UNICEF: Investing in adolescents can break cycles of poverty and inequity


Strong investments during the last two decades have resulted in enormous gains for young children up to the age of 10. The 33 per cent drop in the global under-five mortality rate shows that many more young lives have been saved, in most of the world’s regions girls are almost as likely as boys to go to primary school, and millions of children now benefit from improved access to safe water and critical medicines such as routine vaccinations.

On the other hand, there have been fewer gains in areas critically affecting adolescents. More than seventy million adolescents of lower secondary age are currently out of school, and on a global level girls still lag behind boys in secondary school participation. Without education, adolescents cannot develop the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the risks of exploitation, abuse and violence that are at height during the second decade of life. In Brazil for example, the lives of 26,000 children under one were saved between 1998 and 2008, leading to a sharp decrease in infant mortality. In the same decade 81,000 Brazilian adolescents aged 15-19 were murdered.

“Adolescence is a pivot point – an opportunity to consolidate the gains we have made in early childhood or risk seeing those gains wiped out,” said Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director. “We need to focus more attention now on reaching adolescents -- especially adolescent girls -- investing in education, health and other measures to engage them in the process of improving their own lives.”

Adolescence is a critically important age. It is during this second decade of life that inequities and poverty manifest starkly. Young people who are poor or marginalized are less likely to make the transition to secondary education during adolescence, and they are more likely to experience exploitation, abuse and violence such as domestic labour and child marriage – especially if they are girls. In the developing world, (excluding China), the poorest adolescent girls are roughly three times as likely to be married before the age of 18 than their peers in the richest quintile of households. Girls who marry early are most at risk in being caught up in a negative cycle of premature child-bearing, high rates of maternal mortality and child undernutrition. Girls also experience higher rates of domestic and/or sexual violence than boys, and are more susceptible to the risk of HIV infections.

The vast majority of today’s adolescents (88 per cent) live in developing countries. Many face a unique set of challenges. Although adolescents around the world are generally healthier today than in the past, many health risks remain significant, including injuries, eating disorders, substance abuse and mental health issues; it is estimated that around 1 in every 5 adolescents suffers from a mental health or behavioural problem.

With 81 million young people out of work globally in 2009, youth unemployment remains a concern in almost every country. An increasingly technological labour market requires skills that many young people do not possess. This not only results in a waste of young people’s talents,
but also in a lost opportunity for the communities in which they live. In many countries large teenage populations are a unique demographic asset that is often overlooked. By investing in adolescent education and training, countries can reap a large and productive workforce, contributing significantly to the growth of national economies.

Adolescents face numerous global challenges both today and in the future, among them the current bout of economic turmoil, climate change and environmental degradation, explosive urbanization and migration, aging societies, the rising costs of healthcare, and escalating humanitarian crises.

To enable adolescents to effectively deal with these challenges, targeted investments in the following key areas are necessary:

- Improving data collection to increase the understanding of adolescents’ situation and meet their rights;
- Investing in education and training so that adolescents have the means to lift themselves out of poverty and contribute to their national economies;
- Expanding opportunities for youth to participate and voice their opinion, for example in national youth councils, youth forums, community service initiatives, online activism and other avenues which enable adolescents to make their voices heard;
- Promoting laws, policies and programs that protect the rights of adolescents and enable them to overcome barriers to essential services;
- Stepping up the fight against poverty and inequity through child sensitive programs to prevent adolescents from being prematurely catapulted into adulthood.

“Millions of young people around the world are waiting for a greater action by all of us. Giving all young people the tools they need to improve their own lives will foster a generation of economically-independent citizens who are fully engaged in civic life and able to actively contribute to their communities,” said Lake.

**Note to the editor**

As part of its commitment to reaching out to adolescents worldwide, UNICEF today re-launched Voices of Youth (VOY), a youth website on global themes. The platform is youth driven and allows young people to learn, discuss and take action on matters that affect their lives. For more information on VOY visit http://www.voicesofyouth.org

**Attention broadcasters:**

Broadcast quality video footage will be available free of charge at www.thenewsmarket.com/unicef

**About UNICEF**

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world’s largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF and its work visit: www.unicef.org

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