

The power of 1.8 billion: adolescents, youth and the transformation of the future

The State of World Population 2014 and all related materials are embargoed for release until 0001 hours (12:01 a.m.) GMT, 18 November 2014.

Young people matter. They matter because an unprecedented 1.8 billion youth are alive today, and because they are the shapers and leaders of our global future. They matter because they have inherent human rights that must be fulfilled.

Yet, in a world of adult concerns, young people are often overlooked. This tendency cries out for urgent correction, because it imperils youth as well as economies and societies at large. Youth in today's large numbers may be improperly seen as a daunting challenge, a drain on scarce resources, or properly seen as the potential architects of a historic transformation in human well-being.

Young people are our future

The largest global youth population in human history will have a profound effect on every aspect of our common future and can create a better world for all. The effect can be overwhelmingly positive if young people are able to develop their capabilities, have access to education and health, including sexual and reproductive health, and find opportunities to fulfil the promise of their lives through, for example, decent employment.

Under all likely scenarios, the number of young people will continue rising before it crests in coming years. Countries that meet youth's needs in this period are likely to be in a far better position by the second half of the century, with more educated and healthy populations, more productive workforces, growing economies and falling fertility rates. Those that do not attend to youth may see higher

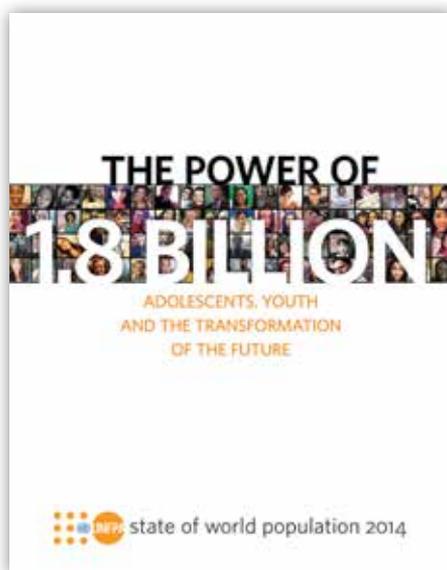
fertility rates over time and sustain a high portion of young and dependent people. Demands for already over-stretched education and health services will continue to rise. A poorly skilled workforce will keep economies trapped in low-value activities and anaemic growth rates. Gender discrimination will make all of these issues even more intractable for young women and adolescent girls.

Obstacles that threaten a generation

Despite evidence that more and more governments are paying greater attention to youth through public policy initiatives, young people as a whole still confront many obstacles that keep them from safely moving into adulthood and entering the workforce. Tens of millions do not go to school, or if they do, they miss even minimum benchmarks for learning. Employment prospects are often dismal, with jobs unavailable or poor in quality, leading to a worsening global youth unemployment crisis. Up to 60 per cent of young people in developing regions are not working or in school, or have only irregular jobs.

Over 500 million youth struggle to survive on less than \$2 per day, a level of impoverishment from which many may never emerge. A yawning digital divide sidelines youth in poor countries from the technology essential to operating in modern economies.

Exclusion keeps youth out of decision-making on how to best meet their needs. Despite their high risk of poverty,



for example, in two of every three countries they are left entirely out of the preparation of national poverty reduction strategies and development plans. Full enjoyment of all human rights remains a distant dream for millions; egregious violations are the norm for many. Every day, 39,000 girls under 18 become child brides.

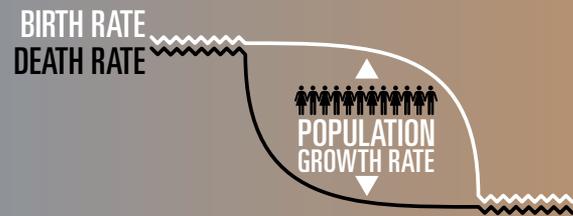
Sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights—which are pivotal to young people’s realization of their full

potential—are blocked because of large gaps in information and services. Adolescents, in particular, have less access to contraception, and HIV testing, counselling and care.

Gender norms penalize young women by depriving them of equal opportunities for education, employment and health care, and leaving them more vulnerable to human rights violations. For boys, norms around being “real men” can lead to destructive behaviours. Social

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

The demographic dividend is the realized portion of the economic-growth potential that results from increases in the working-age share of a population



PRE-TRANSITION

↑ High mortality ↑ High fertility

KEY INVESTMENTS



To reduce child mortality through

- 🔪 Childhood vaccinations
- 🏥 Primary health
- 🚽 Sanitation
- 💧 Safe drinking water

EARLY TRANSITION



↓ Reduced mortality ↑ High fertility

KEY INVESTMENTS



To empower girls, give them choices through

- 🎓 Secondary education
- 👩 Comprehensive sexuality education
- 🏠 Access to sexual and reproductive health information, services and supplies, including contraceptives

LATE TRANSITION

↓ Reduced mortality ↓ Low fertility

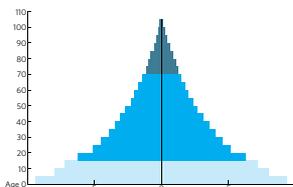
KEY INVESTMENTS



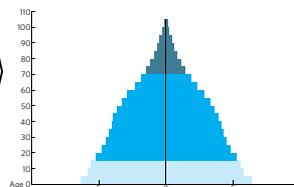
To spur economic growth, expand employment of young people through

- 📊 Macroeconomic management
- 🔄 Open trade
- 🏛️ Good governance
- 💰 Well-functioning labour and financial markets

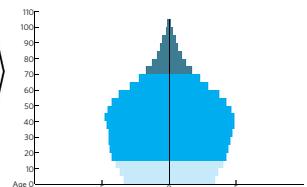
1 When child mortality rates are high, fertility also tends to be high, resulting in a very young age structure



2 When more children survive, parents choose to have fewer children. Population age structure shifts



3 The size of the working-age population grows while the share of young dependent population shrinks



pressures in general can be a strong impediment, such as by encouraging young married couples to get pregnant as soon as possible.

In most countries, laws, policies and regulations have yet to align with commitments in international agreements on the rights of young people—or catch up with the realities in their lives. For example, many countries bar unmarried minors from obtaining contraception.

Acting now to secure a demographic dividend

These obstacles can be complex, but they can all be overcome. Regardless of their stage of development, all countries bear a responsibility to uphold the rights of youth and help them establish foundations for their lives. This includes equipping them with high-quality, relevant education, and comprehensive health care, encompassing all aspects of sexual and reproductive health. Youth need opportunities to earn a living and to participate in decisions that affect them. Given the disparities that persist in all societies, special efforts should reach groups marginalized on multiple fronts, such as age, gender and ethnicity.

Making these investments in youth is the right thing to do. It is also smart, for many reasons. For example, investing in youth can enable developing countries to reap a demographic dividend, which can help reduce poverty and raise living standards.

Many of the countries with the largest portions of youth today are among the poorest in the world, but they are also on the cusp of a demographic transition that can yield the dividend. Transition begins as fertility and death rates start to fall, leaving fewer dependents. More people, proportionally, are in the workforce. The dividend comes as resources are freed for economic development, and for greater per-capita spending on higher quality health and education services. Economic growth takes off. A virtuous cycle begins where capabilities and opportunities continuously expand.

Making the most of the demographic dividend depends heavily on appropriate public policy choices and investments made before or during demographic transition, when a country moves from high death and fertility to low death and fertility. Countries face vastly different circumstances, so there is no set recipe for all. Much depends as well on where a country is in terms of the transition.

Broadly speaking, for those who have not begun the demographic transition, steps should be taken to reduce child mortality through means such as better health, sanitation, clean water and child vaccination programmes. When child survival improves, fertility typically falls, as parents feel less of an imperative for larger families. For

VIDEND

As a country transitions from high mortality and fertility to low mortality and fertility, a young, working-age population emerges and can propel economies forward

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND REALIZED

When young people are healthy and educated and equipped to seize opportunities



When more resources are available for productive investment

When per capita incomes and standards of living rise

When poverty is reduced





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countries beginning the transition, with declining mortality but still high fertility, important investments include comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care, and the empowerment of young women and adolescent girls through health and education. In later stages, an emphasis should be placed on stimulating rapid and inclusive economic growth, and ensuring access to jobs, credit, financial services and other economic building blocks. Different stages of transition may be at work within a single country—through markedly different scenarios in rural and urban areas, for instance—underscoring the importance of carefully orchestrating policies and investments.

A 2013 global survey of 176 United Nations Member States and seven territories and areas provided a unique picture of countries and the demographic transition. It found, for example, that those in the early stages of transition are generally doing well in policies critical to this period, especially to empower young women and girls. They are also, however, paying more attention to employment for young people even before young people's basic capabilities are fully developed. The avail-

ability of jobs may mean little to a young person who has not completed school or is in poor health.

The survey confirmed progress on many levels, including bringing adolescents to the top of policy agendas, a critical step towards greater visibility for this long overlooked group. But achievements lag behind commitments. Many policies and strategies languish without full funding or implementation. Promises alone will not be enough for youth—or to fully capitalize on the demographic dividend.

Making post-2015 count for youth

The global sustainable development agenda that will follow the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 and beyond provides an opportunity to close the implementation gap and pursue ambitious goals that will speed greater well-being in all countries. The needs, aspirations and potentials of young people need to be squarely in the centre of these goals, as well as all international and national actions to accomplish them over the next 15 years.

The international community has already agreed to ground the post-2015 agenda in respect for human rights, equality and sustainability. These principles cannot be realized without youth. In particular, their concerns need to be integral to any goals on ending poverty; achieving sound health, in all aspects; providing education high in quality and relevance; and extending decent jobs and livelihoods. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls must be at the forefront of all goals.

A young person of 10 in 2015 will be an adult of 25 in 2030, the target year for achieving the next generation of sustainable development goals. Governments aiming high today will make that young person's future a brighter one, with rights and promises fulfilled and potential realized.

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