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## **Challenges the Same for Youth Around the World**

By Zack Gross

Today's BBC World News web site contains an on-line survey for teenagers around the world to fill out on their issues, ideals and life experiences. This will form the basis for a series of programs to be broadcast globally in late 2006 on the challenges facing young people now and into the future. Get your students or children to track the survey down at [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/ideas\\_week.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/ideas_week.shtml).

In my work, in various parts of Manitoba and to a lesser extent overseas, I've learned that youth, whether they are anglophone or francophone, urban or rural, Canadian or living overseas, face similar concerns and share similar hopes. The scale of the problems, between our wealthier society and poorer countries, can be quite different in that Canadians don't face disease, hunger, war and more to the extent that others do. But, with Canadian troops fighting in Afghanistan, one-sixth of our children living below the poverty line, the water problems we've experienced, and AIDS growing in some communities, we can't ignore that our comfortable position in the world is eroding.

Focus groups with youth in Manitoba's southwest and Interlake over the past few years have shown that youth most often identify the following as concerns in their lives:

- *Education* – many young people, especially in rural settings, fear that they are not getting the quality of education they need to compete for the jobs they will want in the future. They want a wider variety of courses, better books in their libraries, computer and lab equipment, and top quality instruction. At the same time, many students credit their schools as the institution in their communities that offers them the most enjoyable activities, such as sports, music, theatre, field trips and student clubs.
- *Employment* – young people want more than "McJobs", that is minimum wage service and retail positions, many of which are only available in busy seasons anyway, such as summer or Christmas. Especially in rural areas, they fear that this will be a lifelong frustration – that the choice of jobs available will be very narrow.
- *Transportation* – young people, again as a rural issue, have trouble getting around. Sometimes, their only means of transport is the school bus, so they are unable to participate in extra-curricular activities, unable to get to town or a nearby city, unable to shop or attend an event, and more. Urban youth at least have a bus system.
- *Recreation* – Aside from the school activities mentioned above, youth are looking for opportunities to create their own entertainment. These would include coffeehouses and drop-in centres which they would have a prominent role in operating. They want the facilities to be centrally located in rural towns, rather than put off in a corner. Many towns and neighbourhoods don't have youth-run centres. Students often must find a café where they are allowed to sit and talk without spending too much money or being thought of as vagrants.

- *Environment* – youth are concerned about the fate of the planet they live on. In the Interlake, the focus is the state of Lake Winnipeg while, in rural areas, it is often the affects of farm chemicals or large amounts of manure on land and water. They also want to live in a safe, secure milieu, away from violence and drugs.
- *Housing* – As young people graduate from high school, they face the challenge of securing low-cost housing. With many jobs being low-paid or with the high cost of post-secondary education, it is difficult for youth to move out of the parental home, and this cramps their lifestyle and the opportunities that may arise.
- *Participation* – ultimately, in order to get the policies and programs they want, youth need to participate in the political process, speaking to decision-makers and getting their message out to the public through the media. Many young people don't have the skills to do this, others don't have the interest, few have the opportunity, as the world seems to be run by old people who discount that youth should be given the room to take a leadership role. To quote a student with an extreme point of view: Our hockey rink was torn down for an old folks' home!

Overseas, youth face the same issues, only more so! Many fewer receive the quantity and quality of education they need and many more are unemployed or underemployed, and certainly underpaid. Infrastructure is often problematic – not only are their few vehicles in rural areas, there are often few passable roads.

As many environmental observers have said, the effects of pollution and climate change have a greater impact on the Third World. Life is not secure for young people facing military strife, refugee crises, natural disasters and disease. Housing and independence is a huge issue for many Third World young people who struggle to earn an income that would allow them to marry and set up their own home.

Recreation, sometimes even childhood, is a non-issue for those who must work hard to survive. In all of the above, community organizations are working hard to build programs to deal with these issues, but the scale of the problems is overwhelming compared to the resources available. Youth participation should be seen as necessary as the Third World has a much larger young population than we do, but the challenge is to push aside traditional ways and give youth a chance.

I look forward to seeing the proposed BBC programs about youth's place in the world. People like to say that young people are the leaders of tomorrow. I disagree. From my experience, we can learn from them. They are leaders with us today.

*Zack Gross is program co-ordinator of the Manitoba Council for International Co-operation (MCIC), a coalition of 35 international development organizations active in this province.*