

**USAID Development
Information Services**

YOUTH
A Critical, Cross-Sectoral Piece of the Development Puzzle
(Response to an Information Request)

April 2006

USAID Development Information Services
Information Request Response
United States Agency for International Development
Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination
Office of Development Evaluation and Information
1331 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 1425
Washington, D.C. 20004

YOUTH

A Critical, Cross-Sectoral Piece of the Development Puzzle

Why Invest in Youth?

At 1.77 billion¹, today's youth² are the largest generation ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Young people present a set of urgent economic, social and political challenges that are crucial to long-term progress and stability in developing and transition countries. Yet, the needs and opportunities associated with youth have been largely overlooked by USAID—in part because this group has neither the strong advocates of the “under five” age group nor the political clout of adults. The values, attitudes and skills acquired by youth—and especially the choices made by the current generation of young women and men—will influence the course of current events and shape our future world in fundamental ways.

- **Vulnerable to Negative Influences**

Youth are a diverse group, and adolescence and young adulthood are formative stages in life. Those lacking opportunities are more susceptible to crime and to being co-opted into armed conflict and terrorism, undermining social cohesion and wellbeing. Marginalized youth are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors leading to HIV infection, unintended pregnancy, and chronic substance abuse.

- **A Positive Force for Change**

Research and experience show that investments in youth advance a stronger civil society, equitable economic growth, and healthier lifestyles. When given a chance to participate, youth have played a catalytic role in promoting democracy, increasing incomes, helping communities develop, and slowing the AIDS epidemic.

- **Opportunity Costs of Ignoring this Age-Group**

When young women and men lack the skills, support and opportunities to become productive citizens, their potential to contribute to society is under utilized. Youth in these circumstances are more likely to be a long-term drain on public and private resources in terms of increased unemployment, higher health and social welfare costs, and lower economic growth. Economies are also weakened where youth become alienated and engage in social unrest and conflict. An intangible cost is the diminished quality of leadership available to countries as well as the international community.

Youth Demographics: 27% of the World's Population³

The huge size of the current youth cohort reflects higher growth rates in many countries several decades ago, which contributed to increases in the relative share and absolute size of the youth population. As the current generation of young people moves into its childbearing years, it will

¹ Population Reference Bureau. World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet.

<http://www.prb.org/datafind/prjprbdata/wcprbdata7.asp?DW=DR&SL=&SA=1>

² Youth (also referred to as adolescents and young adults) are individuals in the transition from childhood to adulthood. While this group is often defined to include 15-24 year olds, some sectors, such as health, focus on ages 10-24, while some political analyses track 15-29 year olds. The 1.77 billion figure refers to 10-24 year olds.

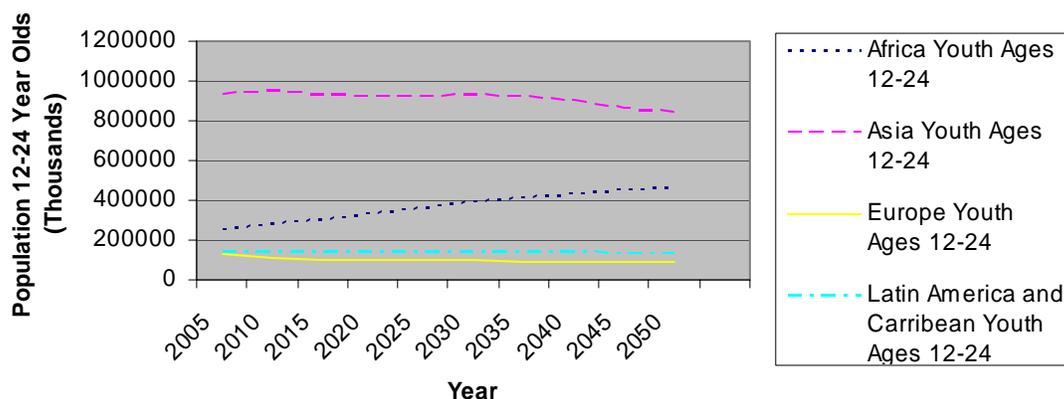
³ Population Reference Bureau. World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet.

<http://www.prb.org/datafind/prjprbdata/wcprbdata7.asp?DW=DR&SL=&SA=1>

continue to establish historic precedents and have far-reaching impacts. For example, this generation will have more women of reproductive age than at any other time in history; their fertility will be the engine driving future population growth. Even as birthrates decrease and stabilize, the “population momentum” generated by this large cohort is expected to account for half the world’s population growth over the next 100 years.

Overall, youth aged 10-24 represent 29 percent of the population in the developing world.⁴ But the relative share of the youth population varies widely, depending on where countries are in the “demographic transition.” Russia’s youth represent about 22 percent of its total population; in Kenya and Bangladesh, the 10-24 age group represents 35 and 32 percent of the population respectively.⁵ The youth population and share are shrinking in countries that have completed the transition to low fertility. But in those countries in Africa, the Near East and South Asia that are only recently beginning to experience fertility decline, the youth share and numbers have not yet peaked, and this age-group will continue to grow for decades to come.

Figure 1: Projected Youth Population by Region, 2005 to 2050



Source: U.N. World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision Population Database

The rise of mass schooling has also dramatically reshaped the demographic profile of the youth population, by delaying entry into work, marriage and childbearing. In Asia, nearly all young women aged 15-19 were married at the beginning of the 20th century; today, 85% of women in this age-group remain single in most Asian countries.⁶

Youth are also more likely than older adults to leave their communities in search of better economic opportunities. In parts of Southeast Europe, Eurasia, and Asia, young adults are leaving their countries in large numbers. Within many developing countries too, rural youth are leaving the agricultural workforce and moving to urban areas. Migration may foster positive social and economic change in some contexts. However, when job opportunities and social services are lacking at migrant destinations, migration can also be a disruptive force.

⁴ Population Reference Bureau. World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet. <http://www.prb.org/datafind/prjprbdata/wcprbdata7.asp?DW=DR&SL=&SA=1>

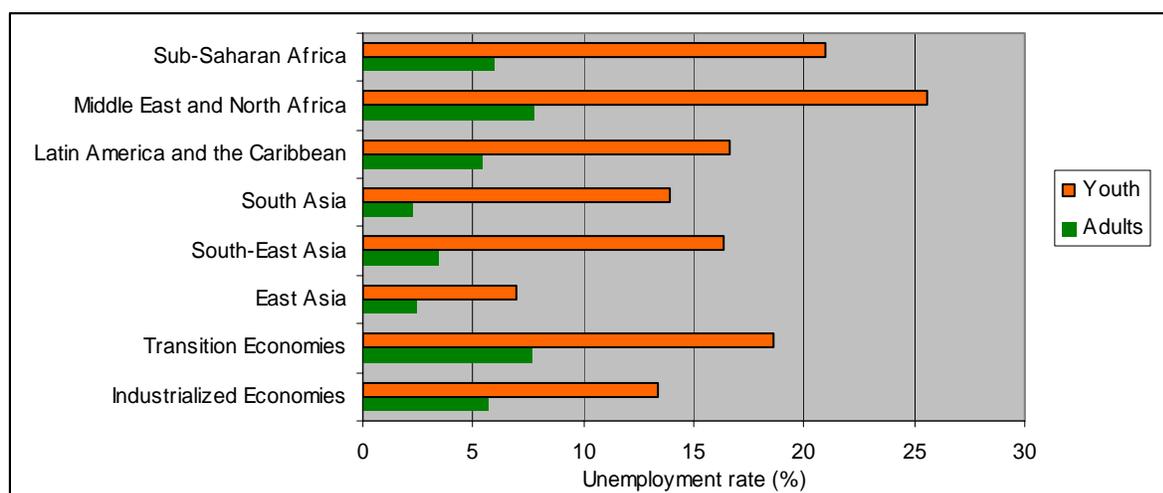
⁵ Population Reference Bureau. World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet. <http://www.prb.org/datafind/prjprbdata/wcprbdata7.asp?DW=DR&SL=&SA=1>

⁶ Population Reference Bureau. World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet. <http://www.prb.org/datafind/prjprbdata/wcprbdata7.asp?DW=DR&SL=&SA=1>

Addressing Youth Needs: Dimensions of the Challenge

1. Youth Employment: In many developing and transition countries, one-third to one-half of 15-19 year olds are unemployed.⁷ Youth unemployment rates have been rising in recent years; worldwide, this group accounts for 47 percent of all unemployment.⁸ Typically, unemployment rates are 2 to 3 times higher for youth than for adults.⁹ In many countries, youth lack the necessary skills to earn a livelihood; in others, large numbers of highly-educated youth are unable to find jobs. Lacking opportunities in the formal economy, youth are often attracted to the shadow economy, crime, and militant movements. Many working in the informal sector do not earn a living wage or enjoy basic social protection. Unemployed urban youth also often lack the social and economic “safety nets” available in rural areas. Unemployment early in life may have long-term effects on employability and future income levels. Poverty and lack of economic opportunity also fuel political and social instability, including religious extremism and terrorism.

Figure 2: Youth and adult unemployment rates, selected regions, 2003



Source: ILO. 2004. Global Employment Trends for Youth

2. Education and Training: Youth workforce issues are inextricably tied to education and training concerns. While school enrollment rates have increased world-wide, the quality of education is undermined by limited resources, outdated curricula, irrelevant skills training, poorly trained teachers, and limited access to new knowledge and technology. School completion rates remain low in many countries, and many girls and boys do not achieve basic literacy or numeracy before they drop out of school. Africa lags in both enrollment rates and quality of education; in many countries, school enrollment has not kept pace with population growth, while in others, the AIDS epidemic is further exacerbating these problems. In addition, few institutions in developing and transition countries prepare youth to compete in

⁷ Population Reference Bureau. *World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet*.

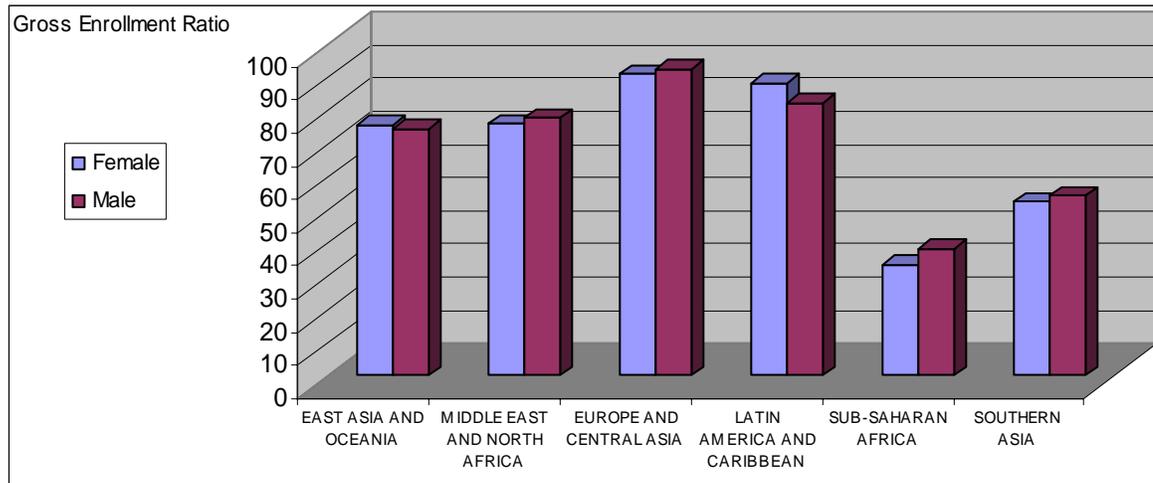
<http://www.prb.org/datafind/prjprbdata/wcprbdata7.asp?DW=DR&SL=&SA=1>

⁸ International Labor Organization. 2004. *Global Employment Trends for Youth*. P. 1
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/download/getyen.pdf>

⁹ International Labor Organization. 2004. *Global Employment Trends for Youth*. P. 8
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/download/getyen.pdf>

their emerging economies. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 25 percent of young people attending primary school continue on to secondary education and vocational training; as few as five percent attend college. School enrollments have declined in some Eastern European and Central Asian countries, where the old education system is not relevant to the development of market economies and democracy.

Figure 3: Male and Female Enrollment in Secondary Education, 2002



Source: UNESCO

3. **Health and Lifestyles:** Over 70 percent of premature adult deaths are linked to behaviors begun in adolescence, such as smoking and risky sexual behavior.¹⁰ HIV/AIDS is now a major threat to the lives of young people—half of new infections are in youth under 25,¹¹ and 10 million youth currently live with HIV/AIDS.¹² AIDS has dramatically reduced life expectancy—in the hardest-hit countries, nearly 75 percent of youth who are now age 15 are projected to eventually die of AIDS.¹³ Early childbearing also remains a problem. Annually, one tenth of all births are to girls between the ages of 15-19 years old and complications related to pregnancy are the major cause of death among adolescent girls.¹⁴ Although unmet need for contraception remains high among young women, the rapid growth of this population in those countries with the greatest needs compounds the challenge of providing services to youth. Other issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide and depression, are of growing concern but are often neglected.
4. **Gender Inequity:** In many countries, girls' lack of empowerment undermines their well-being and opportunities. In traditional cultures, girls are still married very young, truncating their education and limiting their ability to earn a living. While the gender gap in school enrollment rates has narrowed globally, in certain countries this gap persists or has even grown. Young women also typically have higher unemployment rates than young men.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State. January 2005. "Protecting Youth from AIDS in the Developing World," in *Growing up Healthy*, an issue of *Global Issues*

¹¹ UNAIDS. 2006. http://www.unaids.org/en/Policies/Young_people/default.asp

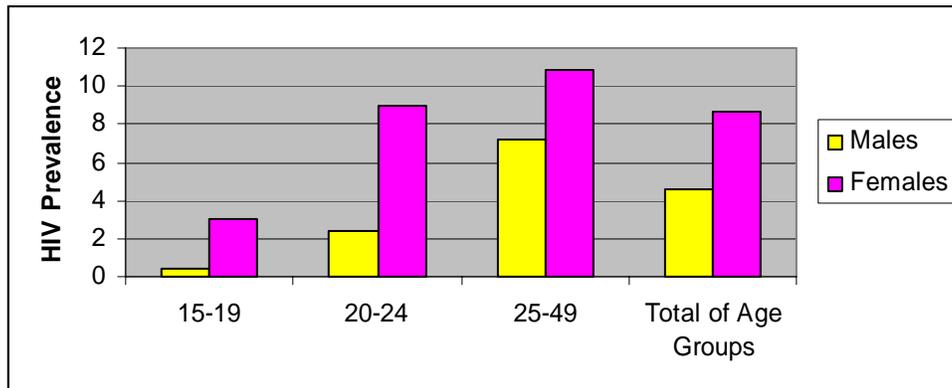
¹² UNAIDS. 2006. http://www.unaids.org/en/Policies/Young_people/default.asp

¹³ U.S. Department of State. January 2005. "Protecting Youth from AIDS in the Developing World," in *Growing up Healthy*, an issue of *Global Issues* and Population Reports. December 2001. "AIDS and Youth: Avoiding a Catastrophe," Series L, Number 12, p. 30

¹⁴ UNICEF. 2002. "Adolescence: A Time That Matters."

Sexual coercion and exploitation of young women are widespread, and for both social and biological reasons, girls are more vulnerable to HIV infection than boys. In some parts of Africa, girls are up to six times more likely than boys the same age to be infected with HIV.¹⁵ In some North African and Near Eastern countries, brothers are pushed to beat or even kill their sisters for infractions of religious or societal norms.

Figure 4: HIV prevalence by age and sex, Kenya, 2003



Source: Demographic and Health Surveys

5. **Social Cohesion:** Poverty and deteriorating health trends are disrupting social and family structures. Young people are being abandoned, sold to the sex trade, or forced into military service at alarmingly high rates. Millions of young people, orphaned by AIDS, have become the breadwinners and caregivers for their younger siblings. Many countries hide the growing incidence of domestic violence, which most often victimizes girls under 15. Boys are also victims of beatings, abusive labor practices, and the sex trade. These practices destroy self-esteem, push teen suicide rates upward, and within the society, undermine values of democracy, social equality, and economic opportunity.
6. **Political Stability:** In many settings, political and ethnic violence have violated the rights and sensibilities of youth. Many have seen their families killed, their communities uprooted, their homes obliterated, and their hopes for an education shattered. Their trauma has been compounded by the absence of interventions by accountable governing authorities to protect young people’s interests. As young men have been drawn into fighting and large numbers of young women have endured rape and forced pregnancy, many youth have been desensitized to violence. Some recent research suggests that the propensity for violence increases in populations with a high proportion of young males.

Youth Are Resources for Development

Whether the force of the youth cohort supports or detracts from a nation’s development depends on the ability of leaders to harness the creativity and energy of young women and men in responding to the many challenges facing them. Much of the economic success of the “East Asian Miracle” countries has been attributed to a heavy investment in human capital formation,

¹⁵ Population Reports. December 2001. “AIDS and Youth: Avoiding a Catastrophe.” Series L, Number 12.

especially primary and secondary education, which was made possible in part by smaller family size and postponement of marriage and childbearing.

Youth have demonstrated their potential as a force for positive change in a variety of places. In Uganda and Zambia, teens and young adults have been key to reducing HIV infection rates through their adoption of more responsible behaviors. Both countries have also demonstrated that youth have the ability and drive to gain transferable skills to earn a livelihood and to contribute to the development of their communities.

Events in countries such as Mali and Serbia also illustrate the potential power of young people's engagement in political and civic participation. In both nations, student-led movements helped usher in democratic, reform-minded and relatively stable governments.

USAID's Involvement with Youth

USAID has yet to embrace the special needs and opportunities presented by the next generation as part of its corporate strategy for development. Given current demographics, recent world events, research findings, lessons learned in the field, and emerging program trends, it is critical that the Agency include YOUTH as a strategic priority within its development agenda.

The central technical or "pillar" bureaus are already increasing their attention to the special needs of youth. The Global Health Bureau, for example, is supporting a specialized activity to promote healthier behaviors among young women and men, while also mainstreaming a youth focus in other agreements. The Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade Bureau's attention to workforces in transition includes sharpening the relevance of skills training for young adults.

At the field level, USAID missions in Jamaica and Mali have incorporated a major focus on youth in their strategies, cutting across both education and health; other missions are now moving in this direction. In the Central Asian Republics, USAID targets youth in its efforts to foster democratic values and to develop a constituency for economic and political reform. Many missions are also increasing their focus on young people in their AIDS prevention and mitigation efforts, including developing basic education and livelihood programs for youth affected by AIDS.

What is needed now is for USAID to explicitly articulate and more systematically support the youth dimension of development.

USAID's Comparative Advantage

USAID is in a unique position to advance youth as a new and rapidly evolving issue within the development field. USAID/Washington bureaus with their strong technical expertise provide opportunities to scale-up and systematically document and assess promising youth interventions in different sectors. At the same time, field missions provide a practical vehicle for country-level work on youth issues across sectors, at both the policy and grass roots levels. The new Global Development Alliance also provides USAID the opportunity to attract additional resources through public-private partnerships focused on youth.