



Youth Involvement in the World Organization of the Scout Movement

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My name is John Lawlor. I am 22 years of age and come from Dublin, Ireland. I recently graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a BA in European Studies and am presently studying for a Masters degree in International Organisations at Dublin City University. In Scouting, I have been working as a Youth Advisor to the World Scout Committee since the elections for Youth Advisors at the 9th World Scout Youth Forum in 2005. Previously I have been a National Commissioner for Scouting Ireland with responsibility for Youth Involvement and Reaching Out. I remain a member of Scouting Ireland's International Team however today it is my weekly work at local level as a Rover Scout Leader with which I occupy myself most regularly and indeed most heavily! I have been involved in Scouting my whole life. It is a very important part of my life but I do have other interests in particular sport, music, news and current affairs and modern languages.

Today, I have been asked to speak on the topic of Youth Participation or as I would prefer to call it Youth Involvement. In recent years, my work in Scouting at all levels has frequently had a particular focus on this issue and indeed since 2002 the issue has been addressed by World Scouting as one of its seven Strategic Priorities.

The 2005 WOSM handbook entitled "Youth Involvement, Youth Empowerment" recognises the following as a generally accepted definition of "Youth Involvement"

Youth involvement is a process that ensures youth have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. It creates volunteer opportunities for youth to be a part of the changes and decisions being made in their communities.

In Scouting, youth involvement is the very essence of what we do. As a principle, "Youth Involvement" can be traced right back to the time of our founder Baden-Powell whose motto was "Ask the boy". Indeed were he alive today, Baden Powell would probably tell you that it was not he who founded Scouting but rather the young boys in his home country of

England who inspired by BP's "Scouting for Boys" magazines, acting of their own initiative, organised themselves into Scout troops. So "Youth Involvement" is not something new. It is and always has been a core element of "The Scout Method" and is thus enshrined as such in our Constitution.

In my opinion, the challenge for us is not simply to implement or to legislate for Youth Involvement but rather to work to provide our young people with opportunities to be empowered right throughout our youth programme. In the "Youth Involvement, Youth Empowerment" handbook, Dominique Bénard makes the following important distinctions. "Young people" in Scouting divide into two categories. Firstly there are those who are benefiting from the youth programme (i.e. Scouts, Senior Scouts and Rovers). Secondly there are those who are in charge of delivering and developing the youth programme (namely young adult leaders in their late teens and twenties). It is obvious that in terms of Youth Involvement, these two groups cannot be treated in the same way. Ideally, the former will be involved in the decision making process at local level while the latter will participate fully in the decision making process of the whole organisation.

It is important to recognise that these are not two separate processes. Rather it should be the case that the skills acquired by the young people that are benefitting from the youth programme shall empower them to make an effective contribution to the decision making processes of the whole organisation as young adult leaders.

I would like to share some reflections based on my experiences in working to promote youth involvement in each of the two areas of the process that Dominique Bénard outlines.

Youth Involvement within Scouting

I'd like first to look at the (11-15) age section (or as we call it in my country, the Scout Troop). It is a section for which I have a particularly high regard. Within this section, Scouting possesses a unique learning model. One of the many beauties of the Scout section lies in the fact that it spans two of the broadly recognised stages of development – early and mid-adolescence. In simple terms, in the Scout section the younger Scouts benefit from the knowledge and experience of the older Scouts who in turn benefit from the leadership opportunities that the younger Scouts afford them. With a well structured patrol system, this age grouping lends itself naturally to youth empowerment. On Scout Camp the benefits of this structure are most evident. There's no shouting, no weary Scout leader struggling to prepare dinner for 30 disobedient children but just the crackle of wood fires, the gentle hum of four patrols diligently going about their business and the smell of good Scouting in the air. I refer to this case for the simple reason that, so often in Scouting when we discuss Youth Involvement we leap ahead to arguing for things like "younger Chief Scouts!" and "more Young People on Regional and World Scout Committees!". However, before there is Youth Involvement, there must be Youth Empowerment. Often, we fail to pay due attention to the elements of our programme that have proven success in facilitating the empowerment of young people from an early age.

Recently I have been working as facilitator to the Patrol Leader's Council of my father's Scout Troop. Chaired by a 15 year-old senior patrol leader, this council serves as the devolved governing organ of the Scout Troop. It determines the Troop programme, nominates assistant patrol leaders, decides upon the composition of patrols and division of responsibilities.

Here the role of the adult leader is a delicate balancing act. Ironically, in order for the Scout Troop to operate in such an autonomous manner, an element of precise directive authority is incumbent upon the adult leader. How so? Again, Dominique Bénard discusses the concept of "framework versus content". The framework comprises all of the things that guide the creativity and freedom of the young people (that is to say: security, rules, structures, roles and responsibilities, ways of working, time constraints etc). The content is simply what the Scouts do. Mr Bénard holds that if you, the adult leader, can succeed in issuing your Scouts with appropriate directive regarding the framework whilst allowing them to determine the content for themselves, you have created the optimal conditions for autonomous learning and indeed youth empowerment.

As I have said, one of the qualities of this section lies in the fact that it spans two stages of development with younger Scouts learning from older Scouts and vice-versa. Many National Scout Organizations (NSOs) throughout our Movement, such as my own, are undertaking a process of programme review. In certain cases, NSOs may opt for shorter sections, each one catering for an individual stage of development. Scouting is of course a Movement that must remain open to new educational methods and structures. However I believe that when we look to alter our age structures, we must consider very carefully the learning environments that we have known to work, that provide our young people with solid frameworks in which to learn by doing and have thus been the catalysts for youth empowerment. Why are we celebrating our centenary this year? Well one simple reason for that is, we've done a lot of things right!

Based on my experiences, I believe that a strong Scout section is crucial to the empowerment of young people who, by their age, fall into the first of the two categories identified by Dominique Bénard. I would like now to look at the second category and to offer some perspectives on Youth Involvement in Young Adulthood.

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In my experience, when Scouts have debated the issue of Youth Involvement, there has most frequently been a particular focus on the issue of Youth Participation in decision making at an institutional level. In my research for a paper on the issue of Youth Involvement in NSOs which was presented to the recent meeting of the World Scout Committee, it emerged that in many cases this issue manifests itself as a power struggle between the generations. In some cases, the research revealed that certain NSOs attempt to legislatively enforce Youth Involvement by defining age limits, above which a person cannot be a Scout leader. I believe this to be counterproductive. As a young adult, I feel that those of my generation who wish to see greater opportunities for young people at institutional level have a responsibility first of all to acknowledge and respect the contribution made to the Movement by older

experienced Scouters. After all, Baden-Powell himself was no spring chicken at the time of Scouting's foundation! Youth Involvement at institutional level must be brought about through partnership between the young and the not so young. As the Youth Involvement, Youth Empowerment handbook states:

When different skills and capacities are recognized and valued for their contribution, and both parties respect the other's expertise, the basis exists for partnership.(WOSM 2005).

I'll offer a personal example: Having been a Youth Advisor to the World Scout Committee for two and a half years, I now recognise that there are very few people of any age with the necessary skills to do the job done by our chairman Mr Herman Hui. For me to have the opportunity to work with such a person as a colleague is an empowering experience for me and something that I hope will stand to me in later life.

With regard to young adults, the research paper on Youth Involvement in NSOs suggests that there are many ways in which we could be more clever about how we promote Youth Involvement. Let us remember that autonomous learning by doing (in other words "Youth Involvement") is a key part of the Scout Method and as such should come to the fore naturally in all Scout activities. What is unnatural is to throw young people, in particular those aged 18 and under, onto national committees here and there without any regard as to their needs and competencies. Such action can be counterproductive leading only to the intimidation and disillusionment of the young people. In any case, would they not be better served by taking on leadership roles in their own local units and spending their weekends out on the mountains with their friends rather than sitting around committee tables?

WOSM has said that:

"Involving young people with leadership capacities in the development of the community is certainly the ultimate goal of Scouting"

(WOSM 2005)

I believe that, rather than striving to increase the involvement of young people in institutional structures, we should instead look to utilise young people as a force in order to address the challenges in our communities. Youth Involvement in this case should mean young people taking the lead role in organising and carrying out such work.

The Amhoro-Amani project in the Great Lakes region of Africa which in turn has proven the inspiration for the Open Minds Global initiative has shown how youth can be used as a powerful force for development and peace-building in the developing world.

In the case of wealthier countries such as my own, it is noted in the Youth Involvement, Youth Empowerment handbook that in many industrialised societies, community development projects are rare and Scouts are involved mostly in recreational activities. As a consequence, the proportion of adolescents and young adults in Scouting is weak.

The problems of wealthier societies are perhaps less obvious than those of developing countries nevertheless they are there and they are plentiful. For example, in spite of their high level of wealth and prosperity, countries such as Ireland, New Zealand, Finland and Belgium are among those affected by the highest rates of youth suicide per capita (and I'm sorry to say that my own Scout group was directly affected by such a tragedy just this year).

There are other many other problems. Our consumer-driven societies have given rise to untold levels of childhood obesity. Racial discrimination and attacks take place in countries, such as my own, that have experienced high levels of immigration. Thanks to Al Gore, the industrialised world appears to be awakening to the "Inconvenient Truth" of Global Warning; however much remains to be done in promoting further public awareness and encouraging sustainable practices. If we in Scouting wish to promote Youth Involvement then let's do it by using similar methods to those employed by the Amhoro-Amani project where young people are mobilised as an army of peer tutors educating their fellow young people in peace and tolerance. Similarly using young people as a force in order to tackle the various challenges that exist in industrialised societies offers us meaningful Youth Involvement with the added promise of enriching our adolescent and young adult programme. Initiatives of recent years such as Gifts for Peace and the Scouts of the World Programme indicate that this is the approach that World Scouting seeks to pursue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Youth Involvement should be looked upon as a natural outcome of good Scouting. Good Scouting at all levels fosters youth empowerment and the structures that we employ in our programme sections are key to this. Promoting Youth Involvement should bring brother and sister Scouts, young and old, together in a working partnership with due mutual recognition of each others skills and capacities. Finally, let us involve young people in working as agents for change in their communities and, as we have identified, there are many opportunities for youth involvement in the community not only in developing countries but also in the more wealthy industrialised world – where the Rover Scout programme is crying out for such engagement.

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