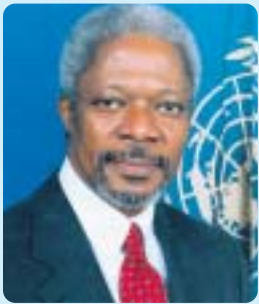




# World Population Day



## Message from the United Nations Secretary-General



**Kofi Annan**  
United Nations Secretary-General

The theme for this year's World Population Day, "Young People", focuses attention on the unique challenges faced by the burgeoning ranks of the young in our societies. Today, nearly half the world's population—more than 3 billion people—are under the age of 25. They represent the largest cohort of young people in human history, and far too many among them confront bleak prospects.

No matter where they are born, the lives of young people are shaped by forces beyond their control—the prevalence of poverty, the incidence of crime, the availability of education and training, opportunities for decent employment, and access to affordable health services. Yet today's young men and women are also more aware of the lives led by their counterparts across the world. As a result, many of them are demanding action to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and measures to increase opportunities for all.

There is a clear need to answer their call. After all, providing for youth is not just a moral obligation, it is a compelling economic necessity. Study after study has shown the benefits—to the young and to their communities—of investing in education, reproductive health, job skills and employment opportunities for young people. Such returns are especially great in the case of girls. Healthy, educated and informed young women are better prepared to participate fully in society and contribute to the life of their communities.

Sexual and reproductive health information and services are a particularly important—though often neglected—pillar of youth empowerment. Their availability can enable young men and women to make responsible and informed choices to protect themselves. It can help the global fight against AIDS, and it can allow the young to make better decisions about starting families.

The decisions young people make will shape our world and the prospects of future generations. Yet under-investment in the young means that they often lack the resources, training or information to act. Governments must inevitably lead the way in addressing this failing. But all of us—policy makers, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens—should contribute in ways both large and small.

On this World Population Day, let us all reaffirm our determination to promote the human rights and well-being of young people, and work with them to build a better world for all.

## Statement from the Executive Director, UNFPA



**Thoraya Ahmed Obaid,**  
Executive Director,  
UNFPA

This year on World Population Day, the focus is on young people. From a 10-year-old girl to a young man of 24, their needs are different, their cultures diverse. Yet, all over the world, young people want to be heard and involved.

They possess the ideas, determination and energy to accelerate effective action to reduce poverty and inequality. In every region, young people are taking action on HIV/AIDS and other issues that threaten their health, education and future opportunities.

Young people want to stay safe and healthy. They want a chance at a better future. About HIV prevention, they tell us: "Adults say we are too young to know; we say we are too young to die." About family planning, young people tell us: "Men should share responsibility with women." About sexual and reproductive health, they say: "Young people need this information. It shapes our lives and affects our future."

Yet today, millions of young people are threatened by poverty, illiteracy, risks of pregnancy and childbirth, and HIV/AIDS. Today, more than 500 million people aged 15 to 24 live on less than \$2 per day; 96 million young women in developing countries do not know how to read or write; and 14 million adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 become mothers every

year. Every day, 6,000 young people are newly infected with HIV.

These challenges lie at the heart of goals set by world leaders to reduce poverty and improve health and well-being. It is clear that the Millennium Development Goals will not be met unless young people are actively involved in policymaking and programming, their voices are heard, their needs are met and their human rights are respected.

UNFPA champions young people's rights to education, health and employment. We recognize that investments in young people promote social and economic growth. Key to these efforts are keeping girls in school, building life skills, delaying marriage and pregnancy until adulthood, and preventing HIV infection. Young people have the power to drive development forward.

On World Population Day, let us focus on young people and seek new ways to work side-by-side as partners in development. Although it is often said that young people are the future, it is also true that young people are the present and their leadership should be supported today. As a young peer educator said, "We are creating the future and it is great."

## Investing in Youth to Break Cycle of Poverty

Stories By PATRICK NGUGI

The United Nations Population Fund is involving young people in solving the myriad global problems that are mainly affecting their age group.

The Fund believes that at a time when young people make up such a large part of population, they deserve a fair share of resources, and investing in them can help break the cycle of poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

UNFPA works with governments to incorporate young people's issues in national development policies and plans, and supports action in areas such as data collection, education, livelihoods and reproductive health information and services.

Through this initiative, young people are contributing a lot to solving pressing problems — like unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and violence and discrimination against women and girls. Efforts by adults to help the younger generation will be more effective if supported by the youth themselves.

To be sure that they are on the right track, the UNFPA is going to the experts young people themselves. The Fund is to an approach that is sensitive to culture, appropriate to age, strong on human rights and a force for gender equality.

The direct involvement of young people in decisions affecting their lives not only advances human rights, but builds self-confidence, leads to better decisions and starts a life-long process of citizenship. The Fund says extra efforts must be made to engage the most vulnerable, such as young people who are from the poorest communities; young people who are discriminated against because they are female or disabled or belong to a particular ethnic or indigenous group; and young people from families devastated by HIV/AIDS or torn apart by armed conflict.

The African Youth Alliance (AYA) is a multi-sectorial project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Botswana, Ghana, Tanzania and

Uganda, and administered by PATH, Pathfinder International and UNFPA. Stronger policies, laws and programmes are among the results achieved by the AYA in Ghana, which is now scaling up for greater impact on adolescent sexual reproductive health.

Global Youth Partners is a dynamic youth-driven advocacy campaign led by young people in 29 countries. Founded by young people following the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS, the UNFPA-supported campaign advocates greater access by young people to information, education and services for HIV prevention, and works to increase political commitment and financial resources.



Photo/file

**Children, defined as persons below 18 years, constitute 55 per cent of the total population**

## Need for New Approach to Dealing with Youth Urged

This year's World Population Day is being celebrated at a time when half of the earth's population are under the age of 25.

It is also a sobering fact that some three billion children and young people will soon be of reproductive age, according to the United Nations Population Fund.

Today's adolescents and youth represent the biggest generation in human history and the UNFPA is advocating a new approach to dealing with children and youth issues, which have hitherto made them be viewed as liability to the adult world.

The youth (people under age of 25), says UNFPA "are opportunities and the adolescents and youth represent the biggest generation in human history. They are opportunities and assets to be nurtured, not problems to be treated. Their issues issues, especially those of girls, very young adolescents and married adolescents, need special attention."

The global picture at the moment shows that this group of

youngsters form more than half of the population. For example in 57 developing countries, more than 40 per cent of the population is under 15. Investing in this younger generation is important for a host of ethical, human rights, gender and economic reasons, and is a top priority for UNFPA.

Despite a shift towards later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now aged 10 to 17 will be married before their 18th birthday.

The percentage of births to women under 20 years of age in the least developed countries is double that in developed countries, putting their lives and those of their babies at risk. Pregnancy is a leading cause of death for young women aged 15 to 19 worldwide, with complications of childbirth and unsafe abortion being the major factors.

For both physiological and social reasons, girls aged 15 to 19 are twice likely to die in childbirth as those in their twenties. Girls under age 15 are five times as likely to die as those in their twenties.

The Fund recognizes that support for adolescents and youth is one of the most cost-effective strategic interventions to attain ICPD goals. Support for young people is also critical for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The lives of young people will vastly improve as targets related to poverty and hunger eradication, education, gender equality, child and maternal mortality, health, HIV/AIDS and environmental sustainability are met. Moreover, given appropriate support and opportunities, young people can become a powerful force for their achievement and for sustained progress.

### The dividends of investing in health and education

Investments in health and education are among the most cost-effective development expenditures in terms of the social and private returns they generate.

Girls and their families who face limited life prospects may look to early pregnancy or marriage for economic and social security. However, early pregnancy is closely correlated with poverty. Delaying first births can improve quality of life, educational and employment opportunities for young women. But adolescent pregnancy rates — and associated social, emotional and economic

costs — remain high.

Without education or employable skills, pregnant girls may be forced to drop out of school, and be poorly prepared to take on the responsibilities of childrearing, while facing diminished income prospects.

Education — especially completion of secondary school — can be a lever for breaking out of poverty. Girls' education can be particularly important in breaking the inter-generational transmission of poverty by leading to smaller families, more investments in each child's health and education, and greater earning potential.

For countries with high population growth rates, girls' education carries additional benefits: for every extra year that girls spend in school, fertility rates drop by 5 to 10 per cent. Indeed, most countries now recognize that investing in and empowering women and girls is an effective and strategic way to advance the development agenda.

Moreover, for a majority of young people, economic life begins in the adolescent years — for those who can get jobs. But unemployment is high for this group. Enhancing the skills base and employability — especially of the poorest groups — can translate into better jobs and better pay — a better chance to escape poverty and socio-economic exclusion.

### Young people are pivotal in the fight against HIV/AIDS

Without urgent measures to enable young people to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS, development gains, economic prospects — and their very lives — are being dangerously undermined, or lost. About half of all the people living with HIV/AIDS are under 25. Everyday, 6,000 more become infected, mostly young women. Yet, many millions still do not know how HIV is transmitted or how to prevent it.

As AIDS decimates parents and breadwinners, adolescents increasingly find themselves as heads of households. The majority of the more than 10 million children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS, most of them in Africa, are between the ages of 10 and 14. These adolescents are being thrown into adult roles with minimal or insufficient supports, obliged to sacrifice educational and other skills-building opportunities to support their families or for their own survival.



Photo/file

**Investments in health and education are among the most cost-effective development expenditures**