

The Development of the Global Youth Agenda

In 1995, the UN General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, setting forth a global framework to address key issues related to youth and reflecting a dialogue ongoing since the 1960s. The key issues concerning youth had been raised in internationally negotiated documents, such as the Programme of Action (PoA) of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.¹

Development, peace, and participation have been the three most popular themes in the past four decades to raise issues of concern for youth. Reflecting these themes, the World Programme of Action for Youth outlines 10 priority areas of concern for young people: *education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure time activities, girls and young women, and participation*. Youth's sexual and reproductive rights and health (SRRH) are identified as an important element in improving the situation and well-being of youth in all 10 areas, particularly in the ICPD PoA. This document stresses the necessity of increased access by youth to sexual and reproductive health services, good quality information and education regarding sexuality, and young people's participation in programs and policies which affect their SRRH.

In 2003, at least eight years after adoption of the ICPD PoA and the World PoA for Youth, the UN Commission for Social Development identified five new priority areas significant to the well-being of young people: *globalization, information and communication technologies, HIV and AIDS, conflict prevention, and intergenerational relations*. The remainder of this fact sheet will paint a picture of youth and the state of the world 10 years after ICPD.

Although the terms **youth** and **young people** are conceived differently in various parts of the world, they most commonly refer to adolescents and young adults between the ages of 10 and 24, where

- *adolescent* describes those between 10 and 19,
- *youth* describes those between 15 and 24, and
- *young people* can be used to describe either grouping.

Despite these commonly used categories, countries often use different distinctions, and "youth" can include people up to the ages of 29 or 35.

Youth is thought to be a transition stage between childhood and adulthood, but it is a very challenging period of time when many significant life events occur and decisions are made.

Youth are a significant group in the world.

- The number of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 is 1.1 billion; youth constitute 18 percent of the global population. Youth and children together, including all those aged 24 years and younger, account for nearly 40 percent of the world's population.
- Geographically speaking, the largest population of youth is concentrated in Asia and the Pacific. Approximately 60 percent of youth live in Asia; 15 percent, in Africa; 10 percent, in Latin America and the Caribbean; and the remaining 15 percent, in developed countries and regions.
- Today millions of adolescents face the prospect of early marriage, early childbearing, incomplete education and the threat of HIV and AIDS. Increasing youth's knowledge, improving services for young people, and encouraging youth's participation in programme decisions will help all young people to lead healthier and more productive lives.

Many young people are impoverished and face difficulty accessing education and employment.

- About 85 percent of the world's population of youth live in developing countries. Nearly half (45.9 percent) live in low-income countries, while another third (34.1 percent) live in lower middle-income countries. The remaining fifth (20 percent) of youth live in upper middle- and high-income countries.
- Approximately 238 million youth live in extreme poverty—that is, they live on less than \$1 a day; 462 million youth survive on less than \$2 a day.
- About 255 million young people live in the 19 countries with the largest poverty gaps; 15 of these 19 countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.

¹ Other internationally negotiated documents that influenced the World Programme of Action for Youth include the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, adopted by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the Copenhagen Declaration and the Programme of Action of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, and the Platform for Action adopted by the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women.

- Experts estimate that, in the 49 countries classified as having a high proportion of undernourished people, 110 million youth live in hunger.
- About 133 million youth in the world are illiterate.
- Youth comprise 41 percent of the world's unemployed people.

Globalization is reshaping the lives of young people worldwide.

- There are many different kinds of globalization, including economic, socio-cultural, and governance-related, that are increasing the interconnectedness of the world's nations and peoples.
- The benefits and progress often associated with economic globalization mostly accrue to developed countries and the wealthy. At the same time, privatization of services, the concentration of wealth in the northern hemisphere, and the widening gap between rich and poor disproportionately affect poor youth, limiting their opportunities for healthy life.
- Powerful multilateral institutions—such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—limit resource allocation to social services, leaving young people vulnerable to economic and social conditions aggravated by international financial crises.
- Free trade laws have increased the number of export-oriented, manufacturing (EOM) industries placed by transnational corporations in developing countries, where there is a plentiful supply of cheap labour. Poor young people, especially women, are the largest group of workers in these EOMs. As they leave rural areas in search of employment, poor young people often suffer from lax enforcement of labour codes and even from human rights abuses.
- Rather than focusing on agricultural output to meet local needs, the WTO and governments encourage increased production for foreign markets. As local agricultural activities decrease, in part due to declining support from the government and the growth of large-scale agribusiness, farmers and farm workers, including many youth, find their livelihood threatened. Importantly, local agricultural activity is often swallowed up by large agribusiness.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic has a major impact on the world's youth.

- About 11.8 million young people are living with HIV or AIDS; 7.3 million of those infected are young women. Youth amount to one-third of the total global population living with HIV or AIDS.
- On average 6,000 young people become infected HIV each day, most of them young women. Young people account for half of all new cases of HIV infection worldwide.
- About 78 percent of all young people living with HIV or AIDS reside in sub-Saharan Africa; 14 percent, in Asia and the Pacific.
- The 2001 UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS noted, "poverty, underdevelopment and illiteracy are among the principal contributing factors to the spread of HIV/AIDS".
- Thus far, AIDS has orphaned at least 13 million children currently under the age of 15. Young people who have lost one or both parents to AIDS are often highly vulnerable to exploitation, stigma, discrimination, and limited life opportunities, thus also placing them at increased risk for HIV infection.
- Young people infected with or affected by HIV or AIDS often face disrupted schooling due to demands at home for their help, the inability of sick or stressed parents to pay school fees, and stigma and discrimination.

Violence and Conflict

- Experts estimate that 1.6 million people die each year as a result of violence, including homicide and war. Violence is one of the leading causes of death for youth and young adults.
- Political instability and conflict leave young people especially vulnerable to violence. Boys and young men make up a large proportion of those recruited or forced to fight in conflicts and wars, and male children are not exempt, as there are more than 300,000 child soldiers around the world. Girls and young women are especially vulnerable to rape and may be forced into sex slavery for older military commanders.
- Violence and conflict also affect young people by interrupting schooling, disrupting basic health services, and inflicting psychological trauma.
- Specific forms of violence are directed at young women. For example, although it is difficult to gauge exact numbers, experts estimate that between 700,000 and two million women and female children were victims of sex trafficking in 2001 alone; most of these were young women. Another form of gender-based violence is the practice of female genital

cutting—and as many as two million girls and female children are at risk of undergoing this painful and harmful procedure each year.

Sexual and reproductive rights and health are fundamentally linked to all other priority concerns for young people.

- When young people face uncertainty and insecurity about prospects for education, employment and income, they are less likely to practice healthy and safe sexual behaviours, to have stable interpersonal relationships, or to make informed decisions about if and when to have children.
- Poverty too often results in limited access to education and employment. Poverty is also linked to limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, including information and education. Thus, poverty is linked to increased risk of exposure to STIs, including HIV, and to unwanted births and higher reproductive risks among adolescents.
- Unprotected sexual activity—non-use or inconsistent use of condoms—is young people’s primary risk for HIV infection. Young people have unprotected sex for many reasons including forcible rape, lack of information, peer influence, and limited access to condoms. Young women are more vulnerable to HIV infection than are young men due to biological factors and to 1) cultural norms that promote sexual relationships between younger women and older men, 2) pressure from older partners, 3) rape and sexual abuse, 4) forced and early marriage, and 5) economic and gender inequities that force many young women to trade sex for food, shelter, protection, or money.

Information and statistics cited from:

- Oxfam International Youth Parliament. (2003) *Highly Affected, Rarely Considered: The International Youth Parliament Commission's Report on the Impacts of Globalisation on Young People*. Sydney: Oxfam Community Aid Abroad.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2004) *World Youth Report 2003: The Global Situation of Young People*. New York: United Nations.
- United Nations Population Fund (2003). "Making 1 Billion Count: Investing in Adolescents' Health and Rights." *State of the World Population 2003*. New York: UNFPA.

If you have any questions or comments about any of the Fact Sheets produced for the Working Group on Youth, please contact Youth Coalition at research@youthcoalition.org or Advocates for Youth at questions@advocatesforyouth.org.

