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## Building on early childhood gains, UN calls for increased investment in adolescents



25 February 2011 – With 20 years of strong investment producing “stunning” gains for children up to the age of 10, including a 33 per cent drop in under-five mortality rates, the United Nations is calling for equal focus on the world’s 1.2 billion adolescents to break entrenched cycles of poverty and inequity.

In its [2011 State of the World’s Children report](#) released today, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) cites one startling example: in Brazil the lives of 26,000 children under one were saved between 1998 and 2008, leading to a sharp decrease in infant mortality, yet in the same period 81,000 adolescents aged 15-19 were murdered.

“Surely, we do not want to save children in their first decade of life only to lose them in the second,” UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake [says](#) in a foreword to the report, entitled ‘Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity.’

“Adolescence is a pivot point, an opportunity to consolidate the gains we have made in early childhood or risk seeing those gains wiped out,” he adds, calling for investment in education, training and employment programmes.

Given the magnitude of threats to children under the age of five, it made sense to focus investment there and that attention produced “stunning success,” with the number of children under five dying every day from preventable causes cut by one third from 34,000 in 1990 to around 22,000 in 2009, Mr. Lake stresses. Yet the challenges of adolescence must be tackled too.

“If we want to break the cycle of poverty and build a stronger and more equitable world, we must also focus on adolescence,” UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Hilde Frafjord Johnson told a [news conference](#) in New York to launch the report, noting that nearly one out of every five people on the planet today is an adolescent.

The vast majority of today’s adolescents, 88 per cent, live in developing countries, and the report catalogues “in heart-wrenching detail” the array of dangers they face: injuries that kill 400,000 of them each year; early pregnancy and childbirth, a primary cause of death for teenage girls; pressures that keep 70 million out of school; exploitation, violent conflict and the worst kind of abuse at the hands of adults.

It also examines the dangers posed by emerging trends like climate change, whose intensifying effects in many developing countries already undermine so many adolescents’ well-being, and by labour trends, which reveal a profound lack of employment opportunities for the young, especially those in poor countries.

The report calls for targeted investments in education and training; expanding opportunities for youth to participate in national forums and other avenues to make their voices heard; promoting laws, policies and programmes to protect their rights and enable them to overcome barriers to essential services; and stepping up the fight against poverty and inequity through child-sensitive programmes to prevent adolescents from being prematurely catapulted into adulthood.

Although adolescents around the world are generally healthier today than in the past, many health risks remain significant, including injuries, eating disorders and substance abuse. It is estimated that around one in every five adolescents suffers from a mental health or behavioural problem.

Youth unemployment remains a concern in almost every country. An increasingly technological labour market requires skills that many young people do not possess. In many countries large teenage populations are a unique demographic asset that is often overlooked, the report stresses. By investing in adolescent education and training, countries can reap a large and productive workforce, contributing significantly to the growth of national economies.

“We need to focus more attention now on reaching adolescents, especially adolescent girls, investing in education, health and other measures to engage them in the process of improving their own lives,” Mr. Lake writes.

“Through a wealth of concrete examples, The State of the World’s Children 2011 makes clear that sustainable progress is possible. It also draws on recent research to show that we can achieve that progress more quickly and cost-effectively by focusing first on the poorest children in the hardest-to-reach places. Such a focus on equity will help all children, including adolescents. How can we delay?”

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