalist view of life, which values human existence for itself and does not just regard individuals as creators of material commodities. Therefore, development must enable everyone to develop their human potential fully. Everyone "is entitled to a just opportunity to make the best use of his or her potential capabilities" (United Nations Development Programme, 1994, p. 13).

The opportunities granted to young people should be on the basis that once alive, they deserve all the opportunities to succeed. Benson (2006) challenges the norm by which society takes care of its youth or offers the opportunity to succeed. How well a community cares for its youth indicates its overall health (Benson, 2006). Benson posits that the critical issue is the response, individually and collectively, to the challenge of meeting this standard. There are three interlocking approaches when responding to this critical issue: meeting basic human needs, identifying, and removing risks and deficits that hinder the healthy development of children and youth, and finally, bringing the community together with the shared vision of healthy youth development (Benson, 2006). The third approach stems from the developmental assets framework of forty building blocks of human development, with the aim "to mobilize and engage all parts of our society, to become more developmentally attentive to our young people, to build up the levels of the developmental assets for and with all our young people." The more assets a young person has, the more likely they are to succeed and the less likely they are to gravitate to negative problem behaviors. If this is the case, the expectation is that a country's national plan for youth would emphasize and include strategies that increase or optimize the developmental assets of all its young people. Looking at the national youth policy with an asset-building lens and assessing the asset-building efforts of a

country can determine the possibility of forming asset-building coalitions and other asset-building initiatives that advocate for youth success.

Countries serious about their youth's success enact laws and implement policies with community-based development at their core (Khan, et al., 2018). This bottom-up approach fully supports grassroots organizations, like a coalition that mobilizes community members. The reason for doing this is that it allows these community members to engage in the decisions and activities that result in the success of their young people. Whether leading youth nationally, as a minister responsible for education and youth affairs, or leading a coalition or community effort, a specific type of leadership is most effective for asset building. Uniting an entire country or community around the vision of healthy youth development requires servant transformational leaders who serve their followers to reach their full potential and emphasize individualized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration that lead to collective efficacy and transformation.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions for Turks and Caicos, Jamaica, Bahamas, and the Cayman Islands: Is the National Youth policy compatible with the developmental assets framework? Is the country ready to set up an asset-building coalition? What are the strategic needs for setting up a coalition, and what type of leadership is needed? The study begins with reviewing the existing literature on the developmental assets framework, national youth policy, and coalitions, purposely identifying key concepts and themes that would inform the formation of an asset-building coalition—supported by national youth policy. Subsequently, there is an outline of the qualitative and quantitative methodology approached in the study, followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings emerging from the survey and data collection.

Introduction

Research Problem

For decades, adults have focused on recognizing and resolving issues in youth and youth cultures (Pearson et al., 2004, p. 11). This approach meant that developmental deficit thinking had traditionally been the driving force behind youth policies (Peter Benson et al. 2014, p. 781). International and regional developments in youth development have shifted from deficit-based approaches to asset-based ones. An asset-based strategy does not discount or disregard the crucial role of prevention and intervention in addressing the risks and vulnerabilities that may affect young people's experience (Pearson et al., 2004, p. 11). However, it also acknowledges that prevention is merely one part of a more comprehensive strategy considering what young people need to grow healthy (Pearson et al., 2004, p. 11).

According to the Search Institute, the developmental assets framework shows that the more assets a young person have, the more likely they are to succeed (Benson, 2006). Youth with higher levels of developmental assets are much more likely to engage in thriving behaviors and are much less likely to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors (Search Institute, 2015). Considering that the national youth policy is a country's commitment and practice to ensure the success of its youth population, one would think that its objectives and strategies would include the developmental assets framework. Some national youth policies lack asset-building philosophy, language, and processes that mobilize communities for community-wide asset-building initiatives.

Purpose Statement

National youth policies can improve if driven by the developmental assets framework. The framework improves the national youth policy language and discourse from deficit to asset-based, provides a purposeful approach towards supporting youth developmental progress, and provides strategies for mobilizing community-wide youth development initiatives. As a matter of national priority, enacting "developmentally attentive public policies for youth" means creating and sustaining asset-building communities (Benson et al. 2014, p. 781). Conducting an analytical overview of a country's national youth policy and asset-building efforts can reveal whether it is compatible with the developmental assets

framework and whether it is ready to mobilize communities for setting up asset-building coalitions (Benson, 2006, p. 121).

Research Questions

This project seeks to answer the following questions: -

1. Is each target country's youth policy compliant with national youth policy guidelines and compatible with the developmental assets framework?
2. Is the country ready to set up asset-building coalitions, and where a coalition exists, what can build its capacity?
3. What is the process and type of leadership needed to ensure the coalition's success?

The Developmental Assets Theory and Transforming Communities

The developmental assets framework was first proposed by Peter Benson of the Search Institute in 1990 and refined in 1995 to specifically create more focus on positive opportunities and experiences that young people need for successful development rather than to avoid high-risk behaviors. Additionally, the framework intended to highlight the importance of community in adolescents' well-being (Benson et al., 2011, p. 198). As a subset of positive youth development, there is growing evidence of the developmental assets framework that provides a plethora of information that leads to the success of young people. Steadily, more research is pointing toward asset-based approaches as a part of national youth planning. Similarly, growing evidence justifies the need for asset-building coalitions as a social public policy.

As asset-based approaches gain credibility in more traditional academic research institutions and research and practice combine to form a basis for national youth policy, clarifying the common ground of both becomes paramount. With this examination of developmental assets theory, definitions, and hypotheses, policymakers can justify the move beyond "fixing" young people to an asset-based approach to practice and collective action (Benson et al., 2006, p. 2).

The forty developmental assets the Search Institute identified are forty developmental realities contributing to positive development (Starkman et al., 2006, p. 34). They are building blocks of

development that "describe qualities and experiences crucial to positive development" (Nelson & Kjos, 2008, p. 7). The developmental asset framework is grounded in extensive research and is a valuable tool to identify what young people need to thrive (Nelson & Kjos, 2008, p. 7). There is a list of twenty external and twenty internal assets. The external assets are opportunities and experiences that result from ongoing exposure to support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (Benson, 2006, p. 31). The internal assets emphasize a young person's inner life, including their commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity, all of which they will need to inform their decisions and actions (Benson, 2006, p. 48).

The forty assets are in groups with conceptual coherence that can be easily explained to community members because the developmental asset framework is not just to inform theory and research but also to have practical significance for the mobilization of communities (Benson, 2007, p. 40). Benson developed three theoretical constructs to transform communities to promote positive youth development. This applied research initiative begins with the developmental assets culture, representing a "theoretical construct identifying a wide range of environmental and interpersonal strengths known to enhance adolescent educational and health outcomes" (Benson, 2007, p. 33).

Second, an asset-building community is a dynamic conceptual model that describes the characteristics of environments and situations that consistently and fairly distribute energy for creating assets for all children and adolescents (Benson, 2007, p. 33). Otherwise called a developmentally attentive community, there is an investment in discovering, activating, deepening, and celebrating the asset-building capacities of community individuals and institutions (Benson, 2006, p. 121). Although describing "the dynamics of the asset-building community and the strategies that promote meaningful and long-term community change is a work in progress," asset-building is the focus of a shared vision and commitment (Benson et al., 2012, p. 15).

The third is an asset-building society, which informs national policies and local community work (Benson, 2007, p. 40). At the macro level, governments enact developmentally attentive youth policies congruent with the developmental assets framework, encompassing positive outcomes rather than

negative ones (Benson et al., 2014, p. 797). What is experimentally known and understood about healthy development would form the basis for youth policy (Benson, 2014, p. 797). At the micro level, the main goal of the effort is to generate knowledge and practical approaches for enhancing community development infrastructure (Benson, 2007, p. 40).

Hypothesis

The relationships between the constructs inform the hypotheses that result from fundamental theoretical concepts, the empirical evidence from research conducted, and possibilities in national youth policy and practice.

Hypothesis 1: Policymakers can purposefully change their discourse from deficit to asset-based to improve national youth policies and strategies.

This hypothesis proposes that youth practitioners can change youth development contexts from the deficit approach to promote positive youth development through asset-based approaches.

Selected evidence

Youth policy portrays and responds to young people in a variety of ways. Where young people are valued, the policy is primarily opportunity-focused. The policy is more likely to be protective when young people are seen as victims or vulnerable. Where young people are seen as "villains" (for example, those involved in "antisocial behavior"), the policy is more likely to be restrictive (Williamson et al., 2021, p. 17).

This deficit lens informs research, policy, and practice. It fuels the development of complex and costly service and program delivery infrastructures, fosters reliance on experts, breeds public mistrust of youth, and, as a result, interferes with the natural and inherent capacity of human collectives to be the community (Benson, et al., 2011, p. 36).

For decades, developmental deficit thinking has driven national youth policy (Benson, et al., 2014, p. 781). However, improving the healthy, balanced, adaptive synthesis of person and context is central to developmental asset thinking and research (Benson, 2007, p. 39).

The discourse policymakers employed to describe youth development conceptualized the policies developed and implemented (Charles & Jameson-Charles, 2014, p. 24). Whereas the asset-based perspective takes a rights-based approach and sees young people as key agents of social change, the deficit perspective has traditionally characterized youth as problems to be addressed (Charles & Jameson-Charles, 2014, p. 25). In addition to highlighting discourse, Charles and Jameson-Charles (2014) highlight two critical theoretical perspectives on youth development: social welfare and transformational revolutionary. On the one hand, social welfareists seek to reform social and economic policies, while revolutionaries seek to transform and empower youth for success (p. 25).

Policy and practice implications

Emphasize transforming philosophy (discourse) and the benefits of transformational social change.

National youth policies should include strategies for community awareness to promote asset-based youth development.

Hypothesis 2: Developmental supports and opportunities benefit all youth and can have an impact at the time of intervention and later in life.

This hypothesis proposes that all young people can benefit from developmental opportunities and support. It also illustrates the replicating character of developmental strengths, which protect young people when they create them and allow them to develop additional strengths that further their protection in the future. Also, the asset model stimulates mobilization, planning, and implementation for communities that strive to become developmentally attentive places for young people (Fisher et al. 2006, p. 277).

Selected evidence

Research indicates that developmental assets are relevant to all young people, and the more they have, the more likely they are to succeed and avoid problem behaviors.

Evidence shows that the additive nature of developmental experiences and resources impacts adolescents' positive developmental outcomes. These findings imply that the more positive developmental factors a young person is exposed to, the more likely they are to report successful outcomes. Youth with higher

levels of developmental assets were significantly more likely than other youth to report academic success, overcoming adversity, maintaining physical health, and delaying gratification (Scales et al., 2000, p. 41).

Policy and practice implications

National youth policies should include investment in longitudinal research and evaluation methods that indicate short-term impact and long-term healthy development.

National youth policies should include strategies to mobilize community resources for asset building.

Hypothesis 3: Collective efforts to build developmental assets need transformational leaders.

According to this hypothesis, the success of collaborative efforts to build developmental assets speaks to the potential of operationalizing strengths that are dominant in a specific community (Fernandes et al., 2021, p. 3).

Selected evidence

One can agree that the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" has become a cliché in recent years, but it is still profound and relevant. The challenge is to define the village and engage all villagers in the common goal of positive youth development (Barton et al., 1997, p. 483).

Many researchers, youth advocates, and practitioners proactively leverage communities to invest more in youth by moving beyond programs and policies that merely respond to problems. (Barton, et al., 1997, p. 487).

A community's asset-building initiative needs facilitative, empowering leadership (Benson, 2006, p. 165).

Policy and practice implications

Implementing a youth development vision necessitates a community-wide collaborative effort (Barton et al., 1997, p. 487).

Policymakers develop sustainable strategies for youth development.

Effective coalitions require leaders who can reach beyond the individual, group, and sectoral boundaries to advance a shared vision for healthy and thriving communities (Kim et al., 2017, p. 20).

Significance of Project

This analytical overview of the national youth policies and asset-building efforts of Turks and Caicos, Bahamas, Jamaica, and the Cayman Islands, will provide new perspectives in approaching youth development and collective community work. Specifically, this project will benefit the following:

Government – this project informs the development and enhances national youth policies.

Community – this project can spread awareness about the benefits of the developmental assets framework and its inclusion in national youth policies.

Youth Practitioners and Advocates – this project will provide valuable information about what youth practitioners and advocates can do individually and collectively towards asset building.

Young people – would become better aware of what they need to succeed, have a practical tool for personal development, and tips on involvement in asset-building causes.

Scope, Methodology, and Data Analysis

Initially, the project idea was to create a leadership manual for setting up asset-building coalitions in Turks and Caicos, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. A quick review of Turks and Caicos National Youth Policy led to doing the same for Jamaica and the Bahamas. Analyzing the policies was to examine each country's approach toward its young people. First, determine whether the policy was compliant with the process and framework expected for national youth policies worldwide, and second, test if the language and discourse of the policy would indicate if it was compatible with the developmental assets framework. A triangulation mixed methodological research was employed to increase the validity of the information. This method included qualitative analysis (literature review and content analysis), purposive key informant interviews, and random sampling surveys. Since the Cayman Islands has a coalition, the project's scope was extended to include surveys to examine its current mobilization and capacity. A survey was created for each country to capture data showing the participant's knowledge and awareness of the asset-building framework, its healthy ratings concerning the assets, and its readiness to begin asset-building. The survey data was collected using Google Forms, which created CSV files analyzed with Excel.

Conclusion

Developmental supports and opportunities benefit all youth and can have an impact at the time of intervention and later in life. Evidence suggests that the more positive developmental factors a young person is exposed to, the more likely they are to report successful outcomes. Youth practitioners do not have the luxury of freezing young people with the hope that youth development practice will develop enough to apply practices to ensure youth success in the future. Already, extensive research provides a plethora of information that leads to the success of young people, for example, the developmental assets theory proposed by the late Peter Benson, which focuses on positive opportunities and experiences that young people need for successful development (Benson et al., 2011, p. 198). These opportunities and experiences include mobilizing the entire community to ensure this successful progress. Since the national youth policy is the national commitment and priority for youth success, it would be prudent to include the developmental assets framework in their objectives and strategies to ensure the success of their youth population.

At the macro level, governments enact developmentally attentive youth policies congruent with the developmental assets framework. At the micro level, the main goal is to generate knowledge and practical approaches for enhancing community development infrastructure. This project sought to determine if the youth policies of the four target countries comply with national youth policy guidelines and are compatible with the developmental assets framework. Also, it sought to determine if these countries were ready to set up asset-building coalitions. Where one exists, a further assessment determines if it is acquiring the needed support. This preliminary report does indicate significant compliance by all countries. None of the countries have specific objectives and strategies surrounding the developmental assets framework. However, some content of each national youth policy links to particular asset categories, lists, or action strategies.

Considering the importance of shared vision and collective action, this report also highlights the type of leadership needed to lead youth nationally, within a coalition, and in specific community asset-building efforts.

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