

# THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN 2011

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# Adolescence

## An Age of Opportunity

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# The Imperative of Investing in Adolescence

Among the multitude of issues, goals, targets and priorities on the international development agenda, adolescents – defined by the United Nations as those between 10 and 19 years of age – seldom come first. Particularly when development budgets are constrained, as now, conventional wisdom might dictate devoting most resources to children in the first decade of their lives. Investment in health, nutrition, basic education and protection for younger children has in recent years secured a significantly better start in life for many. With this achievement, however, comes a responsibility to ensure that support for children continues as they grow and develop. Lasting change in the lives of children and young people, a critical underlying motivation of the Millennium Declaration, can only be achieved by complementing the commitment to the first decade of life with recognition of the importance of the second.

## Investing in adolescents is compelling for at least five reasons:

- First, it is right in principle under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which applies to adolescents under the age of 18, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which applies to all adolescent girls. If we are to fulfil our commitments to children and young people under these instruments and earnestly pursue our pledge to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, we must make adolescent well-being and rights an integral part of the agenda.
- Second, it is the most effective way to consolidate the historic gains achieved for children in early (0–4 years) and middle (5–9 years) childhood since 1990, notably the 33 per cent reduction in the global under-five mortality rate, the near elimination of gender gaps in primary school enrolment in several regions and the considerable improvements in access to primary schooling, safe water, routine immunizations and critical medicines such as anti-retroviral drugs.
- Third, investing in adolescents can accelerate the fight against poverty, socio-economic disparities and gender discrimination. Inequities often become starkly manifest during adolescence: children who are poor or marginalized are less likely to make the transition to secondary education and more likely to experience such protection abuses as child marriage, early sex, violence and domestic labour – especially if they happen to be girls. Denying adolescents their rights to quality education, health care, protection and participation perpetuates the vicious cycle of



*Hawa, 12, (second from left) recently re-enrolled in school following the intervention of the National Network of Mothers' Associations for Girls, which advocates for girls' education, Cameroon.*

- Third, investing in adolescents can accelerate the fight against poverty, socio-economic disparities and gender discrimination. Inequities often become starkly manifest during adolescence: children who are poor or marginalized are less likely to make the transition to secondary education and more likely to experience such protection abuses as child marriage, early sex, violence and domestic labour – especially if they happen to be girls. Denying adolescents their rights to quality education, health care, protection and participation perpetuates the vicious cycle of

poverty and exclusion that robs them of the chance to develop their capacities to the fullest.

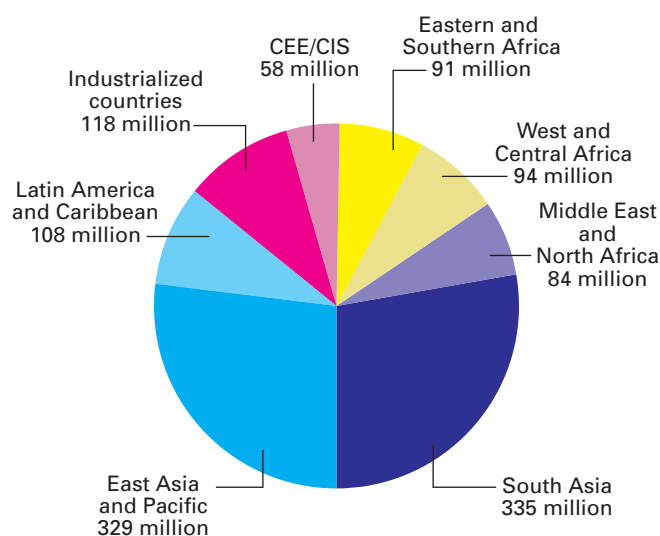
- Fourth, it will enhance our efforts to address the great challenges of our times: climate change, economic turmoil, explosive urbanization and migration, HIV and AIDS, and humanitarian crises of increasing frequency and severity. In order to effectively deal with the intergenerational consequences of these challenges, adolescents will need to be treated as equal partners and equipped with the appropriate skills, capacities and knowledge.
- Finally, while adolescents are often referred to as the ‘future generation’ of adults, we should not forget that they are also firmly part of the present generation of global citizens – living, working, contributing to households, communities, societies and econo-

mies. No less than young children do they deserve recognition, protection and care, essential commodities and services, and opportunities and support.

Indeed in some contexts – particularly with regard to protection risks such as child marriage, commercial sexual exploitation and conflict with the law – adolescents, of all children, may have the greatest needs. Yet little investment and assistance is delivered in these important areas, sometimes due to political, cultural and societal sensitivities. Given the strong link between protection, education and child survival, it is clear that investment in adolescents, especially girls, has the power to reduce the number of child deaths, improve nutrition and address violence, abuse and exploitation of children and women in earnest.

For these reasons, and in support of the second International Year of Youth, which began in August 2010, UNICEF has dedicated the 2011 edition of its flagship *The State of the World’s Children* report to adolescents and adolescence. The report examines the challenges girls and boys face as they enter the second decade of life, outlining not only the risks and vulnerabilities of this pivotal time but also the singular opportunities it can offer, both for the adolescents themselves and for the societies they live in. The accumulated evidence demonstrates that investing in adolescents provides our best hope of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and inequity that weakens communities and countries and imperils the development and rights of countless children. By taking action now, we have a chance to nurture a generation empowered to realize their rights, laying the foundation for a more peaceful, tolerant and equitable world, in which each successive generation of children can thrive.

**Adolescent population (10–19 years) by region, 2009**



**Source:** United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*, <[www.esa.un.org/unpd/wpp2008/index.htm](http://www.esa.un.org/unpd/wpp2008/index.htm)>, accessed October 2010.

# Adolescent Rights

Not all adolescents enjoy access to quality education, health care, protection and participation. An accurate assessment of their current situation is the first step towards monitoring and securing their rights. Unfortunately, comprehensive disaggregated data, essential to tracking progress, remain scarce, particularly in developing countries. National and international information systems for children focus mostly on the early years, when health threats are greatest and school attendance easier to assess. Although an increased focus on holistic child protection has produced some key indicators on issues that affect adolescents – such as child labour, child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting and violence and disability – the scope for more and better information remains considerable.

## Health

Adolescents around the world are generally healthier today than in the past. Thanks largely to investments in early and middle childhood, those who reach their second decade have already negotiated the years of greatest mortality risk. Accidents account for over a third of adolescent deaths: in 2004, nearly 400,000 adolescents died of unintentional injuries. Many could be prevented by improving road safety, especially in areas where rapid urbanization coincides with a large adolescent population. Boys are more frequently casualties of road traffic accidents, and they are also more prone to injury or death from violence, whether random or organized.

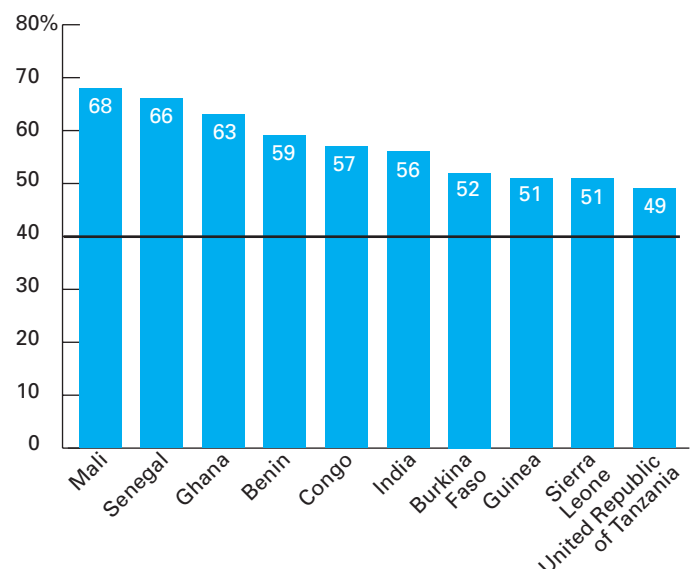
In part, the vulnerability of adolescents stems from their natural propensity to take risks and test the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour. As they

seek to establish an autonomous identity, they may experiment with tobacco, alcohol and other substances or engage in risky behaviour that can lead to injuries or long-term health problems.

## Nutrition

Negligible in earlier childhood, gender differences in nutrition become apparent in adolescence and are particularly striking in West and Central Africa and South Asia. The implications of nutritional difficulties can be particularly serious for adolescent girls: many of those living in regions with very high rates of anaemia and undernutrition are married and become pregnant during adolescence, and are thus more likely to die or suffer complications during pregnancy and delivery. Overweight and obesity also undermine the health of

**Prevalence of anaemia among adolescent girls (15–19) in a subset of high-prevalence countries with available data**



\*The horizontal line at the 40 per cent mark represents the threshold at which anaemia is considered a severe national public health issue.

Source: DHS and national surveys, 2003–2009.



*A girl asks a question at a special assembly held at the Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem, New York City, USA.*

many adolescents in both industrialized and developing countries.

### **Sexual and reproductive health**

Many adolescents around the world are engaging in sexual relations. Household survey data indicate that in developing countries (excluding China) around 11 per cent of females and 6 per cent of males aged 15–19 claim to have had sex before the age of 15. To stay healthy and safe, adolescents need access to high-quality sexual and reproductive health services and information from an early age. Significant gender disparities exist in this area: while adolescent boys more frequently engage in higher-risk sex, they are also more likely to use condoms. The greater vulnerability of girls to sexual and reproductive health risks as well as gender-related protection risks in many countries and communities makes it especially important that they be empowered with the requisite knowledge and access. Child marriage is associated with a high likelihood of complications in pregnancy and childbirth – among the leading causes of death for girls between the ages of 15 and 19 worldwide – as well as an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Insufficient control over their own fertility leads many adolescent girls to resort to unsafe abortions, risking serious injury or death and often putting themselves in conflict with the law.

### **HIV and AIDS**

HIV and AIDS pose a great threat to the health and survival of the current generation of adolescents. Girls are at far greater risk of contracting HIV than boys, both as a result of greater physiological susceptibility and because they often lack control over sexual situations and condom use; sexual violence, both inside



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and outside of marriage, further heightens their risk of infection. Investment in reproductive health services and dissemination of sound knowledge about HIV empowers adolescents in their choices and behaviours, and there are indications that these efforts are beginning to bear fruit – though here, too, gender disparities exist. While more adolescent girls than boys get tested for HIV, boys are more likely to have comprehensive knowledge about prevention. Making such services and information available in early adolescence (10–14) is imperative to curbing the spread of HIV; by late adolescence (15–19), the risk of infection for young people in high-prevalence countries is already considerable.

### **Mental health**

For many people, mental health problems first surface during adolescence. Many countries are seeing an increase in cases of depression, eating disorders (particularly among girls) and self-destructive behaviours. While these often stem from low self-esteem and the strong pressure to conform to unrealistic expectations, contributing factors are thought to include violence, ill treatment, abuse and neglect, and bullying.

### **Disability**

Nobody knows how many adolescents are affected by physical or mental disability. Frequently segregated from society or regarded as objects of charity, disabled

adolescents are less likely to attend and complete school and thus more likely to be impoverished as adults; many also fall victim to violence and abuse. Extending an equity-based approach to disability can effectively alter perceptions and eliminate some of the obstacles that children and adolescents in this group face. Access to transport, buildings, educational facilities and other resources is crucial to ensuring that they can enjoy the opportunities afforded their peers.

## Education

Secondary education is critical to adolescent development and well-being. To successfully negotiate the multiple risks to their development and rights, adolescents must be armed with a broad spectrum of knowledge and essential skills, including solving problems creatively, finding and critically evaluating information and communicating effectively. Where secondary schooling is available, primary schools tend to be of higher quality and to enrol more children, while communities benefit from greater civic participation, lower levels of youth violence, reduced poverty and greater social empowerment.

Most children start secondary education in early adolescence. But within this age group, 1 in 5 is not in school at all (1 in 3 in sub-Saharan Africa) – a total of almost 71 million adolescents. Meanwhile, a third of adolescents who attend school are still completing primary grades. Despite significant progress over the last decade, many millions do not make the transition to secondary grades. Incomplete primary education, higher costs, greater distance to school and economic imperatives are just some of the obstacles preventing children from continuing their schooling.

Education yields many long-term benefits, particularly for adolescent girls, contributing to later marriage, lower fertility rates and reduced domestic violence as well as lower infant mortality and improved child nutrition. In most regions of the world, girls' attendance rates are lower than those of boys. At the same time, in almost all developed countries and in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as East Asia and the Pacific, girls outperform boys in school achievement.

Adolescents from marginalized groups often lose out even where secondary schooling is available. To grant them the opportunity to gain the skills to make a decent living, and the knowledge they need to protect themselves and realize their rights, a greater variety of educational options is required. Educationally disadvantaged adolescents can benefit from non-formal or peer education, vocational and technical courses and flexible 'catch-up' programmes for those whose schooling has been interrupted. By focusing more keenly on equity in education, we can better reach vulnerable adolescents excluded by poverty, HIV and AIDS, disability or ethnicity.

## Protection

Many of the key threats to children from violence, abuse and exploitation are at their height during adolescence. It is primarily adolescents, mainly boys, who are forced into conflict as child combatants or compelled to work in hazardous conditions as child labourers, severely curtailing their chances of completing an education or escaping from poverty. Millions find themselves in conflict with the law; others are denied their rights to protection by inadequate legal systems or by social norms that permit their exploitation and

abuse. Acts of violence – physical, sexual or psychological – take place within the home, school and community, perpetrated by both peers and adults. Adolescents with disabilities, those living on the streets, those in conflict with the law and refugee and displaced children are particularly vulnerable.

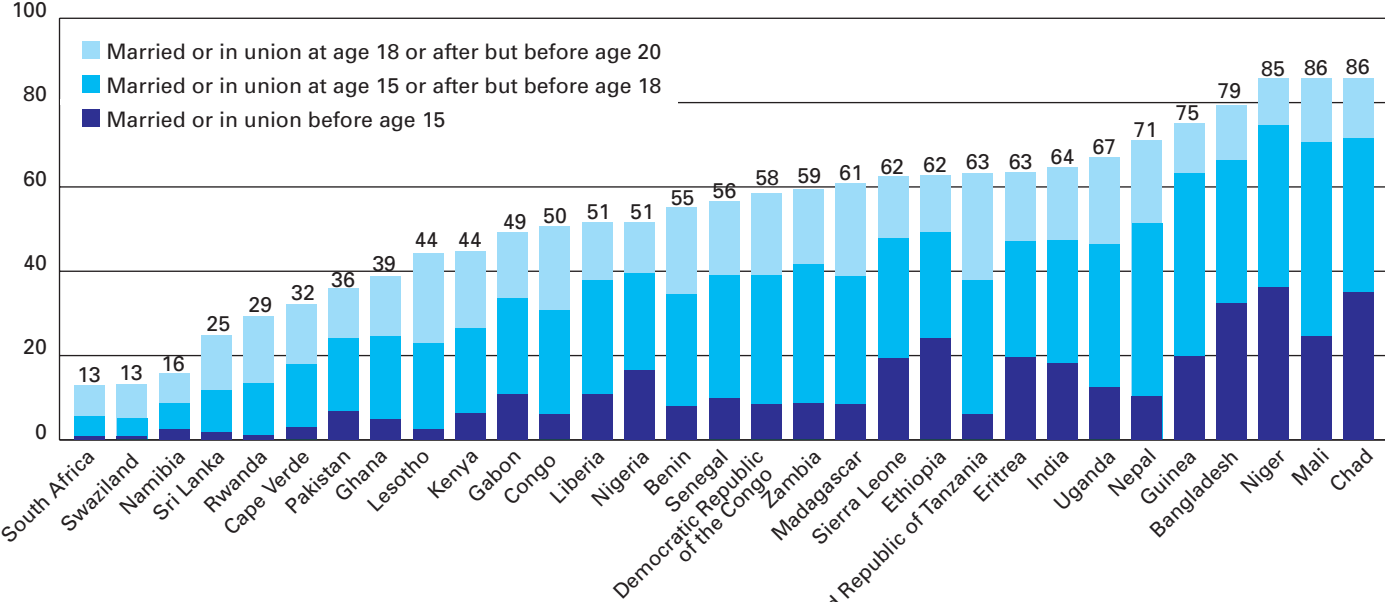
A thorough understanding of the extent to which adolescents are subject to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and discrimination is hampered by a lack of reliable data. Such information is difficult to collect because many forms of protection risk occur in clandestine, extra-legal environments and few of those involved are willing or able to report on the issues. Child trafficking – be it into forced labour, marriage, prostitution or domestic work – is one such area. Over

the past decade many countries have introduced new laws to curb trafficking, though some offenders continue to go unprosecuted.

Threats to adolescent rights are exacerbated by gender discrimination and exclusion. Girls experience higher rates of domestic and sexual violence than boys; these abuses reinforce male dominance in the household and community, impeding female empowerment. Around 1 in 3 women in the developing world (excluding China) is married before the age of 18. Child marriage often leaves girls isolated and powerless within the household of their husband’s family, making them more vulnerable to abuse and often forcing them to bear an excessive burden of domestic work. Female genital mutilation/cutting, though declining, still occurs in 29 countries.

**Marriage by age of first union in selected countries with available disaggregated data**

Percentage of women aged 20–24 who were first married or in union by ages 15, 18 or 20



Source: DHS and other national surveys, 2000–2009.





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*A young girl is interviewed by 16-year-old journalists from the Young People's Media Network, which promotes the establishment of youth networks, Tbilisi, Georgia.*

Combatting harmful practices that predominantly affect women and girls requires rights-based programmes that promote discussion and broad participation as a means to generate consensus and create social change. In addition to fostering greater equality between women and men, such efforts can improve maternal health, reduce child mortality, diminish educational disadvantage and strengthen protection for children and women.

## Participation

Adolescents do not become active and responsible citizens overnight; they must be empowered to learn and practice citizenship over the course of their transition to adulthood. Recognized as one of the four guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right of children to express their views freely on all matters affecting them is a vital component of their survival, development and education. Considerable effort has been made to develop laws and policies that support adolescent participation, but their implementation is not always effective or consistent. Many long-standing practices and attitudes, as well as political and economic barriers, continue to impede adolescents' right to voice their opinions and have them duly taken into account. Nor is that right sufficiently extended to those children who may have difficulties expressing themselves, including girls, adolescents with disabilities and minority, indigenous and migrant children.

In addition to being a fundamental right, participation stimulates the full development of the personality and evolving capacities of the child. Through meaningful civic engagement, young people can learn about their rights, explore a spectrum of social relations and prepare to be active citizens of the future, bringing energy, enthusiasm and fresh perspectives to the development of their communities.

Traditionally, young people enter civic life by joining formal bodies such as youth councils and parliaments; today's adolescents increasingly choose online or interactive activism. As 'digital natives', accustomed to a world of interactive, digital communication, adolescents – particularly those in industrialized countries – are forging a new style of political activism built around relevant and agile networks on the Web. Where possible, adolescents should be encouraged to create their own, adolescent-led organizations, through which they can carve out a space for meaningful participation and representation.

Used appropriately, the Internet, social networking and other communications technologies can be excellent tools for empowering children to speak out on matters that are important to them, lending momentum and geographical breadth to child-led activism. Enabling all young people to voice their opinions via a common platform can help level inequalities and overcome discrimination, especially for adolescents with disabilities, girls or those living in rural areas where youth associations may not exist.

# Global Challenges for Adolescents

## Climate change and the environment

For the current generation of adolescents, the threats posed by climate change have an immediacy that escapes many of their elders, who may not live to see its full impact unfold. Nine out of ten adolescents live in developing countries, which are expected to bear the brunt of the effects of environmental degradation, loss of vital natural resources and greater food and water insecurity – and which tend to lack the systems and resources to rapidly restore ‘normality’ following natural disasters. Climate-related disruptions can have long-term deleterious consequences for the lives and prospects of adolescents, potentially compromising their health and nutrition and interrupting their education. Displaced families or those who have lost their livelihoods may no longer be able to send their children to school or pay for health care.

Keenly aware that they will be saddled with much of the cost and burden of mitigating and adapting to climate change, many adolescents are passionately advocating for doing something about it now. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has sparked vibrant dialogue among young people across the globe; in 2009, youth were officially recognized as civil society actors in the UNFCCC negotiating process. Incorporating adolescents’ perspectives and encouraging their participation in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation strategies at the national and international level is not just a matter of principle – it is an imperative. The magnitude of our current environmental challenges demands an intergenerational response, in which adolescents work alongside adults as integral partners in decision-making.

## Poverty, unemployment and globalization

The future economic and social development of nations depends on harnessing the energy and developing the skills of young people. It is during adolescence that many people have their first experience of work, whether formal or informal, and often they are expected to play a part in supporting their families. Appropriate work can be beneficial, as long as it does not preclude the fulfilment of rights. With 81 million young people out of work, youth unemployment is now a concern in almost every country. Adolescents struggle to find decent work guaranteeing them a foothold above the poverty line. In many developing countries, the paucity of opportunities for productive full-time employment means that the first experience of work for young people is all too often one of wasted talent, disillusionment, underemployment and continued poverty.

Despite advances in health and education, the benefits of globalization remain out of reach for millions of adolescents. Many of those who have been to school are emerging with insufficient skills to compete in an interconnected world. This skills deficit can hold back entire economies; it is a significant obstacle to higher levels of investment and faster economic growth. Information technology has the potential to remove barriers to education and literacy, and it can unlock many of the benefits of globalization. But this magic key remains out of reach for many: a vast digital divide in access and skills persists, not only between the industrialized and the developing world, particularly the least developed nations, but also between rich and poor within countries. Access and skills training are particularly hard to obtain for disabled adolescents, those from marginalized communities or ethnic minorities and, in some societies, for adolescent girls.

Now is the time to invest in developing the skills adolescents need to propel themselves and their countries' economies towards greater security and prosperity. Many developing countries, particularly low-income nations, currently find themselves at a point of unique demographic opportunity. A high proportion of adolescents in their populations creates a very large productive workforce, opening up a two-decade window for more robust economic development. Four key policy areas – employability, entrepreneurship, equal opportunities for young men and women, and job creation – must be included in national action plans to address poverty and unemployment among adolescents.

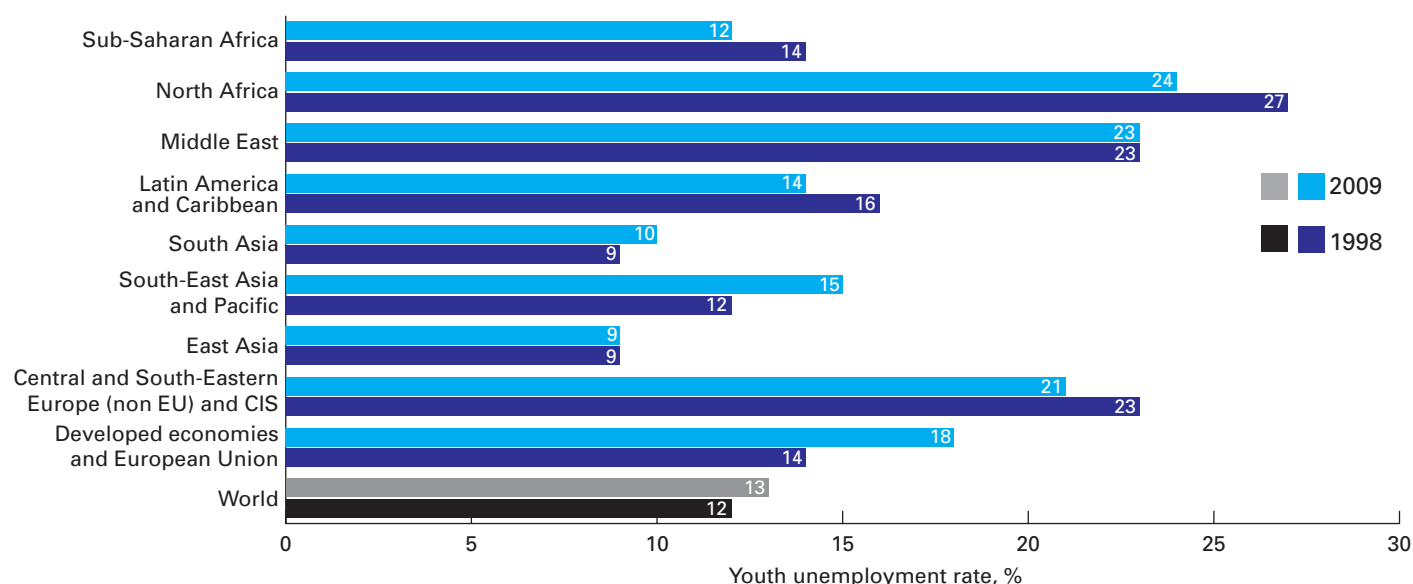
### Children in conflict with the law

Adolescents are often portrayed as a threat to community peace and security. But despite the difficulties they

encounter growing up, the vast majority of adolescents peacefully accept their societies' codes of conduct. The youthful revolt against social norms generally marks a temporary phase, one that disappears spontaneously with the transition to adulthood. Some juvenile infringements of the law, such as truancy or running away from home, are simply 'status offences', outlawed only on the basis of age. The majority of serious crimes emerge from adolescents' involvement in gangs. Young men are far more likely to offend, and although gang culture rejects many established adult values, it tends to import traditional gender roles.

Most adolescents who come into conflict with the law are still children, whose rights under the Convention must be respected. UNICEF estimates that at any one time more than one million children are detained by law enforcement officials. In prisons and institutions

### Global trends in youth unemployment



Source: International Labour Organization, *Global Trends in Youth Employment*, ILO, Geneva, 2010, Annex 1, Table A5.

*A 12-year-old girl collects water from a tap that was installed at the doorstep of her family's house, Pakistan.*



minimum age for recruitment into military service to 18 and criminalized the recruitment of children by rebel groups.

Although adolescents are not as vulnerable as young children to death and disease as a result of conflict, they are at greater risk in other ways. They may be targeted for recruitment by armed groups, forced to carry weapons and participate in atrocities or else held as sexual or other types of slaves. Conflict and emergencies also force many adolescents to discontinue their education, owing to disruption, economic considerations or extra caring duties. Both conflict and emergency situations increase the risk of impoverishment and make adolescents more vulnerable to criminal activity, violence and exploitation.

But at times of crisis adolescents need not be only victims and witnesses – given the chance, they can also play an integral part in post-conflict resolution and societal renewal. Adolescent participation in challenging settings can be both a means and an end. Allowing children to take part in addressing the situation – while taking measures not to create disturbing or harmful experiences – helps them regain control over their lives and cope with psychological devastation, at the same time developing their skills and fostering community rehabilitation.

across the world, children and young people are frequently denied the right to medical care, education and opportunities for individual development; detention also exposes them to serious forms of violence and abuse. While incarceration is unavoidable in some circumstances, it is essential to explore alternatives to custodial sentencing wherever possible. The aim of juvenile justice systems should be reconciliation and reintegration, guiding young people towards responsible citizenship.

### **Conflict and emergency settings**

For adolescents embroiled in conflict and emergency situations, lack of peace and security exacerbates the difficulties of growing into adulthood. Over the past two decades, the international community has increasingly recognized, and sought to respond to, the impact of armed conflict on children and youth. The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulated that children under age 15 should not take part in hostilities and must be protected from the effects of armed conflict. The later Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict raised the



# Seizing the Opportunity of Adolescence

A good start in the first decade of a child's life is necessary – but not sufficient – to break the bonds of poverty and inequity. To make a lasting difference for both individuals and societies, and to take advantage of the opportunities of adolescence, we must complement improvements for young children with investment in education, health care, protection and participation during the second decade of life – particularly for the poorest and most marginalized adolescents. Young people who enjoy these rights are more likely to become economically independent, make informed decisions about sex and take up their positions as fully engaged citizens. To end the cycle of poverty, eliminate inequities and secure a better future for millions of children and young people, it is vital to invest in five key areas:

- **Improve data collection and analysis**

Major gaps in data pose one of the biggest obstacles to promoting adolescent rights. Recent initiatives by the United Nations and others have expanded our understanding of major issues including violence, sexual abuse and reproductive health. In areas such as adolescent mental health and disability, and the quality of secondary education, there is simply insufficient data to adequately assess the circumstances of the world's children. In other areas, notably adolescent participation, the attempt to determine robust measures continues. The existing evidence confirms that poverty limits access to education and heightens the risk of protection abuses – but few countries break down key statistics by location and wealth.

Internationally recognized indicators disaggregated by sex, age, disability, socio-economic status, ethnicity, caste and religion are urgently required to drive

and monitor progress towards development goals. Identifying the most marginalized and vulnerable adolescents is essential to ensuring that advances are equitable. Population-based household surveys such as the USAID-supported Demographic and Health Surveys and the UNICEF-supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys provide comprehensive measures for some of these indicators. Developing the capacity of national statistical systems to focus more keenly on adolescents will ensure a better understanding of how effectively their rights are being fulfilled.



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*A 16-year-old boy makes a sandwich while his instructor watches during a class at the Wan Smolbag Theatre Centre in Tagabe, Vanuatu.*

- **Invest in education and training**

Secondary education improves individual earnings potential and boosts overall economic growth. In an increasingly technological labour market, advanced



*Youth delegates discuss global issues during a working group session at the 2009 J8 Summit in Rome, Italy.*



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education provides the requisite skills to increase productivity and spur foreign investment. Secondary education can also have a strong impact on promoting gender equality and improving maternal health, thus contributing to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals 3, 4 and 5. Adolescent girls who attend secondary school are six times less likely to be married and three times less likely to get pregnant than their peers.

Investing in secondary education can be broken down into three key actions: extending compulsory schooling to the secondary level; abolishing both primary and secondary school fees; and ensuring education is equally accessible to all. Compulsory secondary education provides a stronger incentive to finish primary education and enables more children to acquire the necessary skills to compete in the global economy, boosting economic growth. Abolishing school fees fosters equitable enrolment and permits a greater number of children to continue learning. And promoting equity by granting equal access to post-primary education for those currently excluded and marginalized has the potential to eliminate discrimination and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Finally, states and other stakeholders must invest in the quality of education, as well as opening alternative learning pathways for the many adolescents who have been forced to cut their education short.

- **Institutionalize mechanisms for youth participation**

Active participation of adolescents in family and civic life fosters positive citizenship as they mature into adults. Increasingly capable of assessing their

circumstances and making choices on matters that affect their lives, adolescents should be given the opportunity to act in accordance with their evolving capacities. The personal benefits of participation are immense. The opportunity to hone their decision-making abilities and learn to communicate their opinions empowers young people to make informed choices and more confidently navigate the many challenges along their journey to adulthood.

National youth councils, youth forums, community service initiatives, online activism and other avenues enable adolescents to make their voices heard. But equally important are the daily interactions: contributing to family decisions, representing a group, class or school in a project, volunteering in the community and meeting with local representatives. Dismantling the legal, political, economic, social and cultural barriers to children's participation requires a willingness to re-examine assumptions about their potential in order to create a setting in which children can truly thrive, building their capacities in the process.

- **Create a supportive environment for child and adolescents rights**

Laws, policies and programmes promoting adolescent rights require a supportive environment to uphold them. This necessitates systemic changes at every level. In addition to promoting health and enhancing educational opportunities, national governments must use the legal system, budgets, policies and programmes, and education and awareness-raising to eliminate barriers to essential services and protection and dismantle gender constructs that hamper adolescent development.

- **Address poverty and inequity**

Poverty may be the single biggest threat to adolescent rights. It catapults young people prematurely into adulthood by pulling them out of school, pushing them into the labour market or forcing them to marry prematurely. In the regions with the highest number of adolescents, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 73 per cent of the population live on less than US\$2 per day. Child-sensitive social protection that gives children from the poorest and most marginalized sectors of the population sufficient support to meet their basic needs can form a key component of development policy, helping to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and missed opportunities. There is mounting evidence that social protection programmes can not only

improve children's health, nutrition and educational achievement but also reduce the danger of abuse and exploitation.

Inequity is the other major barrier to the fulfilment of adolescent rights. Policies and programmes aimed at achieving the Millennium Development Goals seldom focus on securing equal opportunities for all adolescents. Enabling even the poorest and most marginalized to enjoy their rights to education, health and recreation; to an environment free of violence; and to a voice in decision-making processes is crucial to creating active, engaged citizens, achieving social equality and promoting sustainable economic growth.

## Working Together for Adolescents

The world is at last waking up to the central importance of adolescent rights – and to the need to harness the idealism, energy and potential of the rising generation of adults. It is now clear that existing international commitments to children will not be met without more resources, strategic planning and political will to promote their rights and development into the second decade of life. Adolescents are as deserving of care and protection as young children and as worthy of consideration and participation as adults. Particularly in the developing world, where the majority of adolescents live, investment in data collection, education, adolescent participation and establishing a rights-based

environment can bring tremendous rewards. Focusing on adolescents has the potential to rapidly accelerate progress in reducing poverty and inequity over the coming decades, as well as stabilizing economies and stimulating growth. It is becoming clear that equitable, sustained development hinges on creating an environment in which adolescents can exercise their rights and build their capacities.

Adolescence is the age of opportunity. This is our chance to recognize the central importance of this formative period by working together to set a foundation for a more equitable, more prosperous future.



**United Nations Children's Fund**

3 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017, USA  
Email: [pubdoc@unicef.org](mailto:pubdoc@unicef.org)  
Website: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

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Cover photograph: Adolescents participate in a workshop organized by a local NGO in Salvador, Brazil, 2006. (©UNICEF/NYHQ2006-1326/Versiani)

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