

## THE FUTURE OF BIOS AND YOUTH

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## INTRODUCTION

Young people are very much aware of the consequences of irresponsible environmental policies of government and industry. They see it every day in their own communities and hear about the international implications of environmentally dangerous practices that are causing acid rain, the depletion of the ozone layer, deforestation, desertification, and air and water pollution. Yet, young people do not readily know how they can even attempt to solve these problems. Awareness without avenues of action often leads to frustration and apathy, especially when it comes to the orientation of youth toward action.

The importance of providing a meaningful role for young people in the protection and management of bios on all levels can no longer be ignored by adults. The future of bios requires active involvement of the "succeeding generations" now, so that when these people inherit bios, they will comprehend and appreciate the weighty responsibilities attached to this inheritance. Experience is the most important ingredient of wisdom. Bios in the future will need wise people if it is to survive, and thus it is imperative that intergenerational approaches for protecting and promoting bios be adopted.

Bios has particular significance to each succeeding generation, but efforts to ensure the quality of bios is the concern of all generations. The broader context of survival of bios, and within it the human species, recommends the incorporation of young people in the processes of government and of international organizations. Unfortunately, governments and international intergovernmental organizations are the exclusive domain of adults. Access and participation of young people on these levels is nearly non-existent. This should change if we are to imbue the succeeding generation with the values and outlooks beneficial to bios.

This paper concentrates on the international role of youth for the protection and promotion of bios into the next millennium. Drawing on our experience with young people in the United States (US), we attempt to outline the increasing significance of youth participation in the international effort to protect bios and offer an agenda for youth action.

## IS THERE A ROLE FOR YOUTH IN INTERNATIONAL

AFFAIRS? Historically, who should govern has always been answered quite simply - the wise men of society. Of course, those with wisdom are those with experience, and those with the most experience are those who have lived longest. Therefore, for most of human civilization the processes of governance on any level have been the preserve of adult men. The dawn of international organizations in the 20th century did little to change global attitudes on this regime, but the changes in society created the conditions whereby traditional views of how society should be governed were, slowly but surely, challenged. It is in this century that women and the young have been more fully recognized as being capable of intelligent participation in government. The infatuation of the industrial world, especially the US, with youth, was particularly evident during the 1960s. It was at this time that young people began to realize that their numbers could give them a larger voice in both government and world affairs. In fact, they were acting on the rights given to them by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and more specifically, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959.

With the increase in activism among the young was a rise in the number of organizations dedicated to environmental protection, conservation and life quality issues. In the US, most of the activism for the environment was organized during the latter part of the 1960s and the 1970s. Of course, the history of concern for the environment goes much further back, but it is interesting to note that the environment became a priority issue throughout the world just as, in 1968, the United Nations General Assembly requested action by governments, non-governmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations to limit the impairment of the human environment and to protect and improve our natural surroundings. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment adopted the Declaration on the Human Environment and created the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The concern for the environment was not exclusively a youth issue; indeed it was a multigenerational phenomenon. The issue remains one of the strongest areas of common ground for all generations.

The particular role of youth in international affairs was minimally recognized by the United Nations (UN) in 1965 when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Promotion Among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples. The General Assembly recognized the considerable contribution young people could make toward development in the short term and international peace and understanding in the long term. The UN recommended that its member states adopt policies that would involve their youth in national development and incorporate in national education systems the principles and goals of the UN Charter. As with many UN declarations, the impact on member states was marginal at best. In fact, one could argue that UN action in the area of youth was like "putting the cart before the horse". Youth for the most part is not organized in most countries of the world, which means that the goals of the UN's Declaration on the Promotion of Youth had to be communicated through governments and school systems unaccustomed to viewing young people as participants in national processes, especially in policy making. On the other hand, many believe that the UN's recognition of a role for youth in the work of the organization was a significant step forward.

Fortunately, the UN's action toward a meaningful role for young people in international life did not stop in 1965. In 1970, the UN convened the World Youth Assembly in New York and created the United Nations Volunteers Programme. Through these fora, both the voices and actions of youth could have an international role for the first time. Recognizing the need to do more in this area, in 1979 the UN General Assembly declared 1985 as International Youth Year (IYY) to focus world attention on the concerns and welfare of youth.

At least as far as the UN is concerned, there is a movement toward a significant role for youth in international affairs. However, progress has been slow in actually implementing the many recommendations and action agendas that have resulted from all the activity around youth. Young people remain woefully unorganized and apathetic toward agitating their governments for appropriate youth policies and programs. But, the dogged persistence of many people throughout the world is slowly making progress. The important recommendations that came out of the IYY remain achievable goals worthy of national and international attention and action. Toward this end, the UN mandated the Centre for Social and Humanitarian Affairs to serve as the focal point for youth matters within the UN system. The Centre's major tasks are:

- a. To assess critical issues and emerging trends in the field of youth;
- b. To promote efforts at the national, regional and international levels to improve the situation of youth across the globe;
- c. To ensure that youth issues and concerns remain an inherent part of the work of the United Nations system;
- d. To ensure effective cooperation with youth and youth-related non-governmental organizations;
- e. To promote, monitor and appraise guidelines for further planning and suitable follow-up in the field of youth;
- f. To disseminate information;
- g. To provide substantive servicing of intergovernmental bodies;
- h. To provide substantive support to technical cooperation activities;
- i. To strengthen cooperation with concerned United States bodies and organizations;
- j. To strengthen cooperation with non-governmental organizations and non-United Nations intergovernmental organizations and research centers; and
- k. To initiate and promote action-oriented research.

The Centre and the financing mechanism created for youth affairs, the United Nations Youth Fund, have continually encountered obstacles in the efforts to implement the recommendations and directives of the General Assembly for the IYY. The most troubling has been the lack of financial and human resources and the paucity of research on youth and youth issues. The ambitious objectives of the IYY and the broad tasks of the Centre for Social and Humanitarian Affairs, almost preclude any real progress in the near term. This is further complicated by the financial and informational barriers cited above.

However, in select areas, meaningful youth participation in the work of the UN and national development is making headway. The same common ground that brought action on the environment in the US and Western Europe by all generations in the 1960s and 1970s provided a foundation for significant action during the IYY and the years since. Young people had demonstrated both interest and zeal in their efforts on behalf of the environment. Therefore, it was an easier focus to mobilize the world's youth on this issue than in other areas.

The vehicles for action were readily in place and youth access to these vehicles was previously tested. Even with all these advantages, a great deal of effort and resources are needed to sustain the drive to increase youth participation on all levels in the environmental field. UNEP, United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF, the United Nations Volunteers Programme, UNESCO, and scores of non-governmental organizations are noted to have given an active role for youth in their activities and objectives in the Secretary General's report to the Economic and Social Council regular session in 1988. The eleven proposals made by the Secretary General to strengthen UN action in the field of youth were unfortunately simply "noted" by the Economic and Social Council in 1988. This lack of action on the Secretary General's recommendations by the Council makes it more difficult to sustain momentum in the varied areas of youth participation. The task of pushing forward now rests primarily on non-governmental organizations.

The future of bios rests more or less in the hands of organizations like Biopolitics International Organisation (B.I.O.), especially when it comes to involving youth. Luckily, there is a short history and several very useful networks to build on in B.I.O. The goals and models generated by the IYY and specific projects by UN programmes for IYY should be able to help us chart a safe course of action for the future.

Young people are prepared to take more responsibility for the protection and promotion of bios. All they need are the tools and confidence of adults to be able to contribute. If we accept that bios will be the most precious inheritance of our succeeding generations, we are obliged to include young people in the processes of policy and implementation at all levels on bios.

## **YOUTH ACTION AGENDA FOR BIOS**

Defining the role of young people in any cause-related campaign is difficult. In the US, there are numerous organizations concerned or focused on almost every issue under the sun. Opportunities for young people abound within the framework of many of these organizations. Yet, the incredible number of organizations alone create difficulties for young people as to which organization or cause they should devote their energies. Organizations devoted to international affairs, like the US United Nations Association (UNA) and the World Affairs Councils, are less numerous, but, with such an overwhelming variety, the problem of choosing one or more organizations over another remains. Upon examining the opportunities related to bios, there are literally hundreds of organizations devoted to one or more aspects of bios (see Appendices A and B listing environmental and conservation groups in the US).

Considering the sizeable obstacles to generating a sufficient base of support for a B.I.O. branch in the US with the number of environmental organizations now in existence, a coalition building role of B.I.O. in the US around a particular agenda or action program would bear greater fruit. The US is critical to any campaign or effort on bios at international level. The significant resources available in the US to be applied to such an effort alone warrants B.I.O.'s desire to organize there. An action agenda for bios would be more successful in the US if B.I.O. takes a "coalition-building" approach around specific goals which other environmental and conservation organizations in the US can rally around. This approach would also apply to any effort to involve American youth.

Moving back to the international level, B.I.O.'s youth campaign is made easier with the existence of the Youth Environmental Agenda developed and promoted by UNEP (see Appendix C). The three elements of the UNEP Agenda include creating awareness, education and training, and taking action. The UNEP Agenda is a relevant model that could be replicated by B.I.O. or simply adopted. And, more specifically, could be developed on the issues and content on the regional and national levels by B.I.O. Indeed, B.I.O. should respond to the appeal of Mostafa K. Tolba, Executive Director of UNEP, given in the UNEP Youth Environmental Agenda: "I am asking the youth of the world to help us work on the side of the future, to see to it that when the older generation passes on the inheritance of the earth, they will hand it over to a young generation which knows how to preserve the long natural chain of resources that sustain us all."

In order to get the ball rolling on defining an agenda for action, we suggest that three groups of youth should be addressed: children in primary school; teenagers in secondary school; and young adults in post-secondary education. Based on experience working with young American people in all these groups, the three elements of the UNEP Agenda can be tailored to the capabilities and interests of each. In addition, the programs that are devised should gradually increase expectations as to the responsibilities each young person should assume as they graduate from one group to the next. In short, an integrated approach employed over several generations is needed.

Working with already established environmental and conservation organizations, the B.I.O. Youth Action Agenda should concentrate on pushing for action strategies. We propose that B.I.O.:

- simply and concretely define the most important aspects of bios to be acted on;
- establish communication with existing international and national environmental and conservation organizations in targeted countries;
- convene a working group to develop a timetable, strategy and outline for implementing an Action Agenda on bios; and,
- seek the necessary financial resources to sustain youth involvement in its program for the long term.

We recommend that the outline below acts as a working document for finalizing a Youth Action Agenda: *For children:*

- A. Education through an active learning classroom environment where students are participating in the process. The focus of bios on this level of education should help children differentiate between the two strands of understanding ourselves and understanding our environment. It is extremely important that the children have a meaningful role in the educational process. The classroom must go beyond traditional forms of instruction if children are to fully integrate the cognitive knowledge about bios and their responsibilities as part of bios.
- B. Schools are the most effective mode of involving children. Many US organizations strive to have their issues taught in schools. In most cases, non-governmental organizations have established networks of teachers and parents to facilitate access to primary education. Nevertheless, the complexity of the suggested content must be within acceptable limits of the curriculum of the schools being asked to teach about bios.
- C. In addition to stressing active learning in schools, children should be encouraged to organize in their communities to take action on a local level. Activities on this level would include guided tours of nature trails, visits to local nature sites (e.g., forests, ponds, river banks, etc.), and celebrating World Environment Day, June 5. For example, groups such as scouting troupes (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts) and other recreational organizations (church groups, Ys, 4-H clubs) could be pivotal in involving children in environmental programs.

*For teenagers:*

- A. As children become teenagers and enter secondary school, the education effort must respond accordingly. Older students are ready for a more complex understanding of bios that explores the technical and moral relationships of bios. More complex active learning tools can be introduced. The Model United Nations is a fine example of the kind of tool that provides incentives to students to fully explore a particular issue on an international level and actually play it out for each student. Other forms of role-playing or gaming which emphasize the conceptual elements of bios are highly recommended. It is on this level that expectations for action can be increased because the capability of the teenager to act on knowledge is more refined. It is at this level that awareness of bios is most acute. However, if avenues for action are not provided, the real potential of teenagers can be lost.
- B. Schools and youth organizations broaden the avenues of access to young people. Non-governmental organizations need to develop stronger ties to youth groups and work with them as partners, if any real results are to be gained.
- C. At this level, more emphasis should be placed on training and skill development among teenagers. Leadership training and basic technical training opportunities should be created. Responsibility to broaden awareness of bios to their peers and to younger children should be a key component in the programs and activities developed for teenagers. More complex activities to be developed might include conferences on bios, participation in community government processes (e.g. attend meetings of the local councils or city authorities, start a petition drive to inform national political leaders that young people want to protect bios, etc.). The kind of activities suggested in the UNEP Youth Environmental Agenda most commonly apply to this level, least, a common agenda. Young adults should be expected to assist in solidifying this linkage.
- D. The kinds of action most appropriate to this population are similar to what we seek from adults. For example, students in post-secondary education are already conducting the kind of research and scientific exploration which could be applied to the questions on bios. In addition, young adults should be encouraged to conduct activities that involve teenagers to deepen their commitment to the preparation of succeeding generations to inherit a quality bios. Greater political and technical action on all levels should be made available to young adults, such as organized campaigns to fight poor or ill-devised policies of industry or government that are damaging bios, lobbying for stronger technical and scientific teams to assess environmental impact of development projects or programs, etc.

## THE CHALLENGE

Our task now is to add substance and further specifics to this outline. This outline only scratches the surface. The direction which is defined above is long term. There is considerable groundwork required and the views and ideas of the youth we wish to reach must be fully incorporated if the agenda is to have any real meaning. Our challenge is now to take action to begin the process of integrating youth into our activities and programs. B.I.O. can take the lead in giving ownership of the future to those who will have to live it. The prospects of having a quality bios in the next millennium improve if the succeeding generations are given ownership and a meaningful role.

It is obvious that the future of bios is primarily dependent on how well we prepare today's youth for tomorrow's challenge to bios. Let us begin today to tap the energy of the future to foster a strong commitment to bios tomorrow.

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