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## Young People: Forging the Future

*Energetic and open to new technologies, history's largest and most interconnected population of young people is transforming politics and culture*

People under 25 make up 43 percent of the world's population, but the percentage reaches 60 percent in the least-developed countries.<sup>i</sup> As parents and teachers of the next generation, their choices will determine future population trends. Investing in young people creates a pathway for accelerated development.

When young people can claim their right to health, education and decent working conditions, they become a powerful force for economic development and positive change.

Investing in adolescent girls is one of the smartest investments a country can make. With health, education and opportunities, girls and women can contribute fully to their societies and help break the cycle of poverty.

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### The Situation

- More than 1.2 billion people are adolescents age 10-19, the parents of the next generation, and 88 percent of those teens live in developing countries.<sup>ii</sup>
  - Of the world's 620 million young people in the labor force, fully 81 million, or 13 percent, were out of work at the end of 2009, the highest number ever. That rate is three times higher than the average adult unemployment rate worldwide.<sup>iii</sup>
  - Millions of young people live on their own or on the streets. Programs of sex education, peer mentoring and reproductive health services can reach them through special messengers: soap operas, comic books, posters, magazines, dramas and music videos.
  - About 40 percent of new HIV infections are among young people age 15-24. In this age group, only 40 percent of men and 38 percent of women have accurate knowledge about HIV transmission.<sup>iv</sup>
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## The Gender Divide

- Girls are more than half of the 143 million young people who are out of school.<sup>v</sup>
- Girls' primary school enrollment rates are high worldwide, approaching those of boys, but their completion rates are below 50 percent in most developing countries. In 19 African countries, fewer than 5 percent of girls complete secondary school.<sup>vi</sup>
- Some 100-140 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation/ cutting, and more than 3 million girls are at risk for the procedure in Africa alone.<sup>vii</sup>
- Girls are often the last family members to receive food and health care. Nutritional anemia affects an estimated half of all girls in developing countries. It stunts growth and increases the risk for miscarriage, obstructed labour and fistula, stillbirth, premature birth and maternal death.<sup>viii</sup>
- Worldwide, more than 50 million adolescent girls 15-19 are married, some with little understanding of reproduction. Most will not complete secondary education, and many will become pregnant before their bodies are mature enough to safely deliver a child.<sup>ix</sup>
- Every year, 16 million adolescent girls become mothers. Half live in just seven countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Congo, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria and the United States.<sup>x</sup>
- Complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in Africa and South Asia among girls age 15-19.<sup>xi</sup>
- The proportion of girls age 10-14 that die in pregnancy or childbirth is five times higher than that of women age 20-24, and twice as high among girls age 15-19. The vast majority of these deaths take place within marriage.<sup>xii</sup>

## The Trends

- Adolescents worldwide are generally healthier today than in the past, largely due to investments in early- and mid-childhood health care. Accidents cause a third of adolescent deaths, especially for boys, who are also more prone to violent deaths.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Many threats to young people from violence, abuse and exploitation are highest during adolescence: boys are forced to work as child soldiers, unpaid farmers or in hazardous jobs; girls are forced into sex or marriage or domestic labour.<sup>xiv</sup>
- Involving young people in designing and running programmes aimed at helping them often leads to unique approaches, improving the projects' success rate, while teaching the young people communication, negotiation and civic participation skills.<sup>xv</sup>
- A year of schooling for a girl reduces her children's mortality rate by 5 to 10 percent. With five years of school, her children are 40 percent more likely to live past age 5.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Each year of secondary schooling increases girls' future wages by 10 to 20 percent, compared to the 5 to 15 percent return on an extra year of schooling for boys.<sup>xvii</sup>
- Educated women are more likely to resist abuses such as domestic violence, traditions like female genital cutting and discrimination at home, in society or the workplace.<sup>xviii</sup> These changes transcend generations, resulting in better health for women, their children and eventually their grandchildren.
- In 2007, UN agencies joined to form the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force to make girls a priority in national policies and promote investments in education, health care, data collection, prevention of violence and support for girls' leadership development. By 2015 the Task Force will roll out comprehensive programmes in 20 developing countries; work has already started in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia, and Malawi.

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