

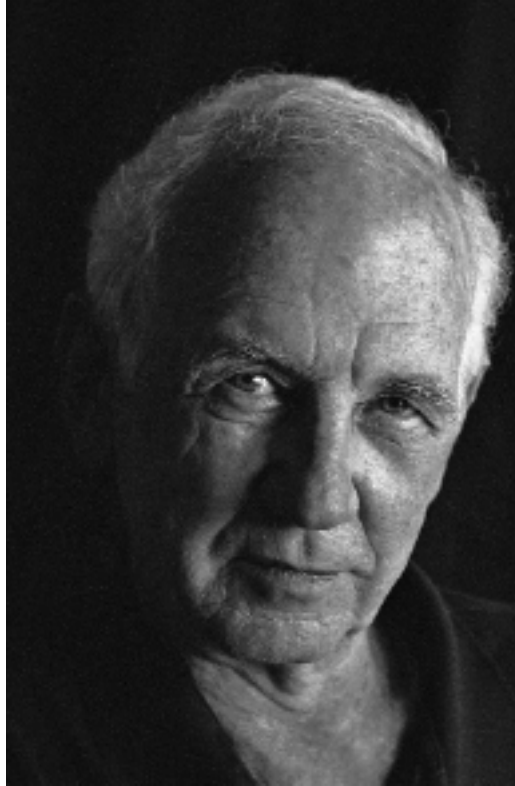
BUILDING DEMOCRACIES FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Pushing the Youth Service Movement Overseas

by Clayton Kennedy

Although no one ever claimed that rebuilding nations into democracies is an easy task, the past few years have made the challenge freshly obvious. Efforts to foster democracy have faced deep political apathy in some nations and anger about Western imperialism in others. So Roger Landrum has an idea. Landrum is a founding father of the United States' youth service movement that produced AmeriCorps and today's red-hot popularity of service-learning programs. He believes that replicating such a movement in transitional democracies could jumpstart their shift toward healthy democratic functioning. Here's how.

Landrum's idea does not aim straight at the level of citizen political engagement, but rather one step back. This is not unusual. Of the various strategies that nations and foundations have used to aid emerging democracies, the one most revered since the fall of Communism is the cultivation of a country's civic activity. "Civil society" has been the vogue term of this sector, referring to those institutions of voluntary collective action that revolve around shared interests, purposes, and values— from the PTA and activist groups all the way down to Robert Putnam's famously cherished bowling leagues and bird-watching clubs. The theory is that through participation in organizations that transcend classic social cleavages, individuals develop public trust and more willingness to work for interests wider than their own, i.e., political development. Many consider the resulting "social capital" crucial to a healthy democracy. This idea has had its critics, but the potential value of fostering civic engagement as a means to bolstering political engagement is widely accepted today.



Roger Landrum, founder of Youth Service America and, in 1997, Youth Service International. Photo © Ginna Fleming

However, civic activity is not easy to initiate. Ex-Communist states have proven particularly ill-suited for social capital development, since public action demanded of citizens by previous regimes has left them resistant to the idea of voluntary activities. This is where the field of youth service comes into play. “It could clearly be a major new institution in many regions of the world,” Landrum says, “Providing millions of young people with invaluable experiences and new career perspectives, and as a result advancing civil society much faster at both national and regional levels.” What better way is there to assure a country’s future than to engage its youth in the joys of serving it? The young volunteers would work hand-in-hand with and for people of all social classes, investing in the upkeep and development of their nation as a whole. Such integrative service has been shown to correspond with increased voting and democratic political activity.

At present, however, the widespread international development that Landrum imagines is far from a reality. To bring about such a large-scale movement would require both vision and major financial investments from multiple nations and transnational institutions. This may seem daunting, but on a domestic scale it is just the task that faced those working to create a national youth service field in the United States two decades ago.

What happened in America, and what Landrum feels must come about internationally, was a multi-stepped process beginning at the grassroots level. By the early 1980s, decades of unsuccessful legislative attempts forced a handful of national service advocates to step back from the concept of a federally funded and driven program.

They realized that they needed to initiate some sort of “movement” before policy makers and foundations would realize the potential value of youth service and devote more resources to it. So they set out to create a system of national youth service from the bottom up, building upon local, mostly non-governmental, program models. These advocates ultimately took on four basic but essential tasks:

- Find the best existing service-learning and youth corps models;
- Rally their program leaders to unify around a grander youth service action plan;
- Publicize and enlarge the program network; and
- Penetrate the big foundations and policy-makers for added resources.

In 1986, with Ford Foundation support, Landrum founded Youth Service America to carry forth these endeavors. YSA created a “leadership circle of the most experienced practitioners who could see the larger vision for the field.” These individuals directed financial support to stabilize and replicate the most successful operations, and to sponsor individuals with breakthrough ideas. To publicize these programs, YSA created National Youth Service Day, which has become the largest service event in the world. All the while, Landrum and others were pulling in the support of the major grant-giving foundations as well as important state and federal officials. Establishing

Civic activity, however, is itself not easy to initiate. Ex-communist states have proven particularly ill suited for social capital development, since the public actions demanded of citizens by previous regimes have left them resistant to the idea of voluntary activities.

these linkages between the “streams of youth service” and the policy elite set the groundwork for AmeriCorps and the wider youth service field in the United States today.

It would not be impossible to replicate such a movement internationally. There is a fundamental problem, however, that Landrum believes advocates will have to overcome: the role of the state. When attempting to expand programs, it is common for political figures to take “control of youth service essentially for propaganda / partisan / ideological purposes, which not only alters the ethic or spirit of service but makes youth service a target for subsequent changes in regime.” This is a significant dilemma, even in the United States. For example, Landrum believes President Clinton “engineered what was essentially a government takeover of the youth service field in America (the Congress was in on this too).” Governments and politicians want both the credit and administrative control of programs, creating a system that is the target of opposing parties when the present party leaves office.

It is thus important for the expanding network of youth service programs to be managed as part of an independent sector, just as the American movement was in

the 1980s. Multinational organizations and philanthropists in particular countries will be key sources of funding and advocacy in the early stages of this movement. The ultimate goal is for programs to have local, self-sustaining support. This might not be possible in many countries without turning to state money. Landrum feels that this could happen if youth service were to gain “the status of a world-wide priority with some kind of independent, nonpolitical standing.” National leaders who have such an appreciation of youth service would be more likely to support the field without attempting to usurp control.

Landrum himself has endeavored to push forth this mentality and movement, co-founding Youth Service International in 1997. YSI is essentially attempting to do transnationally what Youth Service America did on a domestic scale: create a collaborative network that supports and pilots high-quality youth volunteer programs. He has found that the time is not quite ripe yet, however. Policy makers and major foundations want to see proof of the international impact of youth service before they devote resources to it, and the state of international service is still fairly weak. Many countries are stuck on nationalistic conceptions of youth service (“Serve to make Mother Russia stronger!”), and are unwilling to collaborate across borders. Other countries are so new to the idea of youth volunteering that their program leaders are too preoccupied with the survival of their own models to even think about expanding the network. Still, Landrum has seen new service programs arise with each passing year. As these small-scale programs become more visible to the policy and grant-giving elite, it will be easier to convince them of the genuine potential of a wide-scale, transnational youth service movement.

At present, then, Landrum and others are simply working to promote youth service wherever they can. In Hungary, for example, YSI created the service organization Demokratikus Ifjusagert Alapitvany, which has spurred youth into tens of thousands of volunteered hours of service. It is too early to know the effect of this on Hungary’s developing democratic functioning, but it is likely to be significant. Thousands of youth who would not have been involved in their communities have instead trekked out there, working together with others to better the lives of locals. In other words, the future leaders of Hungary have grown intimate with individuals from various classes within their society. They have had substantial social work experience. And they have had the touchstone experiences of what it is like to truly help others and their country. Sometimes that’s all it takes.

Clayton Kennedy is a student at Bard College. While at the Bard Globalization and International Affairs Program, he interned at the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership.