

Sub region's first study on adolescents reveals areas of concern

ST LUCIA, 4 March 2018- A landmark study on adolescents in St Lucia developed by the Government of Saint Lucia and UNICEF have identified several concerns for this key demographic, which represents 16 per cent of the country's population.

The *Adolescent Well-being and Equity in Saint Lucia* study which was released last week provides an up-to-date and comprehensive snapshot of the social, economic and educational lives of adolescents, their well-being and any inequities and injustices they face. Saint Lucia is the first country in the Eastern Caribbean to undertake such a detailed assessment of the critical 10-19 age group.

The research highlights several areas of concern. Poverty remains significant and although it decreased in the last decade, nearly 1 in 3 adolescents is still poor; that's about 9,500 young people. In addition, data show that a third of adolescents are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and the great majority of those over the school age are unemployed.

While the education system consistently achieves high school attendance rates, just 36 per cent of students pass Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) and there is a substantial mismatch between the educational needs of employers and the qualifications of job seekers. Over 40 per cent of job openings require post-secondary qualifications, which are held by less than 10 per cent of those seeking work.

Almost 60 per cent of adolescents live with one biological parent (mostly mothers). This already high prevalence of single-parent families is increasing. A positive development is the reduction, by 30 per cent, of the adolescent pregnancy rate in the last decade, although the figure is still relatively high. Two thirds of young adolescents having experienced violent discipline in their home, more than half of it physical.

The study however highlights that a great deal of progress has been made and recent policy and legislative reforms have positively impacted adolescents. For example, on 20 November 2018, the Government of Saint Lucia passed the Child Justice Bill and the Children Care, Protection and Adoption Bill. Their passage was a crucial step to operationalize the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and can help address the neglect, abuse, exploitation and violence affecting young people.

Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment and Local Government Leonard Montoute pledged that government will use the rich source of data in the report to help plan policies for the country's young people who face challenges which previous generation of adolescents did not have to contemplate.

"Despite living in an era that is laden with opportunities for personal advancement, the risk that the ordinary Saint Lucia youth is currently faced with is equally unprecedented, and in most cases outweighs the opportunities. At the core of this turbulent period of development for each and every youth, is the issue of decisions, be it positive, negative or making no decision at all," the Minister added.

Dr Aloys Kamuragiye, Representative for the UNICEF's Office for the Eastern Caribbean Area, said the report compels action.

“The task going forward will be for all actors - government, private sector, academia, development partners, non-governmental organizations, and parents – to understand and ensure that the second decade of life for our young people is their first window of opportunity, and that we can work together successfully to address their needs,” he added.

In addition to providing data needed for monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, both the Government of Saint Lucia and UNICEF expect the findings from this study to help policy makers, Government, NGOs, and advocacy organizations to identify marginalized adolescents, take appropriate policy and programme decisions, prioritize investments and motivate additional data collection, analysis and research.