



Background Brief

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Global Change: International Agreements on Youth

About half of the world's population, or more than one billion people, are under the age of 25, and over one-sixth are between 15-24 years of age. The vast majority live in developing countries, where they stand at critical life junctures related to work, health, and reproduction. The choices they make will reverberate for generations to come, and the well-being of entire nations depends in large part upon the future opportunities of their young citizens.

Yet youth today face enormous challenges to their quality of life. In the developing world, nearly one-third of youth are illiterate and half are either out of school or out of work. And although many youth—both married and unmarried—are sexually active, far fewer have access to reproductive health services or understand safe sexual practices.

Fortunately, the international community has begun to take steps to improve the life circumstances of young people. International deliberations dating back to 1985 (designated by the United Nations as the "International Year of Youth") have produced a set of agreements to guide governments in the development of relevant policies and programs. Advocates and organizations also rely on these guidelines to hold signatory governments accountable for their commitments to youth.

In March 1996, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the "World Program of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond," a plan that encompasses commitments related to youth made by signatory governments at numerous international gatherings. In short, the Program of Action calls upon nations to seek remedy for the various phenomena that "contribute to the increased marginalization of young people from the larger society, which is dependent on youth for its renewal."

Integrated Actions for Youth: Key to Success

The "World Program of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond" provides a cross-sectoral blueprint for effective policies and programs to enhance the lives of youth and support their full participation in society. The Program builds on the commitments of a number of international conferences and summits, drawing together youth-specific recommendations:

- ▶ "Agenda 21" and the "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development" of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development;
- ▶ The "Vienna Declaration and Program of Action" of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights;
- ▶ The "Program of Action" of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development;
- ▶ The "Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development" and the "Program of Action" of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development;
- ▶ The "Platform for Action" of the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women.

The following summarizes the sections of the Program of Action that focus on education, employment, health, girls and young women, and participation. Also provided is relevant information from the 2001 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS.

Education

Even though many developing countries have made great strides in increasing literacy, the availability of and access to education is still insufficient. The Program identifies three primary constraints to education: social and economic conditions that prohibit parents from sending their children to school; a lack of educational opportunities for marginalized groups; and low-quality education that leaves youth unprepared for adulthood and employment.

Governments, organizations, and educational institutions can take several actions to remedy these situations, as follows:

- ▶ **Improve basic education, skills training, and literacy.** This includes the reform of curricula to expand opportunities for women and foster scientific literacy, moral values, and skills useful in a changing, multicultural world (such as information technology). Programs specifically for marginalized youth and youth with disabilities should be developed.
- ▶ **Invest in vocational and professional training.** Programs relevant to current and prospective employment opportunities should be expanded, including apprenticeships and other skills training that can be used in a changing labor market. Training programs in individual and cooperative enterprises should be established.
- ▶ **Develop infrastructure to train youth workers and leaders.** The adequacy of facilities and programs should be assessed and relevant programs established. International youth worker, leadership training, internship, and volunteer programs should give priority to participants from developing countries.
- ▶ **Promote ideals of peace, solidarity, respect, and tolerance.** Programs on peacemaking and conflict resolution should be designed and implemented, and youth should be given the opportunity to learn about and discuss cultural and religious diversity. Youth should understand their rights and

responsibilities through activities linked to the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), with particular attention given to gender equality and the rights of women.

- ▶ **Educate about cultural heritage and contemporary society.** Youth should learn about their own and other societies through classroom, travel, and exchange programs. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should collaborate with governments and organizations to expand international efforts.

Education was identified as a key priority by world leaders who gathered in September 2000 for the Millennium Summit of the United Nations.¹ They issued the “Millennium Declaration,” in which they resolved to ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.

Employment

Global recession and economic fluctuations hit youth particularly hard because of their lack of education and training. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), more than 100 million new jobs will have to be created by 2015 to meet the employment needs of the large number of youth entering labor markets throughout the developing world. Advances in technology, communications, and productivity have spawned new challenges. Governments and organizations can harness opportunities through the following actions:

- ▶ **Provide momentum for self-employment.** Grant programs should be developed to support youth enterprise and employment. Youth development banks and models for youth-run cooperatives (including training in entrepreneurial, marketing, and management skills) should be established. Businesses should be tapped to provide financial and technical support.
- ▶ **Promote technology training.** Special attention should be given to the development of youth employment opportunities and training programs in technological fields. The entry of youth into this sector should be tracked, and collaboration between trainers and employers promoted, to

¹ A special Millennium Summit was convened by the General Assembly of the United Nations to review the role of the United Nations in the 21st century. A “Millennium Declaration” was issued that identified the main challenges facing the international community and presented an action plan for addressing them.

enhance the opportunities and working conditions of youth.

- ▶ **Expand employment for disadvantaged groups.** Resources should be specifically designated for disadvantaged populations, including disabled and indigenous youth; youth who are refugees, migrants, displaced, or returning from military service; street children; and young women.
- ▶ **Establish voluntary service programs.** Youth organizations should be involved in the development of programs such as youth camps and community service, environmental protection, and inter-generational cooperation projects. Such efforts could be an alternative to military service or part of education requirements. International voluntary programs could also help promote intercultural understanding and development training.

World leaders at the Millennium Summit committed themselves “to develop and implement strategies that

give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work.” A Youth Employment Network was established by the UN Secretary-General in 2001 to promote efforts toward fulfilling this commitment.

Health

Poor health is often the result of a polluted environment coupled with negative social conditions, such as poverty, malnutrition, and a lack of appropriate services and information. In addition, many youth engage in risky practices, including substance abuse, and unsafe sex, which can result in unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other health complications. To address the wide range of conditions that impact health, governments and organizations should make progress in the following ways:

- ▶ **Provide basic health care.** National goals of universal access to essential services should be set and sufficient resources invested to achieve them.

Secretary-General’s Youth Employment Network

The United Nations, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the World Bank launched the Youth Employment Network, a policy network that draws on leaders in private industry, civil society, and economic policy to explore approaches to the widespread challenges of the estimated 70 million unemployed young people in the world. A High-Level Panel of Experts was appointed to develop recommendations to improve the job and life opportunities of youth.² To fulfill the Millennium Summit commitment for creating decent work for young people, the panel outlined an action plan. It also recommended the following to establish a global alliance for youth employment:

- ▶ **Form alliances with youth.** The approach should be based on a view of young people as assets and partners. The UN, ILO, and World Bank can work with national governments to develop and implement national youth employment action plans.
- ▶ **Focus priorities on the 4 E’s.** These represent the common elements that need to be addressed across a variety of countries and different levels of economic and social development:
 - **Employability.** Invest in education and vocational training for young people, and improve the impact of those investments;
 - **Equal opportunities.** Give young women the same opportunities as young men;
 - **Entrepreneurship.** Make it easier to start and run enterprises to provide more and better jobs for young women and men;
 - **Employment Creation.** Place youth employment creation at the center of macroeconomic policy.
- ▶ **Develop national action plans.** At the national level, discussions should stimulate policy dialogue and mobilize specific measures to improve youth employment. Broad coalitions and partnerships should be created that will sustain the long-term effort need to fulfill the Millennium Summit commitment.

² ICRW President Geeta Rao Gupta serves as one of the twelve members of the High-Level Panel of Experts.

Global, coordinated actions should be taken to reduce the incidence of major diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS.

- ▶ **Improve school-based outreach.** Health information (including such topics as hygiene, healthy lifestyles, personal responsibility, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS) should be part of school curricula. Young men should be educated to respect women's rights and to share responsibilities related to sexuality and reproduction.
- ▶ **Provide youth-oriented services.** Comprehensive services should exist that match the specific needs of youth. Young women, in particular, should have adequate access to services to help prevent unwanted pregnancy and early childbearing.
- ▶ **Fight malnutrition.** Information on healthy eating practices should be provided to secondary school students and youth not attending school. School lunch programs, supplements, and food-related services should be provided where needed.

Girls and Young Women

Numerous international declarations emphasize that improved life conditions for girls and women are necessary if social development is to be achieved. Currently, girls and women are frequently treated as inferior and are discriminated against in education and employment, for example through gender-biased curricula and unfair hiring practices. These patterns, along with negative cultural attitudes about female abilities and roles, decrease the self-esteem of girls and women and ultimately limit their life opportunities and choices. Governments and organizations can help change this situation by taking the following steps:

- ▶ **Eliminate discrimination.** Comprehensive social policies and programs should be developed on the basis of equality and the fulfillment of human rights. Specific initiatives should prepare girls and women to actively participate in social, economic, political, and cultural arenas on an equal basis with boys and men.

Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS: Youth-Specific Goals

Today, about half of all new HIV/AIDS cases occur among people 15-24 years of age, with approximately 6,000 young people infected each day. In June 2001, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS convened to review the problem of HIV/AIDS and to "secure a global commitment to enhancing coordination and intensification of national, regional, and international efforts to combat it." In response to the escalating presence of the disease among people of all ages, the gathering's final document included specific references to youth. According to the UNGASS, governments and organizations should work to meet the following goals:

- ▶ **Establish national prevention targets.** Aim to reduce by 2005 HIV prevalence among young men and women ages 15 to 24 in the most affected countries by 25 percent—and by 25 percent globally by 2010. By 2005, ensure that at least 90 percent—and by 2010 at least 95 percent—of young men and women ages 15 to 24 have access to the information, education, and services necessary to develop life skills to reduce vulnerability to HIV infection. Programs should be based on partnerships among young people, parents, families, educators and health-care providers.
- ▶ **Address key factors that increase vulnerability.** Strategies, policies, and programs should be adopted and strengthened to eliminate specific factors that increase vulnerability to HIV infection, including all types of sexual exploitation of women, girls, and boys.
- ▶ **Enhance protection for women and girls.** Implement measures to increase the ability of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from the risk of HIV infection, principally through the provision of health care and health services and through prevention education that promotes gender equality within a culturally and gender-sensitive framework.
- ▶ **Prioritize the importance of family.** Strategies, policies, and programs should be adopted and strengthened that recognize the importance of the family in reducing the vulnerability of children and young people to HIV infection, for example by educating and guiding children. Effort should also be made to provide community support young orphans infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

- ▶ **Ensure access to education.** Universal, equal access to education (on primary, secondary, and higher levels) should be a priority. Educational materials and practices should represent and involve both gender groups equally and help eliminate barriers to the education of girls and young women.
- ▶ **Work to end economic exploitation.** In keeping with international conventions, girls and young women should not be forced to perform work that is detrimental to their development, health, and education. Equal access to employment and participation in all sectors of work should be encouraged.
- ▶ **Respond forcefully to abuse.** National and international legislation should protect girls and women from all forms of violence, including infanticide and prenatal sex selection, genital mutilation, sexual abuse and exploitation, and child prostitution and pornography. Victims of such forms of violence should have access to appropriate, confidential support services.

Participation

Harnessing the unique capacities, perspectives, and contributions of youth is necessary to ensure the progress of societies; in this sense, participation is also a critical development strategy. Any actions taken to further the well-being and opportunities of youth—including those outlined in the preceding pages—will therefore require the full participation of youth and youth organizations. Governments and organizations can take several actions to ensure such participation, as follows:

- ▶ **Improve access to information.** Young people should have access to information on their rights and responsibilities and social, political, and economic conditions to ensure that they can participate in decisionmaking and take advantage of opportunities.
- ▶ **Support youth associations.** Financial, educational, and technical support should be provided to expand youth activities. National, regional, and international cooperation among youth groups should be encouraged.
- ▶ **Involve youth in policymaking.** Delegations to international gatherings should include youth representatives. Youth should participate in the development and evaluation of national policies and plans that affect their lives.

2001 Progress Report

Implementation of the Program of Action's goals and recommendations is considered to ultimately be the responsibility of governments, which require support from the international community and cooperation with the nongovernmental and private sectors. In July 2001, the UN Secretary-General issued a report on the status of the implementation of the plan.

The progress report identifies two priority issues for youth in the 21st century: *globalization* and *empowerment*. It underscores how economic globalization holds great promise, but also exacerbates poverty and unemployment. Ensuring that continuing economic interdependence does not prevent youth from realizing their potential and seizing opportunities is an enormous challenge.

The report defines empowerment largely as giving young people the ability to make decisions that affect their lives, rather than having their needs defined and wishes determined by others. Empowerment in the context of a rapidly changing, interconnected world means making sure that youth have knowledge and awareness of economic, social, political, and cultural contexts and the capacity to take advantage of existing opportunities.

Looking Ahead

In the future, it will be necessary to develop, implement, and strengthen concrete policies and programs so that they positively influence the lives of individuals. By 2001, many signatory countries had already taken specific actions to advance progress for youth, as summarized below.

Action	Number of Signatories	Percentage of Signatories
Formulated a national youth policy	155	82
Designated a national youth coordinating body	168	89
Implemented a national youth program of action	116	61
Taken any type of action to implement the Program of Action	97	51

The groundwork to support actions recommended in the plan is being laid round the world. Globally, young people have participated in recent UN General

Assembly meetings and in activities (e.g., youth forums and retreats) sponsored by various UN agencies. Regionally, meetings have been held on all continents to further collaboration among governments and youth organizations. Nationally, many countries now have youth policies in place and have established the bureaus or committees needed to carry them out.

Both the Program of Action and the Secretary General's progress report emphasize that girls and women are key to the realization of the full

participation and empowerment of youth, as well as of broader development goals. The period of life that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood is a critically important opportunity to overcome gender inequality and create for young women and young men more promising possibilities for healthy and productive lives. For its part in this global effort, the United States should strengthen humanitarian and development assistance policies and programs by incorporating a sharper focus on the promise and needs of young people.

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