

ICPD Beyond 2014 Issue Brief: Investing in the Capabilities of Adolescents and Youth

Demographic changes in the past decades have led to the largest generation of young people (10-24 years) in the world today at over 25% of the total population, and over 30% in Africa. Declining fertility rates are providing low- and middle-income countries with a window of opportunity because the proportion of the population that is in the young working years is historically high. These cohorts have the potential to jumpstart economic growth and spur innovation needed for a sustainable future. Yet many young people, especially those living in poverty and who experience marginalization or discrimination, including girls and young women, have been excluded from development efforts. The well-being of these young people hinges on commitments to protect their human rights and investments to develop their capabilities, secure their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), equip them with skills to meet the labour demands of current and emerging economies, enable them to participate in the development of their communities and countries, and prepare them for a healthy, and productive future.

The Demographic Importance of Young People

Young people (10-24 years) accounted for 28% of the population in 2010, 27% in Asia, and more than 31% in Africa. This proportion will remain above 20% in all regions except Europe until 2035, and above 30% in Africa.

Young people are central to the development agenda of the coming two decades, not only because of their large absolute numbers, but also because:

- Decline in fertility after their births means they must be self-supporting since there will not be a larger, younger cohort to support them, and they will live longer lives;
- They will need to support the growing population of older persons;
- The majority of them are growing up in poor countries, where education and health systems are weak, reproductive choices are not guaranteed, good jobs are not abundant, and where mobility may be constrained;
- The information age has increased their awareness about their human rights, and given them a broader vision of what their lives could be.

Uneven Progress Meeting the Needs of Young People

Primary school enrollment rates have reached 90%, with significant gains in parity that have particularly benefitted girls, but there is enormous variation in access and quality across regions and within countries. Further, secondary education remains a challenge for girls in many regions, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, and girls may face gender discrimination that limits their access to education.

Education increases children's capacity to participate socially, economically and politically, and when girls are educated it reduces the likelihood of child marriage and delays childbearing, leading to healthier birth outcomes. Female literacy is associated with increased use of contraception, lower fertility, healthier families and stronger GDP growth. Greater educational attainment also shapes attitudes of both girls and boys towards gender equality.

Young people are overrepresented among those unemployed, in informal or insecure employment, and in poor quality and low paid jobs. Youth comprised nearly 40% of the 197 million people unemployed in 2012 and up to 60% of young people in developing regions are neither working or in school, or are engaged in irregular employment. Creating employment opportunities for youth is a critical challenge as 600 million productive jobs need to be

generated globally over the next decade to absorb current unemployment levels and provide employment opportunities to the 40 million labor market entrants each year.

Despite a global rise in the age at first marriage and the fact that a majority of countries have a legal age of marriage of 18 years, an estimated 34% of women aged 20-24 in developing regions had been married or in union before age 18, and approximately 12% before age 15 in the period 2000-2011. A significant proportion of adolescent pregnancies result from non-consensual sex, and most take place in the context of early marriage. Despite declines in adolescent pregnancies over the last two decades, more than 15 million girls age 15 to 19 give birth every year. Adolescent birth rates are highest in poor countries, and in all countries they are clustered among the poorest and least educated.

Adolescent pregnancy has lifelong consequences on girls' health and opportunity, with girls under age 15 five times more likely to die during childbirth than women over 20. Pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among 15 to 19 year olds in low- and middle-income countries. Many girls who become pregnant drop out of school or are dismissed from school, drastically limiting their future opportunities, including future earnings, and both their own health and the health of their children.

Rates of adolescent pregnancy, unsafe abortions, maternal deaths, STIs and HIV highlight significant gaps in coverage of SRH information, education, and services for young people. For example, in 2009 young people accounted for approximately 41% of new HIV infections worldwide. For girls in particular, adolescence and young adulthood are accompanied by acute SRH needs. These unaddressed needs highlight the urgency of providing SRH information, education and services for young people to ensure healthy and productive futures for themselves and their

communities. Meeting these needs is further challenged by the absence of comparable health data on young people, particularly SRH indicators for youngest adolescents aged 10-14. Building the knowledge sector is essential to plan and provide for this cohort.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that emphasizes gender and power, from an early age, and in keeping with the evolving capacities of young people, has been shown to positively impact health outcomes. CSE enables young people to stay healthy; to promote values of gender equality, mutual respect, tolerance, and non-violence; and to plan their lives and develop lifelong healthy behaviours. Further, evidence shows that CSE does not lead to earlier sexual initiation or increased sexual activity. CSE must target and reach all young people, both in and out of school.

Half of all non-communicable diseases (NCDs) can be attributed to behaviours that begin in childhood and adolescence, such as tobacco use, alcohol use, lack of a healthy diet and physical activity. Given the shift in the global burden of disease towards NCDs, it is crucial to reach young people, both in and out of school, early in life to enable and foster life-long positive health behaviours.

Migration and urbanization hold particular appeal for young people and can improve livelihood opportunities and living conditions, but also come with risks to health and housing security. Proactive planning for urbanization, that maximizes the benefits of population concentration and economies of scale that occur in urban areas, is crucial to providing effective services for young people, including quality education, SRH services, and healthcare, as well as for ensuring their rights and opportunities for employment, innovation and entrepreneurship.

It is critical to involve young people in the planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and actions for which they are the intended beneficiaries. 76% of

governments responding to the ICPD Beyond 2014 Global Survey reported instituting concrete procedures and mechanisms for the participation of young people.

Key Messages and Areas for Action

Investments in human development targeting adolescents and youth are critical to ensure that young people have the capabilities and opportunities to define their futures and spur the innovations needed for a sustainable future.

Development plans and efforts must safeguard the human rights and invest in the capabilities of young people, including in quality education, decent employment, effective livelihood skills, and access to sexual reproductive health and rights, so that every young person has knowledge, skills and opportunities for a healthy and productive life.

Removing barriers and promoting universal access to youth-friendly SRH information, services and commodities, and providing comprehensive sexuality education, are essential to enable young people to delay childbearing and acquire the education and skills needed to lead long, healthy lives, and contribute productively to a sustainable future.