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## Peak Youth

### Perry Maddox

The biggest youth generation in history is alive today, and 90 per cent of them live in developing countries, with by far the greatest numbers in Asia and Africa. For Perry Maddox, CEO of Restless Development - the youth-led international development agency - there has never been a more exciting time to explore the intersection of development and young people; nor to help realise the powerful potential of Peak Youth.

#### **Challenging stereotypes**

The stereotypes that are often associated with young people today can get in the way of what Maddox sees as the tremendous potential that young people have to lead change. He challenges embedded views by telling a story from Sierra Leone, where Restless Development has been working with young volunteers since 2003.

When the government declared a state of emergency in response to the Ebola epidemic in July 2014, Restless Development sought funding to run a youth-led community mobilisation pilot project. The main government funders said no, but a private foundation agreed,

Tapping into their network of over 2000 young Sierra Leoneans who had been working on long term programmes in rural communities, Restless Development asked for volunteers to work on the Ebola front line; the response was immediate.

“We asked who’d like to go out, and overnight, 350 young people were ready to stop their lives, stop their work, say goodbye to their families and volunteer to fight Ebola,” says Maddox.

The two-month pilot led to a community-led Ebola response model that allowed local communities to take ownership in identifying and addressing their specific concerns with Ebola, and to lead their own behaviour-change to deal with safe burials, early treatment, and the social acceptance of survivors.

This approach was in stark contrast to the internationally-backed blanket communication campaign that was hammering out the same message around the country, building fear and resentment by urging people to act against their natural and cultural instincts.

#### **A model that works**

The involvement of young people benefited everyone. They were paired with trusted community leaders, such as health workers, midwives and birth attendants, and they played a key role in the District Emergency Response Centres. The model worked: over six to eight months, they reached half the population.

“We ended up reaching 3 million people, not as beneficiaries, not as targets, but as leaders in their own rights, tapping into the agency and the leadership that lies in every single community. It was a really powerful lesson,” says Maddox.

“An interesting take-away,” he adds, “is that the community-triggering process led to local action plans, and six months later we found that 95% of those action plans were still running.”

Nor did the work end when the Ebola outbreak ended. The British government invested massively to help the rebuilding Sierra Leone following the epidemic. Now, young people are doing youth-led social accountability: empowering communities to hold their decision makers to account for the promises made through such bi-lateral programmes, including building schools and training teachers.

Examples like this demonstrate the power of youth to bring about change, says Maddox: “It’s so easy to say that young people are energetic, or that they are really well connected on social media, but the real way to understand Peak Youth is through hard core development outcomes, and we need to hold up that kind of a mirror, because it is where the really exciting potential lies.”

### **The size of the matter**

Not everyone sees this potential, and that frustrates people like Maddox. It’s not surprising, perhaps, when the language commonly used to talk about young people ranges from the unflattering to the patronising: in the politician’s lexicon, peak youth is a “demographic dividend” to be wooed; other common definitions are “youth bulge” and “time-bomb”.

The sheer numbers of young people is unprecedented: of the biggest youth generation in history, 1.8 billion are between the age of 18 and 24. What’s more, these figures are followed by a child boom. In Africa today, only about 19% of the population is aged 15 - 24, while 41% is under 15. That means that over the next 15 years - the timeframe for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals - half the world will be young.

“It’s a really interesting moment,” says Maddox. “These are young people, ready and able to lead change in their communities right now. The young people who led the Ebola response were all Sierra Leonean; none of them were British or American.”

It is significant that most of today’s young people live in Asia and Africa. A simplified explanation for this is that many countries in these regions are at an intermediate stage of economic development: a phase when populations typically peak.

Since the 1950s, the youth population in Asia has tripled to about 750 million today, although youth population on the continent has already peaked; only in Africa is it still growing. “Look at the size of those populations,” says Maddox. “Just think of the development challenges in Africa and Asia. Young people today give us a really dynamic window to change the direction of development,” he adds. It won’t always be like this: “The key thing about Peak Youth, is that it is time-bound. It’s a one-off window, and it will close.”

### **Who are we are talking about?**

What exactly do we mean when we talk about young people? Firstly, they are not a homogenous group. “It’s obvious but needs repeating,” says Maddox. Secondly, they are everywhere, and notably present where development is focused: “Young people are in the majority of numerous groups, such as mothers, job seekers, slum dwellers and refugees. They are embedded in most communities, geographically and thematically.” Crucially, he adds, they are available *now* to take on development opportunities.

As for age, Maddox acknowledges that defining youth is a recurring issue in the sector he works in. For the UN, young people are between 18 and 24; in most countries the practical range is 15-30, but in some this can be 15-35; rarely (as in Nepal), being young stretches into the 40s.

“The point is, it’s a time of transition rather than an age bracket,” says Maddox. “It’s the time between childhood and adulthood; between dependence and independence. It’s important to see youth in this light, because it’s going to look different in every village, in every community, in every country.”

Another way to see youth is a life-cycle transition; one with high potential. “If you invest in young people, it will probably pay off,” says Maddox. For many, it comes as a surprise to learn that young people are less reckless than the generation before them. From all that we know, says Maddox, today’s young people are better educated, consume fewer drugs and less alcohol, and are more active civically.

They also have unprecedented access to information and are better connected; they participate more, but differently; and they are political, while rejecting mainstream politics. Young citizens are more inclined to join movements that matter to them, rather than “do their duty” and vote for a political party which they don’t identify with. “In other words,” he says, “characterising millennials as snowflakes is unfair.”

Maddox likes to describe them as “less noun, more verb.” He flags up Primrose, a Zimbabwean teenager, as an example. As a leader of Youth Power, she is doing hard core work towards ensuring the Sustainable Development Goals: collecting data and using it to hold her country’s authorities accountable. “This engages politicians. It’s not aggressive,” says Maddox. “This is a different generation.

It is certainly one that organisations like Restless Development believe can change the world, if youth-led initiatives can be scaled up. “Solutions to development challenges are staring us in the face,” says Maddox. Why then, he asks, do we have trouble persuading people to run with this?

### **Shifting the mindset**

Ironically, the answer is a lot to do with the development sector itself. Too often, says Maddox, those working in and funding development see young people as “beneficiaries” to be reached, “problems” to be solved and “targets” to be counted. This negative image of youth shapes the mindset of how mainstream development organisations respond to challenges.

Take youth employment: in the next decade, one billion young people will enter the job market, yet only 400 million will find jobs in the formal jobs sector, and that means that 600 million will not. The consensus among global decision makers - including those in development - see formal job creation and skills training as the answer, yet even assuming growth rates of 5% in lower income countries, Maddox says it will take more than 300 years to grow the job market to the levels needed in the next ten years. “People are thinking about top down macro-economic growth, but it simply won’t happen quickly enough for the current generation of young people,” he says.

Maddox is concerned that too many current leaders in the development sector have a vision of the future that mirrors the sector today. A recent survey by Devex (a social enterprise and media platform for the global development community), asked current development workers what the future would look like. Almost 80% of respondents thought that a graduate degree would be needed: a view that immediately writes off the vast majority of the kind of young people Restless Development works with. “That kind of bias is a problem,” says Maddox.

The survey also revealed that just under half the respondents did not think that the number of ex-pats working in the sector would decrease in the coming decades. “What we have is a development sector that looks into the future and sees itself,” says Maddox. “The future is not people like Perry Maddox; it’s people like Primrose.”

The future, it seems, is still some way off. Leadership in development is both male dominated and US/Europe dominated, although times are changing. Comic Relief’s recent decision to end the use of white celebrities in fundraising via so called ‘white saviour’ videos is illustrative that opinion is shifting. “Ultimately, what is being challenged here is power,” says Maddox.

### **Development is at a crossroads**

Ironically, most development professionals *do* believe in grassroots-led change, says Maddox, but the reason people don’t invest in it is because it is hard to scale up.

What’s happened over the past 30 years, in response to growing pressure from funders to deliver bigger numbers, is that organisations themselves have been built for scale - and to be able to attract funding to enable that scale. This has led to vertical organisations delivering big scale solutions. Maddox accepts that much good has come from this, but sometimes the trade off in power is too heavy. “The people receiving your work don’t feel empowered to demand that you treat them correctly,” he says.

So now, development finds itself at a crossroads. International NGOs used to be seen as challenging the system, and bucking the trend; most young people now see the NGOs *themselves* as the system, and associated with upholding the status quo.

There is tension between activists and professionals in the sector. Maddox thinks that both have a role to play: professionals are needed to report to government, thereby holding their organisations to account. The trouble is that this is growing increasingly technocratic. Restless Development recently won a big grant from the UK Department for International Development, which called for 60 pages of detailed due diligence. “We can just about handle that, but what about a small organisation?” asks Maddox. “This is a real challenge for development.”

### **The answer is empowering civil society**

So, how to meet this challenge? Development will only succeed, says Maddox, where it helps to build a robust civil society, and that won’t happen for as long as the sector fails to engage communities, and to build the resilience of local organisations by handing over agency, power, and accountability.

This failure impacts particularly on young people, in a number of ways:

- According to a recent study, fewer than 25% of INGOs engage young people as leaders or partners in their work;
- Development funders shy away from youth-led change because it is a new field and therefore lacking data to prove it is effective;
- A mere 0.02% of development money is spent by grassroots organisations, which helps to explain why about half of youth-led organisations fall by the wayside.

All these things contribute to young people being disproportionately affected by poverty, and disproportionately excluded from decision-making.

In spite of the current shortcomings, Maddox continues to believe in Development. “I just believe that we need to do it better,” he says. He is convinced that young people are key to the solution, and he is not short of examples. Eva, a young Tanzanian girl, was 15 when she wrote to her local government asking for a water point to be installed at her rural village school. The daily chore for herself and other girls to get water was taking two hours, and that meant they were missing out on education. Besides, it was dangerous work, with high levels of gender-based violence around water points.

Eva got no reply, so she wrote to Barack Obama, who promised – very publicly, at the UN General Assembly – to listen to young people like her. Eva went on to launch a global campaign, #StandWithEva, and 150,000 people signed her petition, which she took to the Tanzanian President. Within a year of her campaign launch, a new water tap had been installed near her school.

### **Handing over to communities, and young people**

“This is the power of young people,” says Maddox. How then, can the Development sector encourage more young people like Eva to lead change? A few models have which are helping to pave the way, especially when they are championed by influential advocates. Maddox hails a seminal moment when the World Bank – previously reluctant to invest in youth – in its 2007 Development Report presented a ‘three lens approach to youth participation’: a flexible, progressive model aiming to develop young people as partners and leaders in development.

That’s encouraging, says Maddox. We need the courage to hand development back to the community; we need to build agency, not victimhood; and we need to build accountable partnerships. In a plea to his audience, Maddox urged all those in positions of privilege to think how they can direct their voice; their spending, and their conversations.

Remember those 2,000 young people on the front line against Ebola in Sierra Leone. Think of the 40 youth-led organisations that built 500 temporary learning centres in Nepal after the massive earthquake in 2015.

“This is not youth for youth, this is young people for people. This is Peak Youth.”

### **Two respondents – both of them Gates Scholars – were invited to comment on Perry Maddox’s talk.**

*Aliya Khalid is doing a PhD in Education based at Newnham College. Her research focuses on women’s agency as mothers, and their influence as mothers on their daughters’ education and inclusion in her native Pakistan.*

“The critical question for me is how do you bring the agency back to grass roots? Education is also grappling with this,” says Khalid.

“Education is often seen as something that will bring economic gains, and increase income per capita income, but typically, the non-tangible aspects of learning – things like political empowerment – are left

out,” she says. This is particularly important with respect to girls. “In many parts of the world hardly even make it to school, so how can they become agents and active participants in society?”

Pakistan’s population is the sixth biggest in the world, and 27% are young. “If you put gender into the mix, it gets more complicated,” says Khalid, because girls are less likely to have access to schools and to participate in labour markets, so what is the future of these girls who, by default, are born to situation where pathways to adulthood already restrained. How do you bring the voices of the girls to the fore?”

During her research in rural Pakistan, Khalid saw how those mothers who were politically aware stood out as agents of change, because they had the language and knowledge with which to claim their rights, and those of their children: “These women were able to closely observe what role the government was playing in the education sector, and at the same time, able to hold the schools to account for the quality they were giving to their children,” she says.

Khalid believes that the biggest challenge facing the development sector is how to give people the language and skills with which they can claim their justified positions in their own societies. The strategies that these women have developed could help in spreading new models.

**Alice Musabende** *is doing a PhD in Politics and International Studies, focussing on collective identity in African states, how the states collaborate to advance peace, and the role of the African Union (AU).*

In a robust response, Musabende challenged a number of issues raised by Maddox. Firstly, she is troubled that the development sector has started to talk about young people as ‘potential’.

“It sounds really good, but it is incredibly unfair,” she says. Musabende fears that the key time of transition for young people to develop as individuals will be compromised. Between the age of 14 and their early 20s, young people have the chance to be at school, go on to high school and to at least start university, before they are considered as adults, and go out and work. “In the developing world, by using this language, we risk robbing them of chance.”

Musabende points out that some of these young people live in countries coming out of wars, and some in extreme poverty. “Putting the weight of change on their heads is something I find extremely demanding,” she says.

It is a viewpoint shaped by personal experience: “At the end of the Rwandan genocide I was 14. Now at 38, I realise how much of my life got lost in the 10-15 years following the war,” she says.

As for her response to personalised stories – like those of Primrose and Eva – that development organisations love to promote: “I am thinking: where is her government? The government should be coming up with these ideas. She should be reading books!”

Secondly, Musabende speaks out as a feminist scholar, taking issue with youth being seen and discussed as if it is one big group. “When you speak of youth as a homogenous group, you can forget the different sub-groups of people, especially women, who have more to lose. Often, women don’t have “a youth”. You are child, then young woman, and therefore marriageable.

“We need to include this in our discussions,” she says.

Musabende's third point picks up on Maddox's frustration with the time spent in the development sector defining "youth". "It's important that you figure out a way to define at least approximately it because it has huge implications."

If we cannot define youth, then we end up with inconsistent policies which might allow young people to join the army at 15, but not be allowed to drive or to drink at the same age. For women it is critical, not least because for villages or communities in many countries, age can determine when girls marry.

Equally, access to jobs and scholarship opportunities are often limited to those below a certain age, but what does this mean for people who, for various reasons, may not be ready by that age to pursue such options.

As Musabende concludes: "Who defines what age is really has a lot of power and I think it's the kind of discussion we should be able to have without just seeing it as a scholarly amusement."