

## **Youth Empowerment & Capacity Building**

### **International Conference: Education as a Driver for Sustainable Development Goals, CEE, Ahmedabad, 11-13 January 2016**

India has the largest youth population in the world. According to the National Youth Policy (2014), *Youth in the age group of 15-29 years comprise 27.5% of the population*. The nation is struggling to understand what role youth play in the development processes in India. In turn, institutions at all levels (public, private and civil society) are asking how to effectively engage the youth while simultaneously meeting the multi-faceted needs of this specific population. It is often said that youth are the leaders of tomorrow. This is clearly true, but young people are very much present in the neighborhoods and villages, work places and communities in India. They are potentially the leaders of today as well.

The issue, then, is not the difference youth *can* make in the life of society. Young people are already impacting their communities every day, in countless ways and to widely varying ends. The issue, rather, is how the desire to contribute to constructive change and to offer meaningful service – both characteristic of their stage in life – can be strengthened, supported, and expanded.

Discourse on the role of youth often focuses on issues of voice and participation. Integrating young people into formal structures of power is of course advantageous for a variety of reasons. But simply feeding “young” voices into “old” systems, if unaccompanied by more substantive forms of participation runs the risk of degenerating into mere tokenism. Young people are needed as leaders and decision-makers not only in youth forums and special-purpose councils, but in those spaces where the course and direction of society as a whole are determined. This may well require the development of new systems of decision-making and collaboration – systems characterized by an unbiased search for truth, an attitude of cooperation and reciprocity, and an appreciation for the vital role every individual can play in the betterment of the whole.

Therefore, our approach to development needs to be based on a conviction that all people not only have the right to benefit from a prosperous society but also have an obligation to participate in its construction. But society is far more than a collection of impersonal laws, policies, programs, and organizations. It is equally shaped by norms, values, aspirations, and relationships. It is important, therefore, not to artificially limit young people’s potential sphere of contribution. Youth might well contribute to social progress by participating in various structures of society.

Youth must be involved in development efforts because the construction of a new and better society rests on their shoulders as much as on those of any others, and everyone is worse off

when the contributions of any group or population are marginalized or disregarded.

The future of today's society will depend to a great extent on the manner in which educational programs and methods are designed to release the latent potential of youth and prepare them for the world they will inherit. The forces acting on youth through the media, technology, family, peers, the wider community and other social institutions, convey messages that may be reinforcing in some respects and contradictory in others, which contributes to confusion for many youth - about identity, moral purpose and social reality. As such, formal education needs to go beyond the exclusive aim of helping young people to secure gainful employment. Educational processes should assist youth to recognize and express their potentialities while developing in them the capacity to contribute to the spiritual and material prosperity of their communities.

Some of the questions that this seminar would like to address include:

1. How can the qualities of youth be enlisted in the processes of community building and social transformation?
2. Education, the acquisition of knowledge, and work are essential to one's contribution to civilization building. How can young people under diverse social conditions ensure that they obtain the most effective education available? How would one's work or profession serve as a means to contribute to the well-being of the community?
3. Many of the approaches to education today treat students in a very passive way, as receptacles of information rather than active members of the community. What would be the educational processes that help young people to recognized and develop their potential and to see themselves as protagonist of change in their own lives and in the life of society?

#### **Experiences of City Montessori School, Lucknow, India in its attempt at imparting Quality Education:**

Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has instilled in the whole of humanity a sense of common cause, reflecting the commitment to the goal of building capacity of every child and youth to contribute to the building of a united world based on the principles of justice, equity and equality. The fourth SDG speaks of inclusive education and life-long learning. It calls for all learners to acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development including the promotion of global citizenship. This will build on the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI)(2012) which seeks to spur renewed efforts to reach global education goals. Fostering global citizenship is one of the three priority areas on which the programme focuses.

City Montessori School (CMS) believes that *every child is a mine rich in gems of inestimable value and that education, alone, can allow it to reveal its treasures and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.*

Hence CMS follows an integrated approach to education in order to empower every child to understand the purpose of life, the essential identity of each human being, and the role of knowledge and volition in initiating and sustaining the dual process of individual and social transformation. To harness the great potential that each one has in order to understand concepts, gain insights, generate and diffuse knowledge, act and reflect upon action, analyze the positive and negative forces and make responsible choices in life, CMS has introduced elements in its educational curriculum that cater to the spiritual, material and human education of all its wards as well as its teachers and staff. Understanding the inter-linkages between various aspects of our existence, our interdependence, our stewardship of nature, etc. demands that educational institutions take up their role in the promotion of social discourses that lead to constructive social action. Hence CMS programme of education is not just restricted to classrooms but also to participation in conferences and seminars that broaden horizons and help in appreciating the fundamentals of sustainability.

Below is a highlight of some of the efforts made at CMS to reach the goals of sustainable living.

#### **1. Junior Youth Empowerment Programme**

City Montessori School (CMS), which has over 52,000 students across 20 campuses, has integrated a programme for the empowerment of junior youth (12-15 years) into its school curriculum. This has provided a unique opportunity to empower and nurture the capacities of literally thousands of youth and junior youth to arise and fulfill their potentials for initiating and sustaining the dual process of individual and social transformation, a kind of education that is rarely made available to many youths today. The objectives of the programme are to enhance their power of expression; read their social reality; develop their ability to work with their peers in an environment of unity; analyze the positive and negative forces around them; make responsible choices; and engage in acts of service to their communities.

An integral part of this programme in CMS has been to train volunteers from the students of the senior section to serve as animators: class 9 animators go to class 6; class 10s go to class 7 and Class 11s go to class 8. The animators build strong bonds of friendship with the junior youth and a group identity is formed as they go through this process with the same group for three consecutive years. As of now, we have a total of around 400 animators in six campuses of CMS. Each animator has a group of 10-12 junior youth and hence 4000-5000 students of CMS in the junior section (classes 6-8) are engaged in this programme.

In addition to conducting the JYEP books, the animators engage their Junior Youth groups in activities related to the concepts in the lessons, as well as in service projects. For example,

junior youths of one of the new campuses of CMS identified a slum area just beside the school and decided to do a *Soles for Souls* project – they donated a lot of their own shoes and clothes and gave them to the poor children in the neighboring community. After giving them these gifts, they decided to invite those children into the campus twice a week and teach them moral values through songs, prayers and drawings as well as lessons in numeracy, literacy, public health and hygiene. Other service projects include making assembly presentations and hosting radio shows to addressing certain issues that junior youths face in their campuses; engaging in peer-tutorials; teaching literacy to campus support staff and moral values to students of the primary section. Read more at: <http://www.cmseducation.org/jyep/index.htm>

## **2. Environment education and projects:**

CMS is dedicated to changing its 50,000 students' mindsets in favor of sustainable living. All 20 campuses of CMS have an environment coordinator (a teacher) dedicated to motivating students to preserve the environment. All the campuses have Eco clubs where students get the opportunity of consulting, planning and executing environment projects in the campuses with the help of the environment coordinator. Below are some of the activities conducted by CMS:

- Celebration of international environment days – World Environment Day, World Water Day, World Ozone Day, and International Day of Forests are celebrated in all CMS campuses. In addition other environment related occasions are also observed. On these days, the students make presentations (eg. poster-making activities, assembly talks, skits) to spread awareness of environment issues (eg. climate change, pollution)
- Students participate in competitions (eg. painting, essay) on themes such as Climate Change. These competitions are organized by the campus, and sometimes by the Center for Environment Education and the Council of Science and Technology, Uttar Pradesh.
- Students are taken on nature walks to places of environment importance, for example visit to Nehru Bal Vatika, the National Botanical Research institute, Lucknow Zoo, etc.
- Students undertake projects such as rain water harvesting, testing quality of the water being consumed from different water sources. CMS is developing the infrastructure for the storage of non-sewage water and rain water to replenish ground water aquifers in all campuses. CMS is dedicated to store water to meet demand over time and to recharge/reclaim waste water or runoff water and restore/renew natural resources. This Rainwater Harvesting Project has been launched in all its campuses.
- Tree plantation is another project that our students are involved in as well as growing and taking care of medicinal plants in the school campuses itself.
- Solar energy and installation of solar panels in order to use renewable sources of energy is a project that is being followed by the management.

Read more at: <http://www.cmseducation.org/environment/>

### **3. International Conferences of Chief Justices of the World**

CMS holds 32 international events a year, one of which is the International Conference of Chief Justices of the World (which is in its 16th year). In these conferences, chief justices and judges from different parts of the world, come together to hear the concerns of children. In preparation for the Conference, CMS holds weekly *Youth Leadership Seminars*, in which the students study documents and engage in discussions around different contemporary issues such as human rights, international law, gender equality, political and social governance, establishment of a New International Order through structural reforms at the United Nations, as well as through releasing the power and building capacity of the individual. In addition the issues of the world undertaking towards the eradication of poverty in all its forms, promoting religious co-existence and respect for diversity are other important areas that the students of CMS learn about, discuss and deliberate upon in the course of these seminars.

During the conference, some of these selected students present appeals to all the judicial luminaries present. These include appeals for international arbitration; for administration of justice; for human and child rights; and even an appeal to hold states and governments accountable to their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals for the eradication of poverty and social, economic and environmental development of the whole of humanity by 2030. \* Read more <http://www.cmseducation.org/article51>

### **4. Children's International Summer Village (CISV)**

#### **What does CISV do?**

- Provides a range of unique, educational group activities, which develop cross-cultural understanding in children, youth and adults from around the world
- Contributes to research in international relations and conflict resolution
- Cooperates with like-minded organizations
- Inspires people of all ages to strive for a more just and peaceful world.

A 4-week long camp (called a 'Village') is held annually since the last 22 years at the City Montessori School, where twelve delegations comprising four children each of 11 years accompanied by an adult leader, junior counselors and host staff stay and work together under one roof. Through a set of activities, at the core of which lie the educational principles of diversity, human rights, conflict & resolution and sustainable development, participants develop cross-cultural understanding. By encouraging respect for cultural differences and the development of self-awareness, CISV empowers each participant to incorporate these values into their lives as they become global citizens and strive for a more peaceful world.

The first CISV delegation from CMS to participate an international camp called a 'Village,' was sent to Cincinnati, USA in 1972. Since then, CMS has been regularly sending children's

delegations of 11 year olds to international camps all over the world. Till June 2015, 102 delegations have traveled abroad to these international programmes.

### **Some other resources for information on Sustainability Activities of CMS students, teachers**

- For month-wise details of activities and achievements of CMS since 2001 do visit:  
<http://www.cmseducation.org/bulletin/index.htm>
- With the threat of war looming large in 1999 between India and Pakistan, the urgent need was felt for starting activities and programmes that would help build defences of peace in the minds of children of both countries who are eager to live together in peace. Thus, started the children's Indo-Pak Pen-friends Club called 'Aao Dosti Karein' with the objective of facilitating person-to-person contact between the children of both countries. More can be read at about this effort at <http://www.cmseducation.org/aaodostikarein/>
- CMS believes that the responsibility of the school is not merely to provide academic education to the children but also to use the opportunity to reach their families, community and larger society with its mission of oneness of God and oneness of humanity. As a lighthouse of society, schools should be concerned with the affairs of the age and therefore in collaboration with the media which is one of the most powerful pillars of a vibrant democracy, seminars are held to raise consciousness of the children and their parents to protect the girl child and woman from all forms of violence and aggression in society. More can be read at <http://www.cmseducation.org/media/>
- The fire of religious intolerance and hatred is devouring the world and therefore there is an urgent need for people of different faiths to consult together on issues of respect for diversity and religious co-existence. Teachers at City Montessori School directly engage in interfaith dialogue at the International Conference on Promoting Interfaith Dialogue in Multi-Religious Communities. You can read more at <http://www.cmseducation.org/interfaith/index.htm>
- With a view to promote the ideals of World Unity and World Peace across the globe, CMS campuses organize international events. A stimulating environment lets children appreciate first-hand the similarities and celebrate the differences between people from all over the country and the world. [http://www.cmseducation.org/events\\_conf/eventindex.htm](http://www.cmseducation.org/events_conf/eventindex.htm)
- International accounts of the impact of CMS education can be read at [http://www.cmseducation.org/cmseduimpact/int\\_acc.htm](http://www.cmseducation.org/cmseduimpact/int_acc.htm)

#### Contact Information:

Farida Vahedi, Head, Youth Empowerment and Capacity Building,  
City Montessori School, Lucknow, India  
[farida.vahedi@gmail.com](mailto:farida.vahedi@gmail.com); +919792840575