

The Seychelles National Youth Service: An Experiment in Socialist Education

SIMON HENDERSON

"Ensemble nou pou lutte contre l'injustice"

"NYS pas tolere parazit"

"Discipline pou toujours"

"Hypocrite nou pas tolere"

"NYS leaders of tomorrow"

Some NYS slogans.

On February 1st, 1981, thirty students were welcomed to the Seychelles first Youth Village at Port Launay on Mahe, the Republic's largest island. They had travelled by sea from La Digue, one of the smallest inhabited islands in the archipelago. Within a month, Port Launay had received its full complement of 820 students. Just over twelve months later a second village at Cap Ternaie—across the bay from Port Launay—was opened to a further 1200 fifteen to seventeen year olds. By 1984 the total age cohort of approximately 2600 students will have been divided equally between four villages. The project is massive both in ambition and size; Seychelles has a total population of only 63,000 people. It is clearly the most significant expression of President France Albert Rene's will to transform Seychelles from a society divided by class, race and gender and heavily dependent on multinational capital to one where the principles and practice of socialist self-determination permeate all spheres of daily life.

What follows will be an attempt to describe the background, philosophy and practice of the National Youth Service (NYS) in its first twelve months of operation. In addition I shall identify some of the main problems facing policy-makers, students and staff and consider the role of the Youth Service in Seychelles' transition to socialism.

Initially, however, it seems important to locate the NYS in its political and cultural context.

I. Seychelles: Social and Political Background

Seychelles, first settled by the French in 1770 and later transferred to the British in 1814, eventually gained independence in 1976. At independence, Rene, as head of the Seychelles Peoples Progressive Front (SPPF), entered as a minority partner into coalition with James Mancham's Seychelles' Democratic Party. Within a year, a bloodless coup replaced Mancham's coalition by a single party government with Rene at its head. Today it is this event which is celebrated as "true independence" rather than the constitutional end of colonial rule a year previously.

The revolution of 1977 apart, perhaps the event of greatest economic and cultural significance in the last fifteen years was the opening of an international airport in 1971. Since that date the tourist sector has developed rapidly bringing in its train many other changes: the growth of a service sector; a dramatic increase in imported goods and foodstuffs; and the rise of a waged and increasingly urban, proletariat. Today 90% of the workforce are wage workers and it is from this social base that Rene and the SPPF have drawn their support. Of these wage workers, 40% are employed by the state. The tourist trade is critically important; it accounts for more than half the country's foreign exchange. Although private capital still predominates in tourism and other industries, Rene is building up a dual state economy. Parastatals have been created in agriculture, tourism, construction, timber, transport, catering and computer services.

The socialist programme of the SPPF has attacked inequality at work, in education and in the social services. Minimum wages have doubled and disparities between high and low income earners reduced from 1 : 23 to 1 : 9. A Social Security system provides support for the old, the sick and new mothers. A network of creches and health centres has been established in all the districts; both are free at the point of consumption.

In education, every child now receives 9 years of primary schooling. Thereafter, until the recent opening of the NYS, a small elite was recruited either to the Regina Munday convent or to the all-male Seychelles College for their secondary education. Today the convent is closed and the College being phased out. Currently a polytechnic is being built and will draw its intake mainly from NYS leavers. As many as 65% of all NYS students are expected to move on to the Polytechnic for vocational training of one to three years. It will thus be possible for a significant proportion of young Seychellois to have experienced 12-14 years of full-time education, extraordinary in third world terms and almost unheard of for working class students in the West.

Space does not allow anything more than this brief survey of those features which seem to characterize the Seychelles in the early 1980's. Class, colour and gender, despite changes and the Government's plans, are still important sources of inequality and oppression but it is these issues that the NYS has been created to tackle and eventually destroy.

II. National Youth Service: Political Origins

An indication of the SPPF's commitment to the idea of a youth service first appeared in policy documents in 1977, but only began to be clarified and explained in detail from 1979. In the 18 months prior to official opening two figures dominated the conceptualization and planning of the Youth Service. One was Rene himself. The other, Olivier LeBrun, initially a UNESCO consultant in Seychelles and latterly employed directly by the Government, worked on the development of the project for three years until December, 1981. Rene has always taken a strong interest in education, an interest shaped by his experience of youth services in other developing countries such as Cuba, Algeria and Tanzania. Olivier LeBrun, a Belgian citizen, had spent most of his working life in the Third World in the field of educational development. His experience and political insights from Angola, Eritrea, Sri Lanka and Algeria all informed the early direction of the NYS. In addition LeBrun has worked at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University and been active in the U.K. Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE).

From the start it was clear that the NYS was not to be a carbon copy of any other youth service—"You will realize that the NYS is not based on any model" (President Rene in the introduction to NYS handbook). It was to be distinctively Seychellois, influenced by the culture of the Indian Ocean and the particular economic and political needs of a Socialist Seychelles. Unlike the youth services of most developing countries (typically military or para-military in purpose) Rene's plans were explicitly and primarily educational. Later, however, the role of the army in taking drill within the Youth Village and in influencing models of discipline and security became a subject of continuous debate amongst some groups of staff.

In August 1980, six months before opening permanently, a "pilot" youth camp was held for three weeks at Port Launay. Here future staff and students received a taste of the life they were to embark upon in the following year. Three issues of a special newspaper, *Vilaz Lazenes*, were produced; a model village structure planned

and built in miniature; contributions made to buildings only partially constructed and rudimentary masonry and carpentry skills learnt by both girls and boys. In addition to the collective organization of domestic tasks, a camp parliament was elected and so began what it was hoped would become a model of political education through practice to be continued when the Village opened permanently. Although the three weeks were adjudged a great success, in a sense they generated expectations of practice which were far more difficult to sustain when the Village settled down to a more routine existence nine months later.

III. The First Year: Theory and Practice

When the NYS opened early in 1981 much of the detailed planning had been developed by Olivier LeBrun with the tacit approval of Rene and his Government. The team of coordinators only officially took up their posts five weeks before the first students arrived. Thus what little time existed before the opening was devoted almost exclusively to practical questions (ordering supplies, checking completion of buildings, etc.) leaving the more complex political and philosophical issues unresolved.

The only published document which expressed the broad aims of the NYS was a twelve page booklet distributed widely throughout the country. Behind this lay an unpublished paper, "The Seychelles National Youth Service: Seeds of a New Society" written by Olivier LeBrun and Robin Murray, a friend and ex-colleague from Sussex University. The booklet outlined some of the main tasks and aims of the service:

- (i) to unite theory and practice, thus making education more practical and encouraging new developments of theory to solve practical problems;
- (ii) to encourage the spirit of cooperation and participation by working in teams to solve collective problems;
- (iii) to foster the principle of self-reliance;
- (iv) to appreciate the value of intellectual and manual labour and to overcome the divisive specializations between them: all students would contribute to the life of the Youth Village with their head and their hands.

The NYS, the booklet claimed, will "reunite work, daily life and education . . . the students' education will be organized around their participation in the daily organization of the Youth Village. Young people of Seychelles will acquire an education that is not only general and technological but also social, cultural, political and physical".

The emphasis was on a style of education which was both participatory and student-centred. The difficulties of translating these aims into practice were considerable in the first year as the sheer size of the Youth Village and the presence of a teaching staff largely unacquainted with these methods, often resulted in a more traditional and didactic approach.

(a) *Organization and Structure*

The Village, built on a flat peninsular, was bounded on either side by two of the country's most beautiful beaches. Students lived in domestic units called clusters, each accommodating approximately forty five students with a central area for debate, play and meals. These clusters became the focus of domestic life and gradually took on distinct characteristics according to the artistic, musical and horticultural skills of their members.

At the other end of the Village—a walk of some 15 minutes—were workshops, agricultural plots, administration buildings and the recently constructed study centre. It later came to be acknowledged that the physical separation of study centre from clusters reinforced traditional distinctions between education and domestic life and highlighted the need for an architecture which served rather than determined the

socialist and collective aims of Village life. Within a few months the complex time-tabling demands of the new "block" system of education necessitated the use of clusters for teaching purposes. In a small way this development helped to encourage the view that education need not be tied to the classroom but can be pursued to each cluster was attached at least one *animateur*, a young Seychellois adult whose responsibility it was to oversee the domestic life of the Village and to encourage skills of collective self-determination amongst the students in the organization of cooking, cleaning, basic health care and, indeed, the whole politics of cluster life. → in a variety of contexts

In all there were about 140 members of staff at Port Launay. In addition to *animateurs*, there were teachers ($\frac{2}{3}$ from overseas), production staff (manual and clerical) and a team of seven coordinators with overall responsibility for the day to day management of Village life. Throughout the first year each staff grouping tended to be a separate entity and significant problems arose out of differing interpretations of responsibilities and powers. Such problems were in part a function of haphazard selection and the absence of any integrated training programme prior to the opening of the Village. All staff, except teachers, were Seychellois and for the first village recruitment had often been undertaken by several groups of people employing, one suspects, differing criteria. A continuing problem for the Youth Service was the recruitment of adequate numbers of suitably qualified and committed staff. Although many Seychellois were keen to work for the NYS, a process of screening ensured that significant numbers were rejected.

(b) *The New Education*

After following a temporary but very conventional programme for three months, the "block" (modular) system of education was launched in May, 1981. In the remainder of their first year students were to pass through seven blocks, each one linking education with production and theory to practice. The students, divided into seven groups, were to spend four weeks in each of the following blocks: Health, Animal Husbandry, Fishing, Culture, Information, Construction and Technology and Crops.

Alongside the blocks a core curriculum of French, English and Maths was run on a streamed and compulsory basis. Despite opposition from some of the teachers, work in the blocks was organized in mixed ability groups and students followed programmes of compulsory theoretical and practical work. In addition, each block was required to devote at least 25% of its timetable to an optional choice of projects.

Some 75% of all Village production was organized through the blocks. Thus students in the Animal Husbandry block tended pigs, chickens and cattle, while those in the Construction and Technology block learnt masonry, electrical and plumbing skills through maintenance work and building, for example, a new art centre and cow shed. In the Health block, whilst learning the essential principles of preventive medicine, students helped staff the Village health centre. They also formed environmental health "vigilante" teams monitoring and publicizing Port Launay's general state of cleanliness and did investigative work in occupational health by visiting workplaces throughout the island.

In Information, students ran "Voice of Port Launay" (the NYS's own radio station), produced a newspaper and a regular wall newspaper whilst learning the essentials of photography and basic electronics. All the blocks were expected to provide elements of political education both through theory and practice. This process ranged from learning the main principles of SPPF policy and the history of Seychelles' colonial domination through to more practical participatory projects. Amongst the latter were the creation of links with the National Workers' Union over workplace health and safety, the development of cooperative projects in agriculture and the monitoring of

world news and evaluation of the policies of organizations such as the OAU and the Non-aligned Movement.

In addition, political education was derived from the self-organization of cluster life. The more confident and imaginative of the *animateurs* encouraged a degree of democratic accountability within their clusters. Thus rules were defined and enforced by general meetings which regularly elected small teams to be responsible for health, discipline, cooking, budgeting, recreation and informal education. During the evening, issues of controversy (e.g.: teenage pregnancy, sexual division of tasks, Village security) might be vigorously debated with perhaps a brother and sister cluster meeting together. Some clusters organized film shows and invited speakers to talk on certain topics.

At their best the blocks were an imaginative and progressive attempt to provide a general education which was defined as relevant both to the individual aspirations of students and to the collective needs of Village life and ultimately to a self-reliant Seychelles. Often, however, in the early months the blocks failed to realize their potential for a number of reasons: shortage of teachers and material resources; a failure by a number of staff to grasp the essential political and educational objectives of the NYS; the widely varying commitment and interests of students; and the frequent conflict between the short-term demands of production and the longer-term "logic" of education. I return to some of these issues below.

Finally in this section it is interesting to make a brief comparison with the educational approach of the Cuban "schools in the countryside". Here too the objective is to link work and study but there appears little attempt to synthesize theory and practice actually through specific tasks and activities. Pupils do three hours agricultural work a day in keeping with their age, ability and sex. Half of them study in the morning and work in the fields in the afternoon; the procedure is reversed for the other half. The schools form part of agricultural development projects which call for an abundant supply of unskilled labour. Thus the schools make an economic contribution but little integration of education and production takes place except in that both are contained within the same school day. The NYS attempts to go beyond this mechanistic approach and to derive education from production (cultural or economic) and theory from the experience of practice.

IV. The NYS: Dilemmas, Contradictions and Potential

In this final section I shall identify some of the main problems which the NYS has to face and resolve if it is to fulfil its ultimate objective of being an agency of socialist transformation in Seychelles. The issues fall into two main categories: those which can be resolved by internal organization, political will, additional resources and time; and those which concern the NYS and its external relationships. In other words, relationships to the rest of Seychelles society and to those changes which are being promoted in other spheres of political, economic and social life.

(a) Internal Dilemmas

Throughout the first year it was possible to be aware of differing conceptions of the role and purpose of the NYS. These competing ideals were reflected at all levels of staff and throughout the body of students. It became clear that not all completely understood the vision and objectives regularly articulated by the President. Debate and argument continued over whether the NYS should be primarily concerned with disciplining the youth, with providing a more meritocratic access to higher education or with the creation of socialist and democratic forms of discipline, curriculum and assessment.

Whilst such debate was often a necessary and fruitful experience, the absence of a

clear educational and political perspective amongst the staff created divisions and energy-sapping confusion throughout the first year. The speed with which the NYS was established prevented any rigorous staff training before the Village opened to students. Whilst most Seychellois working in the Village shared the political perspective of the SPPF in general terms, many were accustomed to working either in the traditional primary schools or in workplaces where the ethic of individualism and competition still dominated. Most of the foreign teachers, while professionally competent and possessing "liberal" sympathies towards the Third World, lacked socialist comprehension and commitment and thus a theoretical framework to understand the practical and domestic problems they faced. Often relations between some of the overseas staff and the Seychellois were poor and the coordinating team lacked the confidence to resolve these contradictions.

Another important issue was the degree of autonomy accorded to the Village and its participants in determining the development of the project. As originally conceived by LeBrun, the Village was to have its own democratic structure in which all but the most major policy decisions were to be shaped by representatives of staff and students. Although a Village Committee existed, it only had a consultative/advisory role and was consequently accorded low priority by those involved. Expectations about the degree of democracy varied widely and reflected different perceptions and experiences of the various national groups. Some teachers and *animateurs* felt affronted by the lack of trust shown in them and began to "disengage" themselves emotionally from the project. Paradoxically, failure to fully involve staff and students in the decision-making process helped to perpetuate and reinforce that lack of political consciousness and commitment which had been the reason for not fully trusting village participants in the first place.

Closely linked to this problem was the question of motivation and discipline. Whilst the block system of education was generally popular the level of absenteeism was high. Shortage of staff and teaching resources made the task of responding to the varying experiences, needs and abilities of 820 students (now 2000) often beyond the scope of hard-pressed teachers and *animateurs*. Again the absence of a clear theoretical perspective amongst the staff—especially teachers—prevented solutions to these problems emerging. To be more specific, there was a failure to create an adequate mechanism whereby the definition and enforcement of discipline became a collective process equally shared by staff and students. Thus discipline, except perhaps in the clusters, was something performed by adults on students, so perpetuating traditional expectations of the role of teachers and other adults. Genuine attempts to resolve this were made, but even after nine months the question was a confused and sometimes bitter issue.

(b) *Relations with the wider society*

Paradoxically, the greater the success of the NYS in creating a new generation of politically conscious and committed young adults the greater some of the problems of adjustment will be when these "seeds of a new society" emerge into the outside world. The emphasis on youth education at the expense of developing the potential and promise of adult education has become an issue of concern and debate. Increasingly a number of students complained—occasionally in some distress—after their monthly visit home that they could no longer communicate with their family and friends. The experience and vitality of collective living at Port Launay highlighted aspects of domestic life at home which they found confusing and unsatisfactory. Sometimes this resulted in bitter clashes with family and parents.

A potentially larger problem was that the NYS was creating expectations which

could not be satisfied by existing economic and workplace structures. The more the NYS released abilities and skills in the majority of its students the more difficult it was going to be to match existing jobs with a consciousness which was no longer uncritical of traditional work relationships.

The irony and potentially destructive consequences of these contradictions were not lost on some members of staff and the NYS Advisory Board and by the end of the first year discussions were taking place at various levels. In September, during a two day period of assessment and reflection, the Coordinating Team began seriously to look for solutions to these problems which could be recommended to the Advisory Board and then perhaps implemented by other Government departments and agencies. On a number of occasions the President had made it clear that the NYS should take the initiative in defining what structures and organizations would be most suitable for students emerging to seek work or further training after two years in the Youth Service.

Thus NYS coordinators were invited to submit proposals for the embryonic polytechnic which was to open its doors to NYS (and other) students in 1983/84. Students not electing to follow more specialist vocational training at the polytechnic would enter either the existing labour market or what, Olivier LeBrun argued, might be a "new cooperative sector". This sector was to be partially developed by other agencies but could also be launched from within the NYS. He proposed that in the second year about 200 youth might go through the experience of cooperative production by developing the infrastructure of one of the outer islands. A number of production cooperatives were to be identified and a training team of construction workers and *animateurs* of architecture, economics and pedagogy were to work with groups of student cooperators.

The thinking behind this plan was that the second year of the NYS afforded an excellent opportunity for learning the skills of cooperation through practice. On leaving the NYS a number of cooperatives might be launched which would receive further support (educational and financial) from a Government agency created specifically to oversee the development of this new cooperative sector. If these or similar plans are not developed with a sense of urgency and the resources they require made available, there is a great danger that the NYS, rather than being the seedbed of a continuous process of socialist transformation, will be simply an isolated incident in the lives of young Seychellois.

Conclusion

By the time this article is published the NYS will be well into its second year. Some problems will have been resolved; others certainly will have emerged. The events and issues described and identified above relate to the first ten months when the author played a small role in the development of the project. Confronting the day-to-day problems of village life could often induce an overwhelming sense that solutions were beyond the collective grasp of politicians, staff and students. However the opportunity for reflection afforded by six months away from the project encourages a more optimistic perspective. Moreover, eighteen months is a fraction of time, too short to make any authoritative evaluation of whether the Youth Service will fulfill the visionary expectations of France Albert Rene.

The speed with which the NYS was established, and is now being developed has meant that inevitably inadequate time and attention have been paid to complex issues which require thought and thorough analysis. Two questions in particular seem vital: One is the development of a continuing staff training programme which encourages the interchangeability of skills and breaks down traditional barriers between mental

and manual labour. The other is the need for parallel work to be developed with Seychellois adults and parents of NYS students. Ironically, the more successful the NYS is in generating a new consciousness among youth, the greater the likelihood of destructive cultural and generational clashes. Integration of the Youth Service with other village communities in the Republic and conversely the involvement of "outside" adults in the life of the NYS are two important means of preventing such a process taking place.

The challenge to Rene and the other NYS pioneers is whether this ambitiously large project can continue to sustain the claim that it is both a unique experiment in democratic socialist education and, at the same time, a vehicle for economic and cultural regeneration.

Simon Henderson worked for the Youth Service of Seychelles for much of 1981. He is currently a tutor-organizer with the Workers' Educational Association in the North of England working with unemployed adults.
