JULY 11, 1997

'We have a duty to the young'

More than 100 countries, as well as

institutions, non-governmental

and private organisations, are

commemorating today, World

population Day.

population Day Was

first celebrated in 1987 When the world population reached 5 billion. In 1988, the United

Nations authorised the event to be celebrated

annually on I July as a vehicle to build

awareness of population issues and the impact they have on development and the environment.

The theme for this year's World Population

Day is adolescent reproductive health

care, focusing on the need to prepare them so

that they can make informed choices, including how to protect themselves from unwanted

pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases

including HIV/Aids.

There are more than a billion young people

in the world today aged between IS and 24

the biggest new generation ever. As these

new baby boomers enter their adulthood,

many Of them are concerned With getting

married, starting a family and bringing up

their children good health. Others have decided to put off marriage for a while and

build a life on their own,

Whether their priorities are marriage or a

career, today's young people have their own

choices to make, They are more health-conscious than any previous generation — and

reproductive health is important- They 'want to behave responsibly , to protect their health and the health of those they

love, and because it is the right thing to do.

We know this because last year we asked

teenagers all over the world to tell us What

their priorities are. Overwhelmingly, we

found, they want to know. They want information about sexuality, and about sexual

health. They want to know how to protect

themselves and their loved ones from un-

wanted pregnancy, from sexually-transmitted

diseases, including HIV/Aids, and from re-

productive tract infection, We, their elders

and those responsible at all levels. in the

home and the community, in government and

international organisations, have a duty to

these young people. They are a generation of

great promise: but we also have promises to

keep, 'n particular the promises made by all

countries at the International Conference On

Population and Development in 1994.

We must ensure that young people not Only

know the choices open to them but have the

appropriate information and services to help

them make the right decisions. We must protect the health of young people and we must

eradicate customs such as female genital mutilation which threaten their lives and well-

being. Teenage pregnancy is a fact with

which all communities must live. Ignoring it

Will not make it go away. Instead, we must do

everything in power to teenage

actions can be With them all their lives.

We have to inform not only young women

but their families and their prospective husbands that pregnancy before they are 8 will

endanger their lives and Of their babies.

We have to make sure that young people and

their parents are aware of the risks of sexual

activity — that more than half of new HIV

infections are among the 15-24 age group,

that is the group at highest risk Of STDs and

that young women are more at risk than their

male partners. Some older men are prepared

to risk young women's lives and health for

their sexual gratification — young women

and their parents need to know those risks as

well.

Poverty is the enemy Of everyone, young

or Old, Better health and education help

young t? escape from poverty and

help their

education for all, and close the gender gap in

education, so that girls have an equal opportunity With boys. For young women especially, education is the path to a better world. We

have to ensure that young women know their

rights and that young men respect those

rights. e must work for equality between

girls and boys, so that there will be equality

between women and men.

We have it in our power to do all these

things. These are the reasons why UNFPA

has dedicated World population Day this year

to the new generation, and their reproductive

responsibility and make sure that you

people know that the consequences of