On 12 January 2010, the central region of Haiti was devastated by the strongest earthquake the country had experienced in more than 200 years. Over 220,000 people were killed, 300,000 were injured and 1.6 million were displaced and forced to seek shelter in spontaneous settlements. Children, who make up nearly half the country’s total population, have suffered acutely in the earthquake’s aftermath. UNICEF estimates that half of those displaced are children, and 500,000 children are considered extremely vulnerable and require child protection services.

Almost a quarter (23 per cent) of Haiti’s population is between the ages of 10 and 19, and their situation was extremely difficult even before the earthquake. As the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti lagged well behind the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean in many indicators, and even behind other least developed countries throughout the world. For example, net secondary school attendance in 2005–2009 stood at just 20 per cent (18 per cent for boys and 21 per cent for girls), compared to around 70 per cent for the region as a whole and roughly 28 per cent for the world’s least developed countries. Adolescent marriage and pregnancy rates are substantially higher than in other countries in the region. Among 20- to 24-year-old women surveyed in 2005–2006, nearly one third had married by age 18 and 48 per cent by age 20; 30 per cent gave birth for the first time before the age of 20.

These poor education, health and protection outcomes are a direct result of lack of access to services and basic necessities such as water and food due to poverty, political instability, violence and gender-based discrimination. Natural disasters have been a recurring challenge, but the recent earthquake destroyed infrastructure and lives on an unprecedented scale.

The Government has developed an Action Plan for National Recovery and Development of Haiti, with the goal of addressing both short-term and long-term needs. Working with international partners, who pledged US$5.3 billion in the first 18 months following the earthquake and nearly $10 billion over the next three years, the Government is committed to rebuilding the country to be better than its pre-earthquake state. The plan focuses on all aspects of redevelopment, from physical infrastructure and institution-building to cultural preservation, education and food and water security. It prioritizes the needs of pregnant women as well as children’s education and health.

A particularly notable aspect of the rebuilding process so far has been the significant role played by young people. Youth groups were critical as responders in search and rescue, first aid and essential goods transport immediately following the earthquake. Since then, they have been important community-based helpers, imparting health information and building infrastructure. The Ecoclubes group, with chapters in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, has been using Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization materials to provide information on malaria prevention to low-literacy communities. The Water and Youth Movement initiated a campaign to raise $65,000 to train and equip six poor communities with water pumps.

In addition, UNICEF, Plan International and their partners facilitated the voices of 1,000 children in the Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) process. Child-friendly focus group discussions were held throughout nine of the country’s departments. Adolescents and youth who took part raised issues of gender, disability, vulnerability, access to services, disaster risk reduction, and participation in decision-making and accountability mechanisms for the PDNA.

Through partnerships that include young people, programmes have been initiated to vaccinate children, facilitate their return to school, raise awareness of HIV and AIDS, encourage holistic community development and promote sanitation. However, these and future efforts will require continued financial and moral commitment to overcome the host of challenges still to be tackled. One of these is meeting the pressing needs of the most disadvantaged, such as those who lost limbs in the earthquake.

Going forward, it will be critical to listen and respond to the voices of Haiti’s young people of all ages, in order to meet their needs, enable them to make the transition to adulthood in such turbulent times – regardless of their poverty status, urban or rural location, gender or ability – and rebuild a stronger, more equitable Haiti.

See References, page 78.