

The Millennial Generation: Implications for Philanthropists

Eugene Johnson (www.nexusyouthsummit.org)

Much is said about the Millennial generation, with scholars and media figures either extolling their innovative perspectives or questioning their collective potential to affect change. But Millennials, and youth in general, are not just a buzzword in debates, as they quite literally form the foundation of societies.

According to the *United Nations Population Fund*, people under 24 years of age comprise nearly a half of the world's population of 7 billion. Rapid urbanisation, growing inequality, the economic crisis, and rising youth populations have been at the forefront of international policy conversations. Many scholars and policymakers for decades have expressed deep fears that large youth populations will promote instability. Speaking before the *United Nations Commission on Population and Development* in April 2012, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon noted that "(t)his generation of youth is shaping history. We saw that dramatically across the Arab world starting over a year ago in Tunisia. And we see it globally now in homes and in communities, clinics and schools, governments and intergovernmental organisations. Youth are more than a demographic force – they are a force for progress." Yet this vision of young people as a 'force for progress' can only be realised if the international philanthropic community works to create and protect spaces for youth to unite.

We all can recall the perils and joys of youth and adolescence – of how we were passionate, headstrong, opinionated, daring, or energetic, but how we also may have been more dependent, vulnerable, unsure, or prone to influence. It is precisely during this stage of personal development that positive mentors and educators can help leverage this whirlwind of emotions and insatiable curiosity to help young people find passion and meaning that can last a lifetime.

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As well, a strong sense of belonging in a community can help build confidence and recognition. Without resources, mentors, or a strong community, that same



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curiosity and hunger for experience can also lead young people towards desperate decisions and extreme, misguided solutions to problems. This is no secret among those working in the philanthropic space, and plenty of excellent work is being done to address the immediate needs of youth in our own communities and around the world. Still, exponentially more needs to be accomplished, especially in seemingly uncertain times, where young people are driving both innovation and violent conflict around the world.

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Through our philanthropy, it's increasingly easier to connect a young person with a microfinance loan to build a business, to build a school for a community in need, to fund a vaccination program for children to fight against a communicable disease, or to educate the next generation of technology innovators. This is all extremely necessary, and no progress can be made without connecting young people to the basic resources and education they need to advance and propel their communities away from poverty. But as we make progress on these fronts, we must pause to consider how we can affect systems in addition to individuals, multiplying the impact of our giving and accelerating solutions for particularly daunting challenges. We know how to give a young person tools to advance, but how can we ensure there will be a collaborative space or an opportunity for them to leverage them? Recent

youth-dominated social movements from New York to Istanbul to Hong Kong, although divided on many issues, cried out loudly for more opportunity for young people. But do we need more jobs created for youth, or more young job creators?

Young people, and especially young adults, are perhaps the best-equipped to navigate the rapidly shifting paradigms in global markets and the workplace. Understanding and adapting to innovative technology gives us unprecedented access to information and a competitive edge. Yet young people around the world face challenges in accessing stable work as the traditional career paths crumble. Building strong networks of self-sufficient and supportive peers is more important than ever, no matter the income level or challenges of a particular nation or society. And, in an ever-global world, we must find ways to connect like-minded communities around the world. This is why philanthropists of all interests must find ways to support youth-to-youth learning and community-building. Instead of only funding microfinance loans, how can we support systems that connect more young entrepreneurs in developing regions? Instead of just building a school, how can we create programs for inter-school exchanges? Instead of only funding vaccination programs or technology education, how do we build more engaged communities of young scientists? Perhaps most importantly, how do we foster dialogue and collaboration across the invisible lines that divide us?

Philanthropy is extremely effective when it works towards systemic solutions to address poverty and

inequality. Creating diverse, peer-to-peer, international communities of youth is the most effective way to maximise value, to preserve wisdom, and to create the foundation of a more promising future. At Nexus, a global movement of over 2,500 young philanthropists and social entrepreneurs, we apply this vision to philanthropy and strive to maximise the potential of the greatest wealth transfer in history. To that end, we host a non-transactional and safe learning community for emerging members in this space. We understand that next-generation leaders are increasingly connected more deeply to the causes they support, and are working more directly with organisations and individuals to whom they give. A generation of more active philanthropists and entrepreneurs is experiencing new challenges and opportunities, and the established philanthropic community should welcome their perspectives.

By connecting young people of means and influence to their peers in social entrepreneurship, we help broaden perspectives and reinforce the notion that philanthropy is more than just an isolated tax exercise for our elders, but rather often a source of life-purpose and meaning that can support lasting social progress. We strongly believe that a young philanthropist working on environmental issues can learn profound lessons from her peers working on issues of human trafficking and modern-day slavery, for instance. Often we find that our issues of focus are more

interconnected than we expected. And we hope that by convening diverse groups of philanthropists and entrepreneurs, we can help young people forge unlikely alliances to find innovative, 21st-century solutions to 20th-century crises. The overarching theme is how these issues impact young people, highlighting what their stories as protagonists, as investors, as leaders, and as change-makers to address these problems. Strengthening ties between young philanthropists at an early age accelerates and multiplies our impact for the decades to come.

Our model has helped our members forge lifelong relationships, has inspired countless social ventures and philanthropy, and has created an international learning community for young people. However, our model is by no means unique, and in every field of interest there are actors working to unite and support youth communities in some way. While we each should remain committed to our chosen causes, we must increasingly pay attention to how our work can specifically support youth, and how we can build bridges between communities of young people. Solutions to poverty and inequality are systemic and do not beget conflict or violence to be implemented. Fighting adversity with unity and a diverse network of communities or changemakers creates opportunity, and may be the best way we can ensure our impact is sustained for generations.

Eugene Johnson is a social entrepreneur, conflict analyst, researcher, and millennial organiser with experience working in coalition-building, conflict resolution, and humanitarian affairs. He currently serves as the director of the Global Campaign for a Culture of Philanthropy at Nexus, having previously worked with organisations such as Uber and the United Nations World Food Programme. Eugene's research focuses on the dynamics surrounding social and political movements outside of the West, and he has developed an expertise surrounding youth in post-conflict and disaster areas.

Eugene received his BA in International Studies from American University and his MA in International Conflict & Security from the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies. He resides in Washington, DC, USA.