



National Council for Voluntary  
Youth Services  
2 Plough Yard  
Shoreditch High Street  
London EC2A 3LP  
Tel: 020 7422 8630  
Fax: 020 7422 8631  
Minicom: 020 7422 8632  
Email: [mail@ncvys.org.uk](mailto:mail@ncvys.org.uk)  
Web: [www.ncvys.org.uk](http://www.ncvys.org.uk)

Registered charity no. 1093386  
Registered company no. 4385383

Changemakers Foundation Ltd  
Baybrook Farm  
Lower Godney  
Near Wells  
Somerset BA5 1RZ  
Tel: 01458 834767  
Fax: 01458 830588  
Email: [info@changemakers.org.uk](mailto:info@changemakers.org.uk)  
Web: [www.changemakers.org.uk](http://www.changemakers.org.uk)

Registered charity no. 1086178  
Registered company no. 4143956

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# Does Youth Action Pay?

## An Evaluation of Action Pays

Ruth Evans, Suzanne Clisby,  
Rachel Alsop and Gary Craig

University of Hull  
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"All too often we tend to talk too much about young people as a problem. We've got to get away from that completely and look at how young people can be part of the solutions in our local communities. The Action Pays projects are a very important positive and constructive example of how it can be done."

**Stephen Twigg, Minister for Young People and Learning**



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## I: The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), Changemakers and Action Pays

Action Pays was a three-year programme, established in 1999 and funded initially by the National Lotteries Charities Board, now renamed the Community Fund. The scheme was proposed and managed by the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) and Changemakers with the aims of encouraging and supporting youth-led community action. It has been executed through a wide range of different organisational contexts. The 19 organisations which contributed to the programme are all autonomous charitable organisations, some of them long-standing national charities working within the general field of youth work, others regional or local organisations which agreed to participate in the scheme.

NCVYS was established in 1936 with the aim of providing a co-ordinated voice for voluntary organisations assisting young people in their personal and social development. From an initial base of 11 founders, the NCVYS now comprises a network of over 150 national, regional and local member organisations. Changemakers is a national support network founded in 1994 by three national agencies, CSV Education, the National Youth Agency and Student Partnerships Worldwide. One central aim was to demonstrate a new approach to young people's community involvement that encourages and supports youth-led community projects in schools and youth clubs. Changemakers enables young people aged 11 to 25 actively to engage in society through designing projects which they themselves manage, help to resource, and review.

Youth-led community action is one of a range of methods (others include youth councils and youth forums) to facilitate young people's more active participation in their local communities (see Section III below). All share the general aim of supporting young people to understand and exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens. In addition to providing opportunities for young people to develop their own projects within voluntary youth organisations, a key aim of Action Pays has been to document and further develop 'good practice' in youth-led voluntary sector work.

Action Pays, aimed at young people between the ages of 14 and 25, was built upon the Gimme 5 pilot scheme launched in 1998 which specifically targeted ten groups of young men and challenged them to set up and manage their own projects of benefit to local communities. Action Pays was an attempt at scaling up this pilot initiative, focusing on both young men and young women, with a special emphasis on encouraging young people facing disadvantage. The scheme incorporated the following key elements:

- Small cash awards given to approximately 1000 groups over a two-year period, giving young people an opportunity to get involved and develop their own skills whilst benefiting the wider community.
- Changemakers would provide training and support for those working with young people to ensure that youth organisations adopted a youth-led approach and good facilitation methods.
- Celebration of achievements of young people who are participating and signposting them on to further opportunities to enable them to take responsibilities as young citizens and to develop their leadership skills.

The particular aims of the Action Pays programme were to work with projects to support young people to plan and manage their own work; to identify factors which helped to develop and sustain good practice; and to encourage young people to develop the skills and confidence to plan and manage their own work. This was done by:

- training facilitators;
- providing relevant written training and other materials;
- the provision of small grants directly to young people's projects (through local projects participating in the programme);
- organising important milestone events including reviews and celebrations;
- organising a youth reference group to act as advisor to the scheme as a whole.

The Youth Reference Group was made up of around fifteen young people from Gateshead, Scotland, Hull, Coventry, Wales, Northern Ireland and London who participated in publicity and promotion of the scheme, training, review and celebration events and acted in an advisory role to the management group, and Action Pays generally.

Changemakers identified 14 key 'enterprise skills' which the experience of young people working in small groups to design and manage a project can help develop. These skills were the ability to:

- assess strengths and weaknesses;
- work effectively in a team;
- seek information and advice when it is needed;
- make decisions;
- plan, taking into account the time, resources and help that are available;
- carry through an agreed responsibility;
- negotiate successfully to achieve your aims;
- deal with people in power and authority;
- solve problems that are a barrier to progress;
- resolve conflict within the group or between the group and others that they are dealing with;
- cope with stress and tension;
- evaluate performance and reflect on achievements;
- communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally (communication skills);
- make an effective presentation of plans or proposals to others (presentation skills).

## II: The Action Pays Evaluation: Aims, Scope and Methodology

In order to ensure that lessons for future good practice are effectively recognised and disseminated, an integral aspect of Action Pays has been an ongoing evaluation of the scheme. As part of this broad commitment to research, a research team from the Departments of Gender Studies and Social Policy at the University of Hull contributed to this evaluation between February and September 2002 by conducting research, principally amongst the young people and project workers involved in Action Pays, aimed at addressing the following key questions:

- Has Action Pays met its aims and were these aims shared widely amongst participants?
- What factors have helped or hindered the meeting of these aims?
- What are the elements of good practice for supporting this work?
- How can this work successfully be sustained and disseminated?
- What are the major learning points for the different parties involved in the programme?

Between 1999 and 2002, Action Pays has worked through 19 organisational settings. For evaluative purposes, and taking into consideration logistical constraints, the following report is based on detailed research conducted within seven case-study projects and more general data collection from all participating organisations. The organisations which were the focus for the evaluation and which formed the basis of the case-study sample were selected on the basis of key variables, namely: geographical setting and location of the organisation, specific population groups, policy arenas and local contextual factors.

Within this, the urban-rural dimension was a key variable to be factored in. Recent studies of rural poverty and access to services suggests that poverty – in the broadest sense of an inability to participate fully in society – needs to be thought about rather differently within rural as compared with urban areas (Craig and Manthorpe 2000; Alsop *et al.* 2002). Furthermore, recent studies conducted by Hull University examining the position of young women within regeneration schemes (Alsop *et al.* 2001), and the experiences of young women and young parents in rural areas (Clisby and Craig 2001; Evans *et al.* 2002), both identify the importance of a gendered perspective in evaluations such as this, and confirm the issue of rurality as significant in shaping people's access to services and decision-making processes.

In addition to these factors, specific population groups, such as young people with physical or learning disabilities, and young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds were identified as important groups to be included in the case study sample, since these groups are frequently overlooked by 'whole population studies', and therefore required a specific and explicit focus.

The evaluation aimed to reflect these various considerations throughout the methodological process. The first stage of the research involved a mapping and contextual phase, with data collected from participating organisations via a detailed postal questionnaire supplemented where necessary by telephone interviews. This enabled the collection of relatively in-depth information concerning:

- the scope of work undertaken by the various voluntary organisations;
- the range of policy contexts within which work was being undertaken;

- whether any specific groups of young people were being targeted;
- structures and frameworks for the researchers to make direct contact with young people;
- progress towards developing an evaluative framework locally;
- suggestions for nodes of good practice which might be the subject of particular investigation.

From this process, and in consultation with the programme management group, a sample of seven schemes were chosen to reflect a range of variables as outlined above. Between April and August 2002 each of the seven selected case-study organisations were involved in the more detailed qualitative research. This involved the primary fieldwork researcher, Ruth Evans, visiting the case study projects and facilitating ten focus groups (in most cases, mixed gender groups) with young people participating in the Action Pays scheme. It is methodologically significant to note that the primary researcher is herself a young woman from a rural background. A total of 55 young people between the ages of 10 to 31 participated in the focus groups, but with the majority being aged between 14 and 20. The focus group discussions were then followed up with additional individual interviews with young people leading the projects, project workers, co-ordinators, and managers, NCVYS's Youth Participation Development Officer (the project worker for Action Pays), the Chief Executive of NCVYS and member of the Action Pays Management Group, and three members of the Action Pays Youth Reference Group.

The organisations selected for the detailed focus groups and in-depth interviews were as follows.

### ● **Project 82, Littlehampton, West Sussex**

Project 82 is a member of the Voluntary Organisations Liaison Group (VOLG) in West Sussex which acts as a support network to youth projects in the area. Project 82 was established in 1997 with funding from an Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) partnership with the town council. The Project runs a drop-in centre for young people in Littlehampton, West Sussex. The idea behind Project 82 was to provide information, advice, free internet access and IT, and a free counselling service, described as *'an informal, friendly, safe drop-in centre for young people to relieve boredom, come off the streets, to run as an alternative to what's on offer to young people'* (Project 82 Worker, 2002). It was originally aimed at 13 to 18 year olds but broadened the age range from 8 to 20 years due to demand from children and young people from this wider age range.

Action Pays was primarily used to support a group of young men who used the drop-in centre and who were coming towards the end of their schooling with no definite plans. They had a keen interest in music and wanted to buy their own mixing desk and equipment. The initial Action Pays grant of £80 enabled the group to set up their DJ project and from there gain additional funding and support from, for example, the town council, Southern FM and Southern Water. Through the scheme, the young people aimed to buy the music equipment, learn to mix, work the decks and show other youth groups how to do it.

### ● **Praxis Young Refugee Arts Programme, London**

The research focused on two groups within the Praxis programme, La Nueva Generacion Latin American youth group, and Umubano Youth Rwandan youth group, led by young refugees. The New Generation Project Latin American youth group was established in 1997 by a female Colombian refugee. Her idea was to create a space where young refugees could develop their abilities and could express their feelings through different art forms – music, painting, drama and dance. The Latin American youth group involves approximately 25 to 30 men and women aged between 17 and 31 who

used the Action Pays scheme to enable them to develop arts projects within the framework of Saturday arts workshops. These provide a meeting point for young refugees every week, who then at the same time learn new skills. The Action Pays start-up grant was used, for example, to develop a photography project, to perform and exhibit their work in quarterly reviews, and to develop a training scheme for older participants to pass on skills to younger children.

The Rwandan youth group began in 2000 with the aim of bringing together young Rwandan refugees aged 14 to 25, although the group now also includes some younger children, in order to develop their creativity and help them feel part of society. As with the Latin American youth project, the Umubano Youth project also runs Saturday workshops such as dance, music and art. The Action Pays grant was used to teach younger Rwandan children about Rwanda through songs and art, *'to give them memories of our beautiful land, our beautiful country, Rwanda, because most of them were born in exile'* (Marie Lyse, youth group co-ordinator). Action Pays was also used to help with materials, transport etc. to develop an art project in preparation for Refugee Day in June 2002 (see Case Study, Section IV: Praxis Young Refugee Arts Programme, for further detail).

### ● Fairbridge West Midlands, Birmingham

Fairbridge works with inner city young people, men and women, aged 14 to 25, who may have been identified as having behavioural or emotional difficulties, to build confidence and skills. Some young people are referred by external agencies as in need of support, other participants self-refer. The young people stay for any period of up to two years. *'It depends what they're here for, if they've just come because school's had enough of them so they're throwing them out, then we don't have them for long, some young people come and are involved in the actual ethos and understand what it's all about, and work on different issues...'* (Fairbridge Project Worker, 2002). Residential and outdoor activities programmes are offered following an action planning process where young people identify their own issues to work on with project workers on a one-to-one, confidential basis. The courses then correspond to the issues identified, such as literacy or confidence-building. Action Pays was used to develop a magazine project and to develop skills in photography, recording interviews, literacy, using IT and digital cameras. They also developed a woodwork project which was expanded into more general arts and crafts activities because of the young people's interests.

### ● Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London

Fitzrovia is a community-based youth action project working with young people mainly from Bengali and Pakistani backgrounds. The group was started as a grassroots community development initiative in 1997 with the aim of getting young people to take responsibility for their area, their parks, and become involved in community action such as planting small gardens or organising community meals. Two different age groups of predominantly young men (13 to 16 years, and 16 to 18 years) participated in Action Pays, although there is a small girls' group (four or five members) which meets on a separate day from the boys. Action Pays was used to further facilitate the young people's involvement in community projects, such as conducting a peer research project on drug and alcohol use, planning football tournaments, such as the Camden Community Cup, and other community events. The younger boys participating in the evaluation had recently become involved in project planning for forthcoming community events, including a four-day residential at Trafford Hall, which involved groups of young people from all over the UK and focused on developing organisational skills.

- **Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, Scotland**

A member of the Prince's Trust Highlands and Islands, Scotland, this is a youth-led grant allocation scheme for young people's projects and organisations in the area. Led by young people involved with setting up the Elgin Youth Café, Moray Youth Bank assesses grant applications made by young people and organisations working with young people within the local community according to criteria agreed by the young people and allocates grants that will be of benefit to the community, particularly young people. As well as participating in Action Pays, young people leading Moray Youth Bank have received training in skills development and support in setting up and managing the youth bank from the national Youth Bank pilot scheme. Community projects which received grants from the Moray Youth Bank include: a task force of young people who help local residents with community work, a group of young fire cadet members, a local homeless project, and an American football club for young people.

- **Gateshead Youth Assembly, Gateshead**

This is a youth-led grant allocation scheme for young people's projects and organisations in the area, with young people on the Youth Executive assessing grant applications according to their own defined criteria. One example of the small youth-led community projects facilitated by the Action Pays grants featured a group of ten young people with learning difficulties planning and developing a community garden project as part of a pre-NVQ course. This project brought them together with other students from ethnic minority backgrounds engaged in the ESOL course at the Further Education College. Other grants were used by, for example, another group of students with learning difficulties in college to organise a disco, by a group of girls and young women to buy equipment for a girls' football club, and for young people attending a youth club to organise an event providing lunches for older people. (see Case Study Section IV: Gateshead Youth Assembly for further detail).

- **FOCUS Challenge Club, Cooper School, Bicester, and Community Challenge Stage of Interaction Programme, Leicester**

FOCUS brings together different groups of young people, including some who are physically disabled and some with learning difficulties, and others at risk of social exclusion, in a range of projects aimed primarily at developing self-confidence, communication and team-building skills. The young people participating in the evaluation comprised teams of young people, men and women, between the ages of 14 and 20, who planned, budgeted and managed their own small-scale projects for the benefit of other groups within the community, supported by FOCUS team advisors. Examples included fundraising activities for a children's ward at the local hospital, organising such events as a village fete, a sponsored sports evening, a disco for young people and a bingo afternoon for older people in a residential home (see Case Study Section IV: Focus, for further detail).

Thus, as outlined above, the groups selected for detailed examination reflected as far as possible the diversity of youth organisations within Action Pays. The focus groups with young participants were held in confidence in the absence of youth workers and local professionals, and where appropriate with volunteers to support young people with learning difficulties. The focus groups aimed to explore with the young people their perceptions of a number of evaluative issues such as:

- how they became involved;
- their comments on the process of involvement – what hinders or facilitates their involvement;
- their thoughts about what would constitute successful outcomes;
- how they viewed issues of sustainability;
- how they viewed the most important elements of their involvement: gains made and lessons learned.

The findings from these focus groups and in-depth interviews were then written up into a short report and used for the basis of workshop discussions held at the NCVYS Action Pays national celebration event in August 2002. Both during these workshops and subsequent to this event, the youth participants directly involved in the focus groups and other young people involved in Action Pays were invited to comment on the preliminary findings of the research. These comments have been incorporated into the final report. In accordance with good ethical practice ; unless young participants specifically requested otherwise, all names included in the report have been changed to protect anonymity.

The findings of the evaluative research have been summarised in the following chapters. Before detailing the substantive issues raised by the participants involved in Action Pays, however, it is useful to examine key factors and policy issues raised by work conducted more generally within the arenas of youth action and participation, in order to place these findings within a broader contextual framework.

- \* the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Social Research Association, see [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)



### III: Young People's Involvement in Social Action

#### Introduction

Action Pays sits within a growing body of work which seeks to involve young people in action which encourages and develops their involvement in local communities. The social and political arguments for doing so, for example, as preparation for effective citizenship and to ensure that services and policies are child and young person-sensitive, have been put forward by a range of writers (for example, Lansdown 1995; Wellard *et al.* 1997; Willow 1997; NEF 1998). Within the UK in recent years, notable examples of this are the Action Pays scheme of which this is an evaluation, the Saying Power programme of Save the Children, which has sought to involve young people as community workers under the mentorship of professional workers, and the work of the Children's Society which seeks, through a network of local projects, to involve young people in community development work.

In recent years there has been growing concern expressed in political and public debates about the extent and nature of young people's general involvement in civil society (Save the Children 1997; Eden & Roker 2000, 2002). In particular, anxiety has been voiced that young people are not taking an active enough part in their local communities, and that they are alienated from and uninterested in democratic and decision-making structures. One manifestation of this perceived lack of engagement is their disaffection with formal political processes, evidenced by the particularly low turnout of young voters (and other marginalised social groups) at elections (O'Leary 2001; Eden & Roker 2002).

As Eden and Roker (2002) illustrate, research into young people's participation has tended to focus, rather negatively, on what they are not doing, highlighting especially young people's unfamiliarity with and general mistrust of 'politics'. In contrast, the research undertaken by Eden and Roker themselves concentrates on what young people are doing, taking as a point of focus youth participation in social action groups. Youth social action groups are defined in the research as '*groups of young people (aged 15 to 25), who meet on a regular basis, and who aim to bring about change by influencing policies and practices, either at a local, national, or international level*' (Eden & Roker 2000:16). Crucially, they argue that levels of youth participation are higher than often perceived and those young people involved in social action groups are engaged in a wide range of activities. In contrast to the very negative public images of youth apathy, Eden and Roker paint a much more vibrant picture of youth action. Of the over 400 groups identified in their national review, the activities identified included: traditional campaigning (for example in organisations such as CND, Greenpeace, Amnesty International); environmental action; the promotion of workers rights; participation in youth councils; peer education groups (organised often around issues of sexual health, drug and alcohol misuse); campaigns directed at inequality issues (related to gender, sexuality, disability, race); and groups focusing on community-based issues, such as crime prevention (Ibid.:17).

Within the auspices of 'youth social action' Eden and Roker identified a mixture of stable, established groups and less stable groups, the latter of which they suggest are '*operating at the 'edges' of social action, where group membership and group existence are fluid and changing, where groups start, collapse, and start again, and where funding and adult facilitation are only periodically available*' (2002:26). This fluidity is characteristic of youth participation in other areas. In community regeneration work, for example, a much faster turnover of members in youth groups has been identified compared to adult community groups (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 1998). The fluidity and instability of some social action groups has contributed to their lack of visibility in research and policy documents. The groups are often known about locally and form an important and essential role in young people's political and social

participation/education, yet receive little attention in policy documentation or from national decision-makers. This gap not only serves to reinforce the stereotype of young people's political and social apathy that abounds in political discourse but also inhibits the scope of policy-making to be influenced and underpinned by young people's experience and opinions. This point is reiterated in the Save the Children report *All Together Now* (1997) which argues that whilst children and young people are involved in a lot of activities in their local communities, their scope to participate in collective decision-making within the community is severely limited as a result of adult attitudes and structures. They are neither encouraged to participate nor is the infrastructure in place to facilitate their participation.

## Why involve young people?

Driving the general concern about the level of young people's involvement in society has been a growing recognition publicly and politically of the value of listening to and including young people in social activities and decision-making processes. Research and policy documents widely recognise that there are important political, social and moral reasons for promoting the greater integration of children and young people in their local and wider communities (Save the Children 1997; Willow 1997; Craig 2000; Matthews 2001). Benefits are identified in the following areas:

- young people learn key skills, improve their self-esteem and acquire a greater responsibility for their environment;
- society benefits from the insights and ideas of young people;
- democracy is strengthened and enhanced by involving young people (Save the Children 1997: 11; Matthews 2001).

As Wade *et al.* (2001) recognise, young people's involvement presents benefits not only to the young people themselves, but also to the service providers and the wider community.

In terms of the moral and legal rights of children and young people some important steps have been made over the past two decades, although there is still considerable ground to cover. A key development was the publication of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was ratified (although not in its entirety – for example children of refugees remain excluded from its provisions) by the UK government in 1991. Importantly, the UNCRC identifies the right of children (and by implication young people) to express their views on matters which affect them and for their views to be taken on board (Article 12) (see e.g. Craig 2000:13; Wade *et al.* 2001:2). Whilst many organisations have taken on board the principles of the UNCRC in their work, the convention is not itself legally binding in the UK but instead sets out a range of principles from which to work. Its strength is in bringing to the fore the issue of children's rights and society's legal and moral responsibility to promote them. There has been some criticism of the UK for failing to adequately comply with or to promote the principles of the UNCRC. Save the Children has, for example, voiced concern over the government's 'piecemeal' approach to children's rights. Madeleine Tearse, Policy Adviser for Save the Children (UK) comments that: *'For too long children have been treated as the 'not yet' generation but they have rights as the citizens of today. All too often children are not involved in the decisions that affect them'* (Tearse cited in Matthews 2001:27). However, some progress has been made in the UK at government level. A Policy Action Team for Young People was set up by the Social Exclusion Unit as part of the government's efforts to address neighbourhood renewal. The resulting report includes as one of its recommendations that *'All government departments and agencies whose work has a significant impact on young people should have a policy of consulting and involving them in policy development and service delivery which affects them'* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000:81).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The rights of children and young people are confirmed further in the European Convention on Human Rights which came into force in the UK in October 2000 (Wade *et al.* 2001:2).

## Children as social actors: the growing theoretical and political debate

The theoretical background to the study was the work of the new interdisciplinary fields of childhood studies within the social sciences, and growing understanding of the important role that community development approaches can play in empowering young people and children to relate to the policy process, understanding which, as noted, has now been acknowledged by key policy-makers and has itself informed the development of recent government initiatives such as the Children's Fund and the Local Network Fund. Indeed, the formation of the Children and Young People's Unit, which emerged from the recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit PAT 12 Report (see below) is a very clear message that the government is strongly committed to enhancing the role of children and young people as policy actors in their own right (see [www.cypu.gov.uk](http://www.cypu.gov.uk) for an outline of the Unit's general aims and the specific goals of the Children's Fund and the Local Network Fund).

Childhood studies (covering the whole period prior to full adulthood) has as its core a conception of children as social actors and as active participants in society, something which again appears central to the aims and aspirations of the Children's Fund, for example. The seeds of this research approach were sown in the late 1970s when questions were raised about the validity of traditional socialisation approaches to understanding children's needs and perspectives. It was then argued that, in both research and policy, children's own engagement with the social world and active participation had, in the past, been at best underplayed and at worst ignored. The cause of this was, it was suggested, the prominence given to traditional developmental theories of children's needs and well-being. These meant that children and young people were seen as passive and their outcomes largely determined by the process of developmental change over which they had little, if any, control. Such a view rendered children and young people as simply bystanders to their own socialisation, ignoring their potential as active contributors to the social world. What was needed therefore, it was argued, was an alternative approach to understanding childhood, one which acknowledged the diversity of children and young people's social experiences and competencies and which, thereby, enabled children to be positioned as active, rather than passive, players in the shaping of their everyday lives.

For example, within the developmental psychological literature upon which much social and policy research was based, the mother-infant dyad was emphasised as the critical factor in children's wellbeing, with correspondingly the significance of children's social relationships with other family members and friends accorded relatively little importance (Burman 1994). That such ideas came to permeate not only research but also policy agendas meant that children and young people's interests were often taken, unproblematically, as synonymous with those of their parents. As Qvortrup has argued, 'this problem arises not because of ill-will, but is rather a problem of the sociology of knowledge in the sense that adults are often intoxicated with the view of children as dependants and themselves as fair representatives of children. Adults simply 'forget' to raise other perspectives. It is more or less taken for granted that 'what is good for the family is good for the child' (1990:87). Thus, in social work, for example, Bowlby's theory concerning children's needs and the impact of maternal deprivation on children's futures provided a base-line agenda for intervention in terms of their welfare, despite as Woodhead (1990) argues, there being a large question mark as to the extent to which such 'needs' are innate and/or culturally universal.

It was, therefore, against such universalising perspectives that the new paradigm of the 1970s argued for acknowledgement of the significance of culture as mediating children and young people's experiences of growing up in the social world (Prout and James 1990). This, it was suggested, produces a diversity, rather than a commonality, of 'childhoods' and therefore raises important questions about the applicability of applying universal developmentally-based models when endeavouring to understand the everyday lives and social experiences of children and young people in and between a range of different social settings. And in thus freeing children and young people

from the deterministic constraints of developmentally-based models of socialisation, children and young people's competence as social actors was no longer called into question. This, in turn, opened up the possibility that children and young people might have their own somewhat different views and perspectives on the social world which needed to be attended to if children's needs were to be adequately met. This separation of adult and children's perspectives is a key theoretical element informing this evaluation: young people have the right to express their views and take action free from the mediating perspectives of parents and adults, although this has to be within recognised parameters of safety and risk.

This shift in thinking in research about children and young people has, in recent years, led to a significant increase in interest from government and other bodies in the policy field in the idea of actively involving children and young people in the re-development of civic society. Alongside and prior to the Local Network Fund, many of these schemes have the intention of encouraging children and young people's participation in the community and, through processes of empowerment, to assist especially those children and young people whose access to resources is limited. Such developments are encouraging and clearly in line with the research perspectives described above and with the growing recognition of children's rights more generally, following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and parallel developments in domestic legislation, such as the Children Act 1989. However, in order that children's participation is effective and their own views are able to be heard, such initiatives have needed to be grounded in the practical lessons found in research conducted with, rather than on children.

For example, one issue which Action Pays (and other schemes such as the Local Network Fund) was concerned to address is that of young people's participation in order to promote their empowerment as members of the community. However, it cannot necessarily be assumed that children and young people share with adults the same sense of what is important to the notion of community. Age and generation can, alongside factors such as ethnicity and class, intervene to provide rather different understandings of ideas of community and what is important to people as members of the community (Hendrick, Scott and Laurier 1999). Similarly, the idea of children's needs has been extensively questioned in research which argues that, although there are clearly human needs which all people share, whether young or old, so-called child-specific needs have to be contextualised within the norms of particular cultural settings. As Woodhead has argued, the universalising claims that developmental theory traditionally holds over children sanctions a 'spurious veneer of coherence on diverse childhood realities' and that what are often taken as 'fundamental needs are actually about socially, constructed, contextual needs' (1996:8-9). A further requirement when conducting research with children and young people is that the techniques and content should vary for the different age groups to ensure that young respondents feel relaxed and confident and able to resist compliance with the dominant or normative views of their peers.

Thus, with respect to children's needs, exactly what is social and particular, and what biological and universal, may, in practice, be rather hard to disentangle in any particular context. The research reported here attempted to acknowledge this need to adjust the research process to the cultural and age-specific context of the groups interviewed.

In general, tackling such problems requires child- and young people-centred methodologies which will not only allow children and young people's voices to be heard but also ensure that the insights which children can provide are incorporated and acted upon. It is important, therefore, that research techniques are empowering for children, in terms of their effectiveness in respect of both immediate actions and long-term capacity-building. As Connolly and Ennew (1996) note, the concept of 'child-centred methods' covers a huge range and levels of participation, only some of which may facilitate capacity- building among children and young people. Our aim here was, both through the workshops

with young people and their opportunities to feedback comments on draft findings from the study, and through proposals in this report (and the accompanying executive summary) to privilege the views of young people as far as possible.

Hart's (1992) ladder of participation depicts the gamut of possibilities of children's involvement and participation - from tokenism and manipulation at one end, via different forms of active participation in research and community projects through to projects which are initiated and controlled by children. Only the higher levels of participation - such as adult-initiated, shared decisions with children - can be truly be seen as empowering for, as Johnson *et al.* wryly observe, one key obstacle to 'developing children and young people's participation is the behaviour of adults' (1998:297). All too often, children's views can become marginalised 'especially if their views run counter to those of the adult majority' (ibid.:298). Within the context of this evaluation, one major structural difficulty the team faced was that of being drawn into the evaluation at a relatively late stage of the study. It was therefore not open to the evaluators to have more than a relatively small input into this process of empowerment and that is an important lesson for future evaluations of community development work with children and young people.

Where this fuller engagement is possible, the particular contribution of community development is to provide techniques and a value base which privileges the active participation of 'communities' (in this case communities of children and young people). The techniques and approaches developed are tailored to the needs of young people of differing ages, understanding and experience. A review of work with children and young people within this empowering paradigm (Craig 2000) suggests that there are few areas of social and public policy where children and young people, appropriately addressed and supported, cannot engage effectively with the policy process, broadly defined. Craig's global review incorporates instances not only of familiar and relatively 'safe' areas of policy such as transport, leisure, planning and the environment but also complex and potentially dangerous areas of policy including community safety, poverty and working in areas of conflict and the present evaluation provided interesting and challenging examples of a range of policy contexts.

## How involved are young people?

In understanding this kind of work, a balance needs to be struck between the following two positions:

- On the one hand, the commonly-expressed view that young people as a group are politically apathetic and are totally alienated from and uninterested in social and political issues. This viewpoint is overly negative and sidelines and devalues the impressive range of activities young people are involved in locally, nationally and internationally.
- On the other hand, despite the sometimes impressive levels of collective organisation amongst young people, many young people are not involved in any form of social or community action work. Moreover, those that are involved tend to be marginalised within formal decision-making processes and stand on the peripheries of mainstream political and social action. Often the social action in which young people are involved is not perceived by the young people themselves as 'political'. Politics for the majority of young people conjures up a rather narrow image of party politics, elections and parliaments (Eden & Roker 2002) and excludes particularly the more informal social action work. Furthermore, there is a clear lack of interaction between the type of social action work many young people are involved in and the realm of policy-making and more mainstream political action.

In short, whilst some young people are very active in their local communities and are organising collectively around a varied range of issues (locally, nationally and internationally) young people still tend to be excluded from the heart of decision-making, with their views and opinions largely unheeded by key policy-makers and practitioners.

The extent and nature of young people's participation in more mainstream social action can differ enormously with varying effects on the benefits to them of their participation. Hart, as noted, famously identified eight rungs of young people's participation (Save the Children 1997; O'Leary 2001; Craig 2000; Matthews 2001).

- **Manipulation** – children/young people follow adult instructions without any real comprehension of the issues involved.
- **Decoration** – children/young people take part in an event, again without any real comprehension of the purpose of their involvement.
- **Tokenism** – children/young people are asked their opinions but have little control over the questions asked or how they express their views.
- **Assigned but informed** – children/young people take part in a project which has been designed by adults. They understand who has made the decisions and why.
- **Consulted and informed** – whilst adults come up with the initial idea and design and run the project, children/young people are consulted in the planning and implementation of the project.
- **Adult initiated** – projects are conceived by adults but decisions are shared with children/young people.
- **Child initiated and directed** – project conceived and run by children/young people.
- **Equal partnership** – children/young people initiate and set up project, then involve adults in decision-making processes as equal partners.

Within Action Pays, the overall framework was not determined by young people themselves. However, there were a range of levels of participation within the individual projects themselves, levels which depended on varying local contextual factors including the type of issue addressed, the timeframe of the project, the capacities of the young people and the point at which they were brought into discussions about projects. O'Leary (2001) suggests that Hart's hierarchy of participation implies that all participation should be on the highest rungs, indeed that this high level of involvement is the ideal to which we should all aspire. However, this stance neglects the issue of young people's choice as to the degree to which they participate. Some young people – as we found within Action Pays to some degree - may not want to take full control of a project and may prefer instead a lesser degree of participation. To insist upon participation at the highest level, it could be argued, is not to listen to and take on board the wishes of the young people themselves. As young people will not always want to participate at the highest level it is imperative that a wide range of opportunities to participate are made available, informed by the varied needs, interests and abilities of young people. *'Young people must also have the right not to get involved'* (Wade *et al.*, 2001:6).

However, it is clear from a wide range of research and evaluative studies that the more tokenistic and decorative modes of participation do little to:

- enhance young people's wellbeing and skills;
- bring young people's opinions and expertise to bear on the decisions made;
- re-draw systems and structures of decision-making. The status quo remains unchallenged.

Indeed, the more detached modes of youth participation can potentially produce negative consequences. Alsop *et al.* (2001), in an analysis of young women's participation in urban regeneration programmes, noted that many young women were potentially deterred from further involvement in community regeneration work by their negative experiences of consultation exercises (often a tokenistic form of participation). Some young women felt let down by the consultation processes, which had failed to feedback information to them or produce tangible results.

## Barriers to effective participation

A number of key barriers to young people's effective participation in social action work have been identified and include:

### 1. Older people's attitudes towards young people.

Whilst there has been growing recognition in political and public discourse that young people should be better involved in social and political decision-making, resistance to their greater participation is still evident. Here generational difference is significant. Older members of the community often act as gatekeepers to young people's participation, policing the extent to which, and the nature of, their involvement. For many older people, young people's participation is perceived more as a privilege than a right (Matthews 2001:19). Doubt is also cast upon young people's capabilities to take part, with many older adults sceptical of young people's ability to take on the responsibilities and to exercise the skills needed in the initiation and running of social action programmes. Additionally, there is no consensus on the manner in which young people should be incorporated with many of older adults who hold power reluctant to hand over any of their responsibilities to young people. What such attitudes fail to take into account is the importance of cultivating the skills and responsibilities to be effective and involved members of the community from an early stage in the life-course – as Matthews argues, *'democratic responsibility does not suddenly arise in adulthood'* (Matthews 2001:24). Fitzpatrick *et al.* (1998) note in their research the problems of intergenerational conflict in securing younger people's involvement in community regeneration work, with marked differences in the aspirations and attitudes of young people and adults evident. However, they also note rather encouragingly that where young people had become successfully involved this had had a positive impact on the opinions of councillors, officials and community workers over young people's capabilities to take part in decision-making.

### 2. Infrastructural and organisational rigidity.

Young people's effective participation is contingent upon an appropriate infrastructure being in place to ensure the continuous rather than ad hoc involvement of young people in mainstream social and political action. Wade *et al.* (2001) argue that for too long young people's participation has been informed by a 'bolt-on' rather than a 'built-in' approach. In other words, young people have been an add-on to existing programmes and processes, with the consequence that the *'culture and practices of the rest of the organisation remain untouched'* (Wade *et al.* 2001:14). The involvement of young people is thus reliant upon the motivation and will of particular people and projects being in place and vulnerable to disappearance if these are removed.

Research on young people's involvement in community regeneration programmes indicates that the formal, bureaucratic nature of regeneration organisations, the slow, cumbersome nature of project implication and the vast quantities of red tape are all off-putting for younger people (Alsop *et al.* 2001, Fitzpatrick *et al.* 1998, Matthews 2001). Even when young people are formally included in the organisational structure they are still often excluded from the key arenas of networking and decision-making. As Fitzpatrick *et al.* note *'the evidence from the case studies [SRB projects] suggests the danger that young people appear to be offered power, then find themselves with very little, as negotiation and decision-making takes place behind the scenes'* (cited in Matthews 2001:182).

### 3. Lack of resources.

To initiate the more effective involvement of young people in mainstream democratic processes involves not only the will and motivation of key individuals and

organisations, the consensus of the wider community and the appropriate strategies in place to provide the correct infrastructural support, but also the adequate financial resourcing of such strategies. Within the arena of urban regeneration funding, for example, Alsop *et al.* (2001) found that of the overall resources available through Single Regeneration Budgets (SRBs), relatively little funding actually filtered down to the community level, and of that, the amounts actually targeted specifically at youth-oriented projects, or youth participation in community development, was even less significant.

#### 4. Attitudes and Aspirations of Young People.

Many young people do lack the self-confidence and/or motivation to get involved in social action programmes. Others may lack the knowledge and information on how to get involved (Craig 2000; Alsop *et al.* 2001; Matthews 2001). Here, long-term capacity building is vital, starting as early as possible in the life-course with the aim to build confidence, skills and interest. As Matthews stresses '*Promoting self-esteem, and a sense of greater control over their lives by enabling participation, is part of this developing agenda*' (2001:183). Importantly, projects should involve young people from inception and work at a pace, which is appropriate to the needs and abilities of the young people involved (Craig 2000). Many adults may be unfamiliar with working with young people and capacity-building and skills training for older adults can be as vital as that for the young people themselves.

### Taking into account the diversity of young people

Young people do not form a neat, homogenous group. Their experiences are varied and are influenced by a range of social factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, family background, able-bodiedness, locality, class and age. To ensure the effective collective participation of young people, it is widely recognised that the opinions and participation of all groups of young people are needed, including the opinions and participation of the most marginalised and disadvantaged (Save the Children 1997; O'Leary 2001). The views of the more articulate and socially advantaged should not be taken as representative of all young people nor their involvement sought at the expense of other young people. In our choice of case study projects, we were anxious to ensure a good representation of young people from more disadvantaged or marginalised groups.

Additionally, there is a danger that young people's participation is only coveted in connection with 'youth' issues instead of with a broader range of issues. Eileen O'Leary's comments in relation to the participation of children are equally pertinent to that of young people more generally (2001:22).

*'Those children who are most often excluded from the activities of mainstream society by disability, homelessness or poverty are, therefore those children whose voices are least likely to be heard in decision-making . Further, when young people in these situations are included and asked for their views it can be on the basis of the very issues which exclude them. This means that disabled young people are asked about their disability, homeless young people are asked about their homelessness and so on [ ... ]. Efforts must be made to reach these young people and to include them in decision-making in the whole spectrum of issues.'*

As Craig (2000) notes, more research is needed on the implications of ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality on young people's participation in community development work. Eden and Roker (2002) observe different patterns of participation for young men and young women in social action work. Overall, slightly more young women than young men were involved in the social action groups. Whilst peer education work appeared more acceptable for young women, young men appeared to be attracted more by organisations such as youth councils, which many felt had a more 'masculine'

image (2002:22), perhaps being seen as the stuff of 'real politics'. Interestingly, Eden and Roker's work counters the predominant perception of social action work being primarily the domain of the white, middle-classes, reporting instead membership that crossed '*a range of localities, social backgrounds, and ethnicities*' (2002:14).

In conclusion, therefore, over the past few years increasing work has been developed which examines the extent and nature of young people's involvement in civil society, community development and effective decision-making. From this, and as outlined above, a range of recommendations and guidelines as to best practice, obstacles to effective participation, and ways forward for the future have been developed and the level of interest within government at both local and national levels is probably now higher than it has ever been. It is, then, within this broader contextual framework that the present Action Pays evaluation should be placed and to which it can make a further contribution. With this context and broader summary in mind, what follows is a detailed overview of the key issues and questions raised throughout the course of the research conducted specifically within the Action Pays scheme.



## IV: What Works in Youth-Led Community Action? The Action Pays Programme

### Introduction

As described earlier, Action Pays is concerned with young people's participation in successful, sustainable, youth-led community action projects. As an aspect of this scheme, this evaluation aims to identify examples of best practice and key factors which facilitate successful outcomes. In particular, it focuses on the learning about how to involve young people in youth-led community action projects at the grassroots level, in order to determine successful 'outcomes' from the young people's perspectives. This section thus presents key findings from the primary qualitative data collection in the form of key summary points and supporting quotes from both focus group discussions with young participants and individual interviews. The following themes are used to analyse the findings:

- getting started;
- staying involved;
- factors which help young people's participation;
- factors which hinder;
- gains made and lessons learned – by young people and project workers;
- sustainability;
- suggested improvements; and
- determining successful outcomes.

The section concludes by examining some detailed project case studies.

### Getting started

- Most of the young people who participated in Action Pays were already involved in activities with voluntary organisations and youth clubs and heard about the grants offered by Action Pays through youth workers, publicity materials, or through contact with NCVYS. This is an important insight; future schemes will need to consider how to reach young people who are not already engaged in some way.
- Some young people simply got together with friends and applied for a grant, having seen posters and leaflets at college, or at a youth information shop at school.
- Young people's expectations of the scheme centred on having fun, helping the community, gaining new skills and experience, enabling them to develop larger projects, and furthering their personal development:

*'To organise something and do it for the community'*

*'To get us more confident'*

*'To do better stuff and get more funding and do bigger things'*

*'To bring people together'*

*(four young men, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 12-14, ethnic background: Asian British)*

- Young people stressed the need for supportive youth workers, who encouraged and motivated the young people to get started:

*'Sarah was the best youth worker ever... She was the one who really got us all started, otherwise we wouldn't have bothered, she was the one who got us to go to the meetings, 'cos if she didn't, I just wouldn't be here now'.*

(Steve, Project 82, VOLG, West Sussex, aged 18, ethnic background: White British)

- Similarly, youth workers stressed the need to facilitate and guide young people, particularly younger ones, more at the beginning of the project:

*'When we started, it was quite a young group, 14, 15, and they needed quite a bit of guidance, and facilitating from behind, working with, alongside [...] to keep them motivated, to keep them focused, because there's been a lot of fun, you don't want to make it too heavy'.*

(Youth worker, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, Scotland)

Participants suggested several ways to encourage more young people to get involved in youth-led community action schemes:

- *'Make the public and community more aware of what youth action is and what it can do'.*  
(Claire, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, Scotland, aged 17, ethnic background: White British)
- *'By doing something that they [young people] all like, you ask them first what they want to do, and then give them what they want to do so they can get more involved'.*  
(Gloria, Umubano Rwandan Youth Group, Praxis, London, aged 16, ethnic background: Black African)

- Several noted that there was a need for good publicity about projects.
- Events in the community, it was suggested, could help make people aware of activities young people could be involved in:

*'When it's spring cleaning day tomorrow, we want to set an example, the young people should come and see what it's like, what we do'.*

(Mushed, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 14, ethnic background: Asian British)

- It was felt there was a need for resources to enable more young people to take part:

*'There are a lot of young people interested in joining the programme for the Latin American Festival, but because we don't have the resources, we can't bring in a lot of people, we don't have the money to do all the workshops we need'.*

(Lida, co-ordinator, New Generation, Praxis, London, aged 25, ethnic background: South American)

## Staying involved

The majority of participants felt that the experience of being involved with the scheme had been very positive for them and that they had learned new skills, such as team work, communication, planning, compromise, listening to and respecting others, gaining in confidence and feeling a sense of achievement in what they had accomplished.

## Factors which help young people's participation

- youth workers who work alongside young people and encourage them;

*'We do all the work but she puts a path down for us to follow, and guides us'.*  
(Nicola, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, aged 16, ethnic background: White Scottish)

*'They just let us do what we wanted, and help out if we ask'.*  
(Jasmine, Gateshead Youth Assembly, aged 15, ethnic background: White British)

This relates to a key tension in this work, allowing young people to develop and act on their ideas but doing so within a framework of safety and drawing on the experience of adults.

- a supportive local council facilitated the Gateshead Youth Assembly and the Youth Council supported the Youth Assembly to develop Action Pays as a young person-led grant allocation scheme;

*'I think we've had just the right level of support actually. Not too much that they're overpowering us, but'.*  
(Kate, Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 14, ethnic background: White British)

- young people learn from each other – those who have already been involved in projects share their experiences and help and advise other young people in planning their projects;

*'The people that's done it before are going to show us a bit of what they did, so we could improve what we do, and that would help us'.*  
(Shvaib, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 14, ethnic background: Asian British)

*'For me, because I have this photography project, so I have quite a lot of experience, so I was giving advice to them, about how to manage it, how to develop it'.*  
(Lida, co-ordinator, New Generation, Praxis, London, aged 25, ethnic background: South American)

- the use of peer volunteers to support young people to plan and carry out their projects in two of the case study projects generally worked well, but there was a need to make sure that 'outsiders' didn't take over;

*'Inevitably, the Millennium Volunteers took over in terms of purchasing the equipment and things like that, because of a lack of skills, really in terms of communication [...]. The volunteers were close to their age group, so that really worked, it's quite essential I think, you need someone close to the group anyway, to actually keep it ticking over. [...] Peer education works really well, and if we do it again, set up a project again, involving a similar thing, it would be best done with peer education and support'.*  
(Project worker, Project 82, West Sussex)

- the original grant level of £80 was restrictive – the enhanced grants level of £100-£200 (available in second year of scheme) enabled young people to carry out their projects more easily;

- there was a need to pay young people's travel expenses to attend meetings;
- projects asking place under the umbrella of a larger organisation benefit the from use of office facilities, telephone, meeting place etc;
- some projects expressed a need for more training in planning projects, fundraising, managing a group etc. but groups mostly learned through experience;

*'Experience has taught us all we know, day by day, we're learning'.*  
(Lida, New Generation, Praxis, London, aged 25, ethnic background: South American)

- young people identified a need for grant application forms to be short, and straightforward, with clear print, in order to be accessible; this was particularly important for people with learning difficulties;

*'The print was a decent one, not slurry, it was a clear print'.*  
(Dave, Gateshead Youth Assembly, aged 20 with learning difficulties, ethnic background: White British)

- it was felt important to consider the use of appropriate technology to communicate and support each other, particularly for those who are geographically isolated in rural areas;

*'We used to do video conferencing, and we used to talk to our fellow youth bankers up in Sutherland about once every two weeks, that was brilliant and we got the facilities free from Moray College, care of Prince's Trust'.*  
(Youth Worker, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin Youth Café)

*'Maybe over the internet, Youth Reference Group could continue to discuss matters if everyone has access to a computer'*  
(Anthony, Youth Reference Group, aged 17, ethnic background: White British)

## Factors which hinder young people's participation

- some expressed a feeling that it is 'uncool' to want to help the community;

*'You're embarrassed about what people think'.*  
(Kate, Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 14, ethnic background: White British)

*N: 'I want to make something for the old people, a chair or something.'*

*RE: 'Do you think you'll suggest that idea to staff?'*

*N: 'No, it's embarrassing, people will take the mick out of me.'*

*RE: 'What, your mates?'*

*N: 'Yeah, they'll think I'm a poof.'*

(Neil, Fairbridge West Midlands, Birmingham, aged 15, ethnic background: White British)

- a lack of commitment and motivation;
- insufficient training;
- lack of support from youth workers;
- lack of confidence;
- time constraints, due to school, college, work commitments, exam pressures, and, for

- some Muslim students, prayer times and Arabic classes after school;
- cost of transport to attend project meetings;
- geographical isolation from other groups in the UK.

## Gains made and lessons learned

### By young people

Young people felt they had made many gains, both personally and collectively.

- Almost all the participants felt that the most important gains made were increased self-confidence, teamwork skills, having fun, co-operation, compromise, listening to others, communication, meeting people and making friends.
- Several projects mentioned gaining organisational skills, experience in managing a small budget, co-ordinating and facilitating others, feeling part of the community.
- Many young people felt a sense of empowerment in having their own responsibilities and their opinions listened to and taken account of by adults, particularly those in authority:

*'You get your shot at independence, becoming not just a young person, but actually someone that is recognised, that we're not just young people, we can actually do things'.*  
(Sarah, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, Scotland, aged 17, ethnic background: White British: Scottish)

*'Doing things without adults telling you what to do'.*  
(Sharon, FOCUS Challenge Club, Bicester, aged 14, ethnic background: White British)

*'It helps us speak up'.*  
(Azam, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 12, ethnic background: Asian British: Pakistani)

*'Getting more adults to trust in our voice'.*  
(Karen, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, Scotland, aged 18, ethnic background: White British: Scottish)

*'We're given more responsibility, people ... heard your opinions, the teachers listen but they don't do it all for you'.*  
(Dave, Gateshead Youth Assembly, aged 20, with learning difficulties, ethnic background: White British)

*'If you're doing something like a party, you feel like you're in charge, because like we did it, we were like in charge of it'.*  
(Kevin, FOCUS Challenge Club, Bicester, aged 13, ethnic background: White British)

*'I think young people feel more confident, and a lot of people have learned that their opinion matters; because people think they're just kids, no-one cares, but people listen to them'.*  
(Kate, Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 14, ethnic background: White British)

*'You learn to challenge things rather than just shouting at them, you can challenge it, and get something out of it, we've learned how to deal with different people, pitch the level, talking to people in authority'.*  
(Lisa, Vice Chair, Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 16, ethnic background: White British)

- Young people felt a great sense of achievement in organising events in the community:

*'We gain confidence... if we manage to achieve, to participate and perform on that date, it's really a big thing for us young people and can be a big success'.*

(Marie Lyse, co-ordinator, Umubano Youth Rwandan group, Praxis, aged 19, ethnic background: Black African)

Young people at Gateshead Youth Assembly and Moray Youth Bank organised successful regional Action Pays celebration events largely on their own, due to a high level of personal commitment and time:

*'We've learned a lot about working with different groups, support work, in terms of planning the regional celebration event, we learnt loads of practical things, it was just such a big job, and we as young people did it on our own, with a little bit of extra help and support'.*

(Lee, chair of Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 17, ethnic background: White British)

*'The celebration events that have happened, the Scottish one and the North of England one, largely happened because of those young people who were active in those areas who were willing to get involved in the planning'.*

(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS)

- The Praxis Arts groups for young refugees played an important role in addressing feelings of isolation and exile from their home countries, as members of the Umubano Youth Rwandan group highlighted:

*'We started with the aim of sharing our skills and potential, so that we can feel close to our new society, as you know, we are refugees from Rwanda, and we really kind of felt like strangers when we came, but when we come together it will renew our hearts, when we sit down and try to create something, or to show we live in this society'.*

(Marie Lyse, co-ordinator, Umubano Youth, Praxis, London, aged 19, ethnic background: Black African)

The New Generation Latin American group felt a strong sense of collective identity and ownership of the project, which motivated them to develop it:

*'It isn't only the skills we get here, it's our relationships, this is the most important thing, we come from very, very conflictive societies, and we have learned here to respect each other, to love each other and respect our differences, because we are all different. I think this is the most positive thing, and now we all feel our project belongs to us, and because it belongs to us, we want to expand it and improve it'.*

(Lida, co-ordinator, New Generation, Praxis, London, aged 25, ethnic background: South American)

- Several young people involved in creative arts projects felt that their involvement in the project offered a way of combating feelings of boredom or worry about their problems, for a while at least:

*'You don't feel so bored, it takes away the reality of life. And I'm more confident around people I don't know'.*

(Neil, Fairbridge West Midlands, Birmingham, aged 15, ethnic background: White British)

- The projects in the North of England and Scotland mentioned that their involvement with Action Pays had given them the opportunity to meet people from different cultural backgrounds, challenging their own perceptions.

A community garden project organised by young people with learning disabilities encouraged them to meet and get to know English for Speakers of Other Languages students at college, changing attitudes:

*'At first I was a bit wary of them [ESOL students] because they're foreign people, but if you understand what problems they have, you kind of feel sorry for them, they're just normal people, but some people, racist people, just don't like them because they're different, but it's not their fault'.*

(Dave, Gateshead Youth Assembly, aged 20 with learning difficulties, ethnic background: White British)

A participant involved in a project which raised money for a trip to Ghana, where a team of young people helped build a school, felt that their own racist attitudes had been challenged:

*'We learned about a different culture, none of us were racist when we came back, we weren't as racist as when we went'.*

(Dan, Gateshead Youth Assembly, aged 19, ethnic background: White British)

- Members of the Youth Reference Group, who were involved mainly with the planning, preparation of materials, organising events and advising the Management Group, valued the sense of responsibility and insight they gained into community projects:

*'It's been fun, because you get an insight into what actually goes on in the community, and it's really hands on because you get to go and visit the projects and make important decisions regarding who gets the money and who doesn't, it's been really cool'.*

(Naomi, Youth Reference Group, aged 19, ethnic background: Black British)

## By project workers

- The role of youth worker was clearly to facilitate and encourage young people, they needed to be able to let them explore in their own way:

*'Don't go in there thinking that we have to come out with adult finished products, young people have to be allowed to design their own product, and you have to take it whatever it looks like, and not to start fiddling about with it, and try to revamp it. You have to accept their level of work and from that encourage them to look at how they may try different things [...] you have to really take a backwards step and encourage them to explore'.*

(Youth Worker, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin)

- However, in practice, it was not always possible to take a completely youth-led approach:

*'The idea with the Action Pays is that young people will take on all the impetus themselves, and that only happens to a certain extent, it's useful to have somebody to facilitate, somebody outside of the young people's group. [...] We try to constantly empower young people to make their own decisions and to help each other, but it depends what context you're doing that in whether it's successful. Also it can be quite apparent, if there isn't anybody in there, then people use bullying tactics and stuff like that, or transfer that over to any setting'.*

(Youth Worker, Fairbridge West Midlands)

- There was a clear need to provide a safe space for young people to experiment, express themselves, gain confidence and skills.
- Facilitation also involves guiding the young people's planning process:

*'They come up with a dozen ideas, then we split into small groups and talk about the ideas, put all the ideas together and then tell them to narrow down which ones they thought are most important or which ones they want to achieve the most. And then they all voted on it, and we kind of fizzled out the ones that were not voted for'.*

(Youth worker, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London)

- Involving young people in projects is an ongoing learning process; because young people are so diverse, each group will be different.
- It is important to recognise and celebrate young people's achievements with celebration events as and when young people are ready rather than within a rigid time-frame, with concrete forms of validation such as certificates offering some kind of accreditation, for example, so that they feel their contribution to the community is valued and acknowledged.
- Enough time should be allowed to promote and publicise the scheme to partner organisations and young people's groups – word of mouth works best.
- It is important to allow time to work with young people and explain management issues carefully, to enable them to make informed decisions, rather than allowing adults with strong opinions to dominate management decisions:

*'It's a bigger issue around youth participation and giving young people more education really around the issues, so that they've got the facts and can make an informed opinion, because what tends to happen if they don't feel strongly about it or they're not sure about something, it's very easy for a decision to be made, because other people have got the strongest opinions basically, the loudest voice [...]. Sometimes young people appreciate a bit more time to sit back and think about it and make an informed decision'.*

(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS, talking about the participation of members of the Youth Reference Group on the Management Committee)

- A mixture of adults and young people works well in training, practice-sharing and review events:

*'Sometimes you can see some of the adults sitting down to do an exercise with young people, thinking they're just there for the young people and they almost take on a youth worker role, then as things start to come out, they begin to react a bit and realise that actually they're getting some useful ideas out of it, rather than it just being a one-way process, so that was quite positive [...]. I would definitely do that again'.*

(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS)

## Sustainability

Young people felt that positive aspects of the projects could be sustained both on a collective level as a project within the community, and in terms of young people's personal development.

- Most of the projects planned to continue to develop and involve more and more young people, and were investigating further sources of funding to enable them to do so. For example, the Gateshead Youth Assembly planned to apply for more funding to enable the young person-led grant allocation scheme to continue with the same procedure and criteria for selection and distribution. They also planned to help the original recipients of Action Pays grants to find further sources of funding and other organisations to continue their work (see case study below).
- Young people have used the skills they have gained to organise larger projects and develop their interests further.
- Several projects developed ways to ensure the sustainable transferral of skills from older participants to younger ones, through peer education and informal training, facilitating new people to come into the groups and committees to replace existing members who were moving on to other opportunities. The issue of sustainability was a critical one for many projects:

*'The younger people carry on and teach it to the next generation'.*

(Azam, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 12, ethnic background: Asian British: Pakistani)

*[The older group] 'They're going to give us little tips on how they did it, and how they did really good, so we can be like them and get an award as well'.*

(Shvaib, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 14, ethnic background: Asian British: Pakistani)

- The sustainability of projects and of the Youth Reference Group, in its advisory role to the national scheme, depended on the continued commitment from young people and project workers, and on continually being able to bring in new people and sustain their interest, due to the often short-term nature of young people's commitment:

*'We've had an attendance of about fifteen from the Youth Reference Group throughout the scheme, although it's evolved quite naturally [...]. It tends to be that people slip off because other things come up like college or whatever, but people tend to have replaced them quite naturally, because people bring their friends along who are involved in youth projects, so the group has stayed at about fifteen members'.*

(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS)

- On a personal level, young people felt that the skills they had learned would help them with their CVs, in job interviews, in their future careers, in training programmes, in meeting people, going to college and university:

*'The skills that you learn stay with you for the rest of your life'. (Jubel, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, London, aged 14, ethnic background: Asian British: Pakistani)*

- However, the sustainability of some projects was reduced by a high turnover of project workers/managers, a lack of commitment and support from project workers and managers, and the short-term nature of commitment from young people, due to their moving on to other opportunities, such as college and employment:

*'One of the biggest issues has been when staff move on and the whole organisation comes to a halt in terms of the work they are doing supporting young people to do activities and projects [...]. It's something that needs to come in from the management level, prioritising that sharing of knowledge and making sure that systems are there, that if someone does move on, that they have a proper handover [...]. But it is also just the nature of small voluntary sector organisations where they're strapped for resources.'*

*'One of the things I have noticed is that the projects which are sometimes the most organised, most informed and more communicative with me are the ones where young people are in the lead. Some of the projects are awful at sending back monitoring forms and they're paid members of staff, whereas in Gateshead, they're all young volunteers doing it in their spare time. But that's not to underestimate the support and the role of the youth workers in Gateshead, because they have had a very significant role in bringing those young people in so that they can do that'.*

(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS)

- Youth-led approaches and processes for involving young people in decision-making within partner organisations and the management of NCVYS through the Youth Reference Group clearly need to be sustained more effectively:

*'I think the whole idea of having a youth reference group to refer to should be sustained, because it means that adults aren't just making decisions for youth, and not asking them'.*

(Naomi, Youth Reference Group, aged 19, ethnic background: Black British)

- Working with the Youth Reference Group through the Action Pays scheme has brought about greater commitment to the youth-led approach to youth work within NCVYS and Changemakers, and increased understanding about how to involve young people in decision-making:

*'The Youth Reference Group itself I think has made a real impact in terms of work that NCVYS does, in general, and whilst we haven't used them as much as maybe we could have, I think there's a good starting point there for us as an organisation to continue to work with the Youth Reference Group on a variety of things, so that can be sustained'.*

(Chief Executive, NCVYS, and member of Action Pays Management Group)

*'Changemakers and NCVYS aren't young people-led organisations, they facilitate some sort of involvement, [...] so realistically, I think it's moved us as organisations forward, and I think next time we're going to do it, we will probably take one step further in terms of joint planning and working jointly with young people on more aspects of the scheme'.  
(Chief Executive, NCVYS)*

- Partner organisations' capacity to achieve organisational change, share best practice and sustain a youth-led approach requires the right level of commitment from senior managers as well as from grassroots project workers:

*'There were times when our members and the organisations that were involved looked at it as purely a sort of youth work scheme, rather than one that would involve organisational change, and so they didn't really put the right level of senior management type commitment into supporting and developing the scheme [...]. I think we may have been a bit too ambitious to assume that it actually creates massive change in the organisations that have taken on the scheme. It's because structures are just not flexible enough, and also I think there is a belief out there that people know how to do it, people know how to get young people to participate and youth-led action is one important aspect of young people's participation'.  
(Chief Executive, NCVYS)*

- Working with a diverse range of participating projects at national, regional and local levels, with varying levels of youth participation, has raised questions for NCVYS as to how best to influence and change practice in future:

*'It is quite useful to see at which level your intervention with training, materials, support and whatever, has had the biggest effect for young people... Some local projects have found it very valuable and we've been able to provide a lot of support for that individual member of staff, but it does raise questions, I mean we're an umbrella group, we're not a service provider for young people, and we've got regional infrastructure bodies and local councils for voluntary youth services, which we traditionally would work through, rather than doing things on a local level. So to promote good practice, do we need to bypass those sometimes, or how do we get it to work through the system [...]? So it's brought up some interesting issues for us'.  
(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS)*

## Suggested improvements to Action Pays

- One organisational issue raised was the need for more project worker and senior management level commitment to practice sharing and organisational change within participating partner projects. Failing this, there would always be the tendency to reinvent wheels in differing parts of the country whereas sharing of experience and gains would help to reduce time wasted in exploring issues which had already been decided.
- Both project workers and young people at several of the case study projects expressed a desire to have more contact and support from Action Pays nationally and with other partner organisations involved in the scheme to share good practice. However, when opportunities for training, practice-sharing and review events were presented to participating projects by Action Pays, time constraints, lack of staffing resources and a lack of management commitment resulted in low take-up.

- More resources were called for – both for the individual grants, and staffing resources - to support projects nationally, particularly for partners who are new to youth-led community action.
- It was suggested that work with fewer partner organisations nationally, but in greater depth, should be undertaken so that Action Pays project workers could offer more support to participating projects, and use that as a springboard to promote the scheme to other organisations.
- The Youth Reference Group should visit more of the partner projects, and receive more feedback from partner organisations to gain an insight into how the scheme is working on the ground:

*'I suppose even if we didn't get to visit, if we were actually given some information about the organisation, updates and how they were helped and stuff, that would probably help us in what we were doing'.*

(Mudassar, Youth Reference Group, aged 18, ethnic background: Asian British)

*'I think just informal arrangements to go and visit projects would be really good [for members of the Youth Reference Group] because it keeps the motivation up and also inspires people, gives them that bit extra, but it comes down to timing, and a lot of them have got a lot of other commitments already'.*

(Youth Participation Development Officer, NCVYS)

- There was a desire for a higher priority to be placed on fitting in with young people's commitments and more time to ensure young people are fully informed about management issues etc. to the Youth Reference Group and Management Group.

## Defining successful 'outcomes'

Based on the key gains made and lessons learned identified by young people, a range of successful 'outcomes' of youth-led community action projects can be determined according to young people's perspectives. These can be summarised in terms of a number of qualitative measures:

- increased confidence;
- team work;
- personal development and social skills;
- planning and enterprise skills;
- greater awareness and understanding between young people and the community, including sensitivity to gender, diversity, ability and cultural difference;
- a sense of achievement and ownership of community project;
- young people's greater participation in decision-making processes and sense of empowerment in expressing their opinions; and
- sustainable transferral of knowledge, skills, resources, and processes for involving young people, as young people and staff move on.

These 'outcomes' have implications for the management and decision-making structures of partner organisations and national bodies managing the scheme, such as NCVYS and Changemakers.

## Case studies

The following case study examples of good practice, focusing on three projects participating in Action Pays, are useful in drawing together many of the issues raised and highlighting how youth-led community action projects can work in practice.

### Case Study 1: FOCUS

Action Pays was used to part-fund two of FOCUS's team-based personal development programmes with young people. Firstly, the Community Challenge stage of the year-long Interaction Programme, which is aimed at young people aged 14 to 17 who are experiencing or are at risk of social exclusion, and young people aged 16 to 25 who have a physical or learning disability. Secondly, Action Pays was offered to teams of young people (years 8 to 10) from partner schools in Oxfordshire, taking part in FOCUS after-school Challenge Clubs. Link teachers were asked to encourage young people who might not normally volunteer for extra-curricular activities to participate in the Challenge Clubs, and some teams included young people from two or more schools working together, including a special school.

In both programmes, the teams of young people were supported by volunteers/project workers to plan and develop their own self-managed community project. Projects included organising bingo and other entertainments for older people in residential homes; organising various fundraising projects to raise money for local charities, for example, fêtes, sponsored swims, school discos; environmental projects, such as creating a conservation area at a local school; renovating a local playground; painting equipment; and decorating an old people's home. Participants were awarded certificates of achievement from FOCUS at celebration events at the end of their projects. These included notes from team advisors of the Challenge Clubs on pupils' skills and achievements, which the young people found useful to help them improve next time.

Young people who had participated in a Challenge Club at Cooper School, Bicester felt that it was a good idea for the Club to be a voluntary, after-school activity run over a term, because they were free from teachers' discipline and it gave them something positive to do in their free time: *'There's no teachers around telling you what to do'* (Sophie, Cooper School Challenge Club, aged 13, ethnic background: White British). *'It's nice to have something to do instead of sitting around watching TV'* (Nicola, Cooper School Challenge Club, aged 13, ethnic background: White British). They felt that the ideal size for a Challenge team was six to eight people, with one team advisor from FOCUS supporting them. Participants felt that as well as the projects being of benefit to people in the community, they had gained themselves in self-confidence, new skills such as talking to people on the phone, handling money and budgeting, meeting new people, especially people from different schools, and learning how to compromise. They felt a sense of empowerment in having some responsibility and organising things without adults telling them what to do. The Director of FOCUS felt that the Challenge Clubs had been a great success, with young people showing a high level of motivation, but stressed the importance of having a good link teacher in school in order to reach the young people and arrange meetings, particularly when trying to bring together young people from different schools. FOCUS experienced some difficulties when relying on volunteers to facilitate the weekly Challenge Clubs, and found that retention was greatly improved when funding was found to pay the team advisors.

The Community Challenge stage of Interaction proved more challenging for the young people at risk of social exclusion and young people with a physical or learning disability:

*'At the moment a lot of them find it a big jump, it's very different to the sort of activities they've been doing beforehand. They're given that much more responsibility, so in future, we want to do more to prepare them for this stage of the programme. But many participants did surprise themselves by rising to the challenge and taking responsibility for organising their own projects'.*

(Director, FOCUS)

Young people who had gone through earlier stages of the programme, which included a week-long 'Residential' and 'Enterprise Project' aimed at developing team-building skills and self-confidence, sometimes found it difficult to get to weekly sessions in a central location. It was also difficult to recruit experienced volunteers to support participants through the Community Challenge stage of Interaction over a period of a few months. Many participants did however gain from participating in the Community Challenge stage, successfully completing their own self-managed projects to benefit their local communities. Projects included creating a herb garden for an environmental education centre; organising a fair trade tea-party for elderly residents of a local home; organising a youth club for other young people; and carol singing to raise money for a new Children's Accident and Emergency ward at the local hospital. In Leicester, young people with special needs organised a fundraising disco and sponsored sports evening to raise money for the children's ward at the local hospital. The gains for Kevin, aged 20 who had learning difficulties, and who was responsible for being the DJ at the disco, were: having fun, making friends, learning how to fundraise and to compromise with others:

*'Some people argued sometimes, but you just talk about it all'.* He summed up, *'It changed my life'.*

(Kevin, aged 20 with learning difficulties, ethnic background: White British)

## Case Study 2: Praxis Young Refugee Arts Programme

The Praxis Young Refugee Arts programme received a block grant of £3,200 from NCVYS in May 2001, consisting of £80 grants for mini-projects led by a group of young people within the two Praxis youth groups: La Nueva Generacion (young Latin American refugees) and Umubano Youth (young Rwandan refugees). The programme aims to provide a space for young refugees aged 14 to 25, from Latin America and Rwanda, to explore and develop their artistic potential within Praxis community project. Both youth groups were led by young people, who planned and managed their own projects. The young people felt that they had gained a lot of self-confidence, skills in managing small budgets and developing projects, as well as exploring their creativity. They felt that the project had enabled them to feel a sense of identity and reduce feelings of isolation, helping them to adapt to life in the UK:

*'You come here as immigrants, especially young people, you feel that you're lost, you don't know if you belong here or there, and it's difficult to settle, in my experience, but here, I feel like I'm at home'.*

(Lida, co-ordinator, La Nueva Generacion, aged 25, ethnic background: South American)

### La Nueva Generacion Latin American youth group

The Latin American youth group consists of 25 to 30 Latin Americans aged between 16 and 25, who organise Saturday workshops on arts, music, drama and dance. They have

recently extended their project to include younger children - the older participants who attended workshops are now becoming teachers and passing on their skills in painting, drama and music to the younger children. The group felt a sense of achievement in attending the workshops and creating something: *'If you come here, you make something, you always get happy'*.

The group used Action Pays grants to organise quarterly evaluations, involving painting exhibitions, music, drama and dance performances on different themes, such as Women's Day, Refugee Week, Youth Day. They also performed at a concert in Birmingham as part of an Anti-Poverty Network event, and organised an exhibition and music performance in the House of Commons on the theme of 'justice' which challenged perceptions about refugees:

*'The idea was to show the politicians [...] it was very strange for them because in their minds, they just have 'migrants', 'refugee surges', 'solitary people', 'isolated', 'they just work, they don't do anything', so it was to show them the other face of it, I mean the reality, so it was a very positive thing'.*

(Lida, La Nueva Generacion)

The group recently organised a float as part of a Latin American carnival in London in the summer, involving music, dance and drama, working together with other community groups.

### **Umubano Youth Rwandan youth group**

The Rwandan young people felt a great sense of achievement in organising displays of their art and poetry, dance and drama performances at events such as Refugee Day:

*'On that day, we need to present our culture, through our own drawings and what the young children have done, preparing drama, based on our experiences of leaving the country and arriving in exile'.*

(Marie Lyse, co-ordinator, Umubano Youth, aged 19, ethnic background: Black African)

The group organised workshops with their younger brothers and sisters to teach them their language through traditional songs, share their memories of growing up in Rwanda, and draw images of their country, to help the younger children remember their cultural identity. Members of the group stressed the need to pay young people's travel expenses to enable them to attend the Saturday workshops, and felt that the workshops gave them a chance to forget their problems for a little while at least:

*'A lesson I learned is that there are times when you have to forget about your problems and get on with the life that is coming in front of you. To forget for a little while'.*

(Emmanuelle, Umubano Youth, Praxis, London, aged 16, ethnic background: Black African)

### **Case Study 3: Gateshead Youth Assembly**

The Gateshead Youth Assembly was set up as a development group in 1998, and in 1999 started electing representatives from each secondary school and college in the borough. The Youth Council (steering body of the Youth Assembly) put in the original application that young people from the Youth Assembly would distribute the Action Pays grants and work with the young

people's groups. The Youth Assembly Executive determined the criteria for grants, along the Action Pays guidelines, that it should involve young people between the ages of 14 to 25, should be young person-led, and of community benefit. The Executive tried to visit groups before they applied and support them through the process, but found it difficult since all the members of the Executive were volunteers with other commitments. They usually managed to meet the groups at least once to discuss their grant application and check how things were going.

They found some adults and youth workers were reluctant to adopt a completely youth-led approach, not allowing young people to make their own mistakes. However, over thirty small grants were distributed to successful youth-led community action projects. The project co-ordinators, all young people, felt that they themselves had gained many new skills, such as facilitation, planning an event, stress management, communication skills, public speaking, to prioritise, to compromise, and learned not to judge others etc., as well as the young people who were recipients of the grants:

*'It helps you for life, 'cos when you go to school you can learn academic things, but realistically, what we've learned over the last two years is going to be much more important than anything we've learned at school, because it's about real life'.*

(Lee, chair of Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 17, ethnic background: White British)

The scheme also succeeded in promoting the youth-led approach within the Youth Assembly as well as in the community:

*'Seeing how much youth-led it was, actually inspired everyone on the Youth Assembly to try [...]. I mean the Youth Assembly tried to be youth-led, but it still was that the agenda was being set by support workers and seeing just how youth led Action Pays was, has encouraged us to change, like the school councils and things. It also helped the Youth Assembly to pinpoint important issues to young people, people were applying, saying, "we want to do this because there's nothing to do on a night time", so that's been highlighting issues for us, for the Youth Assembly to then tackle'.*

(Lee, chair of Gateshead Youth Assembly)

*'Next time, the support workers will say that it should be youth-led on their own, because for Action Pays, it had to be youth-led, but next time, they'll just decide it should be youth-led [...]. I think the support workers have to take a back seat now, as they've seen that it works'.*

(members of Executive, Gateshead Youth Assembly)

The members of the Executive were committed to finding other sources of funding to continue distributing grants to young people for community action projects using the same procedure. They also intended to signpost the original recipients of Action Pays grants on to further sources of funding and organisations to develop their projects:

*'One of the things we can do after we've given them the grant is you can point them to other organisations, like the Youth Bank and things, to continue'.*

(Lisa, Vice-Chair, Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive, aged 16, ethnic background: White British)

By the end of Action Pays, the Gateshead Youth Assembly had managed to secure some additional funding and were investigating further sources, including local businesses, to continue the youth-led grant allocation scheme.

## V: Conclusions

As highlighted in the findings of the evaluation outlined in Section III above, and illustrated through the three specimen case studies, Action Pays has provided many examples of successful youth-led approaches to community action over the three-year implementation period. In contrast to the frequently-projected media image of a 'disaffected and apathetic youth loitering on street corners', this evaluation has provided a glimpse of the rich diversity of effective youth-led community action occurring at a range of levels and among many differing groups of young people throughout the UK. As the discussion of young people's involvement in social action provided in Section III has argued, research on young people's participation has often focused, rather negatively, upon what they are not doing (Eden & Roker 2002). In this report we have highlighted best practice of what, given appropriate support, young people are capable of, based on the experiences of Action Pays participants, as well as examining the obstacles to young people's successful participation in youth-led community action projects.

### Why youth-led community action?

Research and policy documents widely recognise that there are important political, social and moral reasons for promoting the greater integration of children and young people in their local and wider communities (Save the Children 1997; Willow 1997; Craig 2000; Matthews 2001). Benefits are identified in the following areas:

- young people learn key skills, improve their self-esteem and acquire a greater responsibility for their environment;
- society benefits from the insights and ideas of young people;
- democracy is strengthened and enhanced by involving young people (Save the Children 1997: 11; Matthews 2001).

As Wade *et al.* (2001) recognise, young people's involvement presents benefits not only to the young people themselves, but also to the service providers and the wider community. Indeed, the effective provision of opportunities for enfranchisement of all actors within a national arena (perhaps a good definition of an ideal democracy) necessitates the incorporation of all its citizens, both young and old. Thus, the 'whys' of young people's participation in society are not in question, the issue is rather to learn 'how' youth-led approaches to community action work best.

### What is successful youth-led community action?

This evaluation has attempted to draw together the key successful 'outcomes' of youth-led community action projects, according to young people's perspectives. Based on the experiences of young people participating in Action Pays, a series of qualitative measures have been identified which broadly link to the key 'enterprise skills' identified by Changemakers and outlined in Section I. These measures were achieved, although obviously to differing degrees, in many of the projects we visited and can be used as the starting point for developing, implementing and evaluating youth-led community action projects:

- increased confidence;
- team work;
- personal development and social skills;

- planning and enterprise skills;
- greater awareness and understanding between young people and the community, including sensitivity to gender, diversity, ability and cultural difference;
- sense of achievement and ownership of community project;
- young people's greater participation in decision-making processes and sense of empowerment in expressing their opinions; and
- sustainable transferral of knowledge, skills, resources, and processes for involving young people, as young people and staff move on.

These outcomes have implications for the management and decision-making structures of partner organisations and national bodies managing the scheme, such as NCVYS and Changemakers, and should be considered at every level of project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes.

With these outcomes in mind, it is useful to summarise some of the key issues, guidelines and suggestions emerging from the evaluation.

## What did we get out of it? Young people's involvement with Action Pays

The majority of participants felt that the experience of being involved with the scheme had been very positive for them and had helped them learn new skills such as:

- team work;
- communication skills;
- planning;
- organisational skills;
- managing a small budget;
- co-operation and compromise;
- listening to and respecting others;
- being respected;
- gaining in confidence;
- a sense of achievement in what they had accomplished;
- having fun and combating boredom;
- meeting new people and making friends with people from differing backgrounds and cultures; and
- feeling part of a community and collective identity.

These expressed gains link into the 14 key 'enterprise skills' identified by Changemakers. It is important, though unsurprising of course, to note that not all young people felt they had achieved all of these 'skills', and the levels of outcomes in this sense varied from project to project and within projects. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the majority of young people did feel they had learned a range of the new skills highlighted within the Changemakers aims, and felt that their experiences of the Action Pays programme were positive.

Young people felt they were effectively able to learn from each other, with various forms of peer education occurring – those who had already been involved in projects shared their experiences and advised other young people in planning and implementing their projects. This transfer of learning was important in relation to ensuring sustainability of projects where there was continual turnover of young participants. Overall young people felt that they were reflecting on their learning process and they were well able to identify the skills gained from the process. Similarly, many young people felt a sense of empowerment in having their own responsibilities, and their opinions listened to and taken account of by adults, particularly those in positions of authority.

## Young people's participation

Young people's participation in a project needs to begin at the very earliest stages of a project if they are to feel some ownership of it (Alsop *et al.* 2001; Craig 2000). Similarly, because the evaluation of any community development programme needs to reflect the values of community development itself, an evaluative process should ideally engage the participants of that programme from the earliest stage of the evaluation and in that respect we have already noted our view that it would be important for any future evaluation to be drawn into the planning process at a very early stage, rather than, to a large degree, post hoc. Evaluative processes should also be ongoing and reflexive throughout the life-course of a programme in order that best use of the findings from such evaluation can be made and increase their efficacy in improving the management and outcomes of a programme.

A key point discussed in Section III on young people's involvement in social action is that it is important to strike the right balance between the extremes of wholly youth-led versus wholly adult-led programmes<sup>2</sup>, a balance which will always be necessary when working with those who do not have the full responsibilities of adulthood. The findings of this evaluation demonstrate that the balance between young people's level of participation and the level of adult support offered will need to depend greatly on the experiences, needs and interests of the young people involved, as well as the local context, organisational setting, and structures for involving young people. Enabling young people to plan, manage and develop their own community projects requires flexibility in the role that adults play, as well as in the kinds of facilitation and support offered by adults.

It is clear that this flexibility requires project workers and facilitators to start from where the young people are at, recognising that every project, and every group of young people are different, with different skills, needs, and levels of motivation. There cannot be one template for 'what works' or for how project workers and other adults should be involved in youth projects, and at what stages. One group of young people may need the continued support of project workers from the inception and throughout a scheme, whereas another group may prefer to have very limited input from project workers and due to previous experiences and opportunities, may already have the skills and motivation needed to see their scheme through to a successful outcome. Similarly, it is important to allow people space to make their own mistakes as part of the learning process, and project workers can assist, as appropriate, in the process of reflection upon those mistakes in order to learn how to do things differently in the future. Furthermore, young people must be able to participate on their terms, in ways that are appropriate to them, in recognition of their diversity and differing skills and abilities. And as Wade *et al.* point out, '*young people must also have the right not to get involved*' (2001:6).

## Sensitivity to young people's needs and diversity

As also noted above, young people's experiences are varied and are influenced by a range of social factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, family background, able-bodiedness, locality, class and age. This evaluation has illustrated the differing needs and experiences of a diverse range of young people participating in Action Pays. It particularly sought to gain an insight into the experiences and perspectives of the most marginalised and disadvantaged. These included young people at risk of social exclusion, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, young refugees, young people with learning difficulties and young people living in geographically isolated, rural areas, with differing age groups and some single gender groups within these specific populations. Many of the self-managed projects that young people were involved with brought them into contact with other groups within the community, promoting greater intergenerational understanding and young people's increased awareness and sensitivity to diversity in the widest sense.

<sup>2</sup> Hart's ladder of young people's participation (outlined in section III) is a useful starting point when thinking about this balance.

For young people to engage in successful community action projects which correspond to their needs, interests and aspirations, key adults and project workers must recognise and remain sensitive to young people's needs and diversity. Long-term capacity-building is essential to build confidence, skills and interest. As Matthews highlights, 'Promoting self-esteem, and a sense of greater control over their lives by enabling participation, is part of this developing agenda' (2001:183). Projects should involve young people from inception and work at a pace which is appropriate to the needs and abilities of the young people involved (Craig 2000). Capacity-building and training for adults who may be unused to working as facilitators with young people is equally as important as for the young people themselves, as many adults have yet to develop the skills and sensitivities necessary to work with young people in a way characterised by a degree of uncertainty and risk-taking. As some of the Action Pays practice-sharing and review sessions demonstrated, bringing young people and youth and project workers together to discuss relevant issues helps to facilitate an enabling dialogue between adults and young people.

## **Sustainability, resourcing and organisational change**

Sustainability was seen as a key issue both by the young people participating in Action Pays and project workers and managers. On a personal level, young people felt that the confidence and skills that they had learned through planning and developing their own projects had furthered their own personal development and enabled them to progress on to other activities and take up new opportunities. Several groups had developed their small-scale projects into larger projects within the community, as they gained more confidence, skills and experience. This aspect of sustainability – that is, young people carrying the learning into their future lives as they moved on from Action Pays projects – was evident from our conversations with young people. Similarly, young people ensured the sustainable transferral of skills from older participants to younger ones, as existing group members moved on to other opportunities. Informal methods such as peer education and training of new members were frequently used by young people to ensure the continued participation and sustainability of projects, thereby counteracting the negative effects of the short-term nature and 'fluidity' of youth participation (Eden & Roker 2002).

However, this fluidity of young people's involvement, combined with high staff turnover, a lack of resources and a lack of commitment and support from project workers and managers could – and did – undermine the sustainability of some projects. Small voluntary sector organisations were particularly vulnerable with regard to lack of resources. Despite the best intentions, small organisations often did not allocate sufficient staffing resources to facilitate young people's involvement in Action Pays, and processes to manage the knowledge and learning about youth-led approaches within organisations when staff moved on were often lacking. Indeed, a lack of resources was seen as a cause for concern by both young people and project workers, although many were aware of other sources of funding and opportunities which would enable them to continue their projects. Lack of resources also restricted the support that the Youth Participation Development Officer could offer to participating organisations and individuals, and the target number of partners was rather unrealistic, given the constraints on staffing resources to manage a scattered and diverse UK-wide scheme. Working with fewer partner organisations nationally, but in greater depth, would have enabled a greater level of support to be offered to participating projects, particularly those which were new to youth-led approaches to community action. This is an important message for the 'centre': local projects cannot largely be left to get on with work locally without an adequate and responsive resource at the centre and, despite the best efforts of the 'centre' workers, this was not always possible. Future such schemes need to build in adequate resources to ensure, for example, effective training and preparation for all staff and managers, ongoing resources to ensure that effective support can be available on a responsive basis, particularly highlighting the needs of smaller organisations, and mechanisms to ensure that horizontal sharing of learning can be facilitated, perhaps through focused workshops.

Where effective structures for youth participation have been developed over time according to young people's interests, such as in the case study example of Gateshead Youth Assembly, young people's involvement in youth-led community action projects has enhanced their wider participation in many other decision-making processes within the community. Similarly, the participation of young people in the Action Pays Youth Reference Group throughout the implementation period has been a learning process for NCVYS and Changemakers, the national bodies managing the scheme, leading to further opportunities to involve young people in an advisory role throughout their programmes.

When organisations were hesitant in integrating youth-led approaches throughout their organisational structures, the involvement of young people was reliant on the motivation and will of particular people and projects being in place, and they were vulnerable to disintegration if these were removed. Thus the longer-term sustainability of youth-led community action depends on the continued commitment from senior managers to the youth-led approach and a willingness to engage in organisational change and share best practice at every level. This requires flexible organisational structures, which enable young people's continued participation. Indeed, the evaluation findings suggest that sometimes the most effective dialogue between national bodies co-ordinating schemes such as Action Pays on the one hand, and young people at the grassroots on the other, occurs when rigid organisational structures are bypassed. This raises questions as to how national umbrella organisations such as NCVYS, which traditionally work through regional infrastructure bodies and local councils for voluntary youth services, can best promote good practice, effect organisational change within partner organisations and achieve a more youth-led approach on a national level. This requires a reflexive learning process, flexible structures, a real commitment to the youth-led approach at every level (reflected in appropriate skills training for workers), adequate resourcing, and a willingness to engage in organisational change, that is, a mixture of structural and individual factors.

### **Did Action Pays meet its aims?**

The stated aims of Action Pays were to work with voluntary organisation to support young people to plan and manage their own work; to identify factors which helped to develop and sustain good practice; and to encourage young people to develop the skills and confidence to plan and manage their own work. As the key points highlighted above demonstrate, and despite some difficulties, Action Pays can be seen to have been very effective in meeting these aims overall. Whilst there were inevitably some problems and obstacles, as highlighted above, it remains the case that young people were generally successfully supported in planning and managing their own projects and were able to develop a range of important organisational and personal skills such as team work; confidence building; and listening and communication skills. The milestone events, reviews and celebrations held throughout the programme were not only greatly appreciated by the youth participants but engendered a sense of achievement and value placed on their work. Furthermore, in terms of longer-term sustainability, Action Pays has facilitated projects which will be continued and developed and will in turn lead to new youth-led initiatives. At an individual level, the young people involved from a range of backgrounds and capacities, will carry important lessons, insights and skills into their future lives which will strengthen their ability to act as effective and active citizens.

## And finally ...

... a few words to sum up young people's experiences of being involved in Action Pays:

***'Eye-opening'***

(Sarah, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin, aged 16, ethnic background: White British: Scottish)

***'Explosive'***

(Ryan, FOCUS Challenge Club, Bicester, aged 14, ethnic background: White British)

***'Good listening skills and keeping quiet when everyone else is speaking'***

(Shvaib, Fitzrovia Youth in Action, aged 14, ethnic background: Asian British)

***'Makes me smile'***

(Maria, Nueva Generacion, Praxis, London, aged 21, ethnic background: South American)

***'Good at getting adults to listen to young people'***

(Anthony, Youth Reference Group, aged 17, ethnic background: White British)

***'Gaining confidence'***

(Gloria, Umubano Youth, Praxis, London, aged 16, ethnic background: Black African)

***'It changed my life'***

(Kevin, FOCUS Leicester, aged 20 with learning difficulties, ethnic background: White British)

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## Appendix: Evaluation participants

The Research team would like to thank everyone who participated in the evaluation, without whom this work could not have been completed. The names of the youth participants have been anonymised in accordance with ethical guidelines.

**Denise Barrows**

Director, FOCUS

**Pauline Beck**

Project worker, Moray Youth Bank, Elgin Youth Café

**Steve Belcher**

Youth worker, Fairbridge West Midlands

**Jeff Callow**

Team advisor, FOCUS Leicester

**Lida Chavez**

Co-ordinator, New Generation Latin American Youth Group, Praxis Young Refugee Arts Programme

**Kamal Hanif**

Youth worker, Fitzrovia Youth in Action

**Chris Hulme, Lee Bone and Lisa Douglas**

Action Pays project co-ordinators, Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive

**Naomi Marshall**

Action Pays Youth Reference Group

**Mudassar Noor**

Action Pays Youth Reference Group

**Marie Lyse Numuhosa**

Co-ordinator, Praxis Umubano Rwandan Youth Group, Praxis Young Refugee Arts Programme

**Esta Orchard**

Development Officer (Youth Participation), NCVYS

**Susanne Rauprich**

Chief Executive, NCVYS, and member of Action Pays Management Group

**Anthony Ruck**

Action Pays Youth Reference Group

**Duncan Thrustle**

Project worker, Project 82

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**FOCUS Leicester**

**Gateshead Youth Assembly**

**Praxis New Generation**

**Praxis Umubano Youth**

**Project 82**

and members of the

**Gateshead Youth Assembly Executive**