

# PROGRESS FOR CHILDREN

**A report card on adolescents**

Number 10, April 2012



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April 2012

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ISBN: 978-92-806-4629-0  
eISBN: 978-92-806-4634-4  
United Nations publication sales no.: E.12.XX.2

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# FOREWORD | MEASURING UP

For adolescents around the world, report cards present a measure of their academic progress – and can point the way towards their futures. But how does the global community measure up in our efforts to give those young people the futures they deserve – and the tools and opportunities to make the most of their lives?

As the 10th edition of UNICEF's *Progress for Children* shows, this report card is mixed. For while we have made significant progress for millions of children over the last decades – reducing child mortality, increasing the number of children enrolled in primary school, expanding access to health care services – our efforts have left behind far too many adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19.

We must reach them. For adolescence is not only a pivotal time in the life of a child – the gateway to adulthood. It is also a critical opportunity to make progress for *all* children. And it is a stage of life in which we must invest more attention, resources and effort today, or suffer tomorrow the social and economic consequences of a generation less equipped to become fully contributing members of society.

Today there are 1.2 billion adolescents, worldwide. Nearly 90 per cent live in developing countries. But we know less about them than other segments of the child population: too little about their situations, habits, hopes and dreams. While household surveys have improved the quality and quantity of information about adolescents, there remains a marked paucity of data, especially about young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14.

But here is some of what we do know. Some 71 million children of lower secondary school age are not in school, despite the critical importance of education in helping adolescents develop the skills they will need as adults in the work force and in the community. Girls are less likely than boys to attend and complete secondary school – even though educated girls marry later than uneducated girls, bear children later, earn more income for their families, and have healthier, better educated children.

In the least developed countries, a quarter of young men and a third of young women are illiterate. Some 75 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are unemployed – a number that has grown, while educational attainment among adolescents has marginally increased.

While adolescents are at a comparatively low risk for diseases that kill the greatest number of young children – diarrhoea and pneumonia – it is by no means a safe time in their lives. Each year, 1.4 million adolescents die from injuries due to road traffic accidents, violence, and other causes. In 21 developing countries where we have enough data to assess the situation, more than one third of all girls aged 15 to 19 suffer from anaemia.

The onset of puberty and greater personal freedom make adolescents acutely vulnerable, and girls especially so. An estimated 2.2 million adolescents are living with HIV – around 60 per cent of whom are girls. More than one third of young women in the developing world were married before reaching the age of 18, a change in status which can increase the risk of domestic violence. And early marriage frequently leads to early childbirth – the leading killer of adolescent girls in Africa.

But even when excluded from critical services and denied their basic rights, adolescents can be resourceful, courageous, and well aware that their futures depend not only on what we can do for them, but on what they can do for themselves.

Around the developing world, digital technology, mobile communications and social media are connecting young people as never before – not only to one another, but to the world of information and ideas – and inspiring them to find innovative ways to improve their own lives.

I have seen this first hand. In the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, teenagers use cameras tied to the strings of kites to map the risks in their neighbourhoods. In Uganda, and other nations, young people use SMS texting to report on conditions in their communities, and to offer their ideas for how to address problems. And in virtually every country and community, adolescents and young people are changing *their* world – and thus, the world we all share.

Today's adolescents were born under the auspices and protections of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. They are the children of the Millennium Declaration, reared during a decade of unprecedented global effort to create a more peaceful, prosperous and equitable world. We have promised them much; and we must deliver.



Anthony Lake  
UNICEF Executive Director

# 1

## PROGRESS FOR ADOLESCENTS

In the Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, world leaders made a promise to children to help them fulfill their human potential. The children born in that milestone year are now adolescents. It is time to review whether the promise is being kept for these 'Millennium children' and for all adolescents. Have the lives of adolescents improved?

Millions of children have benefited from the promise of the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Many adolescents are alive today as a result of the significant drop in the child mortality rate since 1990. Globally, more children are enrolled in school today than any generation of children before them.

But the benefits of progress have not been equally shared among all adolescents. Economic growth has not always been equitable, and the benefits have not necessarily accrued to the poorest and the most marginalized.

### Situation analysis

Adolescents – defined by the United Nations as those between the ages of 10 and 19 – number 1.2 billion in the world today. As children up to the age of 18, most adolescents are protected under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, their vulnerabilities and needs often remain unaddressed.

- Every year, 1.4 million adolescents die from road traffic injuries, complications of childbirth, suicide, violence, AIDS and other causes.<sup>1</sup> Cause of adolescent death varies by region, and mortality patterns are associated with sex. In Latin America, injuries (including homicide) are the leading cause of death among adolescent boys; in Africa, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause among adolescent girls aged 15–19.
- Around 11 per cent of all births worldwide, or an estimated 16 million, are to girls aged 15–19,<sup>2</sup> and the youngest mothers are the most likely to experience complications and die of pregnancy-related causes.<sup>3</sup> Despite the decline in the overall birth rate in the developing world, adolescent birth rates remain high, especially in some countries

of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean.

- Some 71 million children of lower secondary school age are not in school,<sup>4</sup> and 127 million youth between the ages of 15 and 24 are illiterate, the vast majority of them in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup> Rates of secondary school enrolment, literacy and employment in most regions are lower among girls and young women than among boys and young men.
- An estimated 2.2 million adolescents, around 60 per cent of them girls, are living with HIV,<sup>6</sup> and many do not know they are infected. Overall, the levels of correct knowledge about HIV among older adolescents aged 15–19 remain low, with fewer girls having correct knowledge than boys. Many adolescents aged 15–19 know where HIV testing is offered, yet they are unlikely to take advantage of these services.
- Large proportions of adolescent girls aged 15–19 have experienced sexual violence, and domestic violence is common among adolescent girls who are in relationships. Gang violence is common among adolescents, particularly boys. Adolescents with disabilities are at increased risk of violence and sexual abuse.<sup>7</sup>

Neither young children nor adults, adolescents lack the services that respond to their distinctive needs. Interventions for children very often focus on the younger ages; adolescents 'age out' of paediatric health care, for example, and they are often unreached by programmes for adults. Many adolescents are excluded from services that would reduce their risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, or that would help them prevent pregnancies, because of laws that limit their access to these services without parental consent. Adolescents who live on their own, either by choice or by circumstance, may no longer have the protection of their families.

## **“Understanding adolescents in all their diversity is fundamental to improving their lives.”**

### **A time of transition**

Adolescents experience intense physical, psychological, emotional and economic changes as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>8</sup> Risk-taking is part of adolescence, and it is the duty of society both to prevent risk and to mitigate any dangerous consequences such risk-taking is bound to have.

At this stage, investment must focus on those adolescents who are most at risk of passing the legacy of poverty and discrimination to the next generation: girls at risk of child marriage, girls and boys exposed to violence, younger adolescents out of school and all adolescents who are illiterate, adolescents living with HIV and those without access to knowledge, information and basic services.

Investing in adolescent girls and boys is crucial. In many countries, girls are less likely than boys to obtain a secondary education, more likely to be forced into child marriage and its attendant early sexual activity, less likely to use information and communication technologies and, if they live in sub-Saharan Africa, more likely to contract HIV. Boys are more likely than girls to participate in gang violence and – at least in some regions – fall victim to homicide.

Many of the development successes over the past decade have been the result of targeted investment in programmes and policies benefiting younger children, and investing in a safe, healthy and productive transition from childhood to adulthood is critical to consolidating these successes. Not to invest in adolescence, or to focus on adolescents only when they become

‘problems’, is to squander the investment already made in the early years.

### **Progress for adolescents**

This edition of *Progress for Children* sets out who adolescents are, where they live, what they do, what their problems are and how their needs are – or are not – being met. Understanding adolescents in all their diversity is fundamental to improving their lives.

Countries are increasingly adjusting national statistical tools to better capture the dimensions, threats and opportunities that adolescents face in their lives. Much data pertaining to the 15–19-year-old age group now exist, although there are far fewer data pertaining to the 10–14-year-old age group.

Household surveys, especially the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), have been instrumental in increasing the base of available data on adolescents. Such surveys are being conducted in more countries and on more topics than ever before, and their data can be disaggregated (*see panel on page 38*). This report is informed by an analysis of these expanded data sets.

The current status and future prospects of the Millennium children in relation to education and labour (MDGs 1, 2 and 3); health (MDG 4); sexual behaviour, childbearing and maternal health, and HIV (MDGs 5 and 6); and violence (Millennium Declaration) are described in the following pages.

# 2

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF ADOLESCENTS

### POPULATION TRENDS AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Some 1.2 billion adolescents (10–19 years old) today make up 18 per cent of the world’s population (see Figures 2.1–2.2). More than half of all adolescents live in Asia (see Figure 2.3). In absolute numbers, India is home to more adolescents – around 243 million – than any other country. It is followed by China, with around 200 million adolescents. The adolescent population of either of these countries dwarfs that of any other country.

Sub-Saharan Africa, however, is the region where adolescents make up the greatest proportion of the population, with fully 23 per cent of the region’s population aged 10–19 (see Figure 2.4). Two of the countries with the highest proportion of adolescents in the world – 26 per cent – are here: Swaziland and Zimbabwe. A third country where adolescents make up an equally

high proportion of the population is Timor-Leste (see Figure 2.5 on page 8 and statistical table).

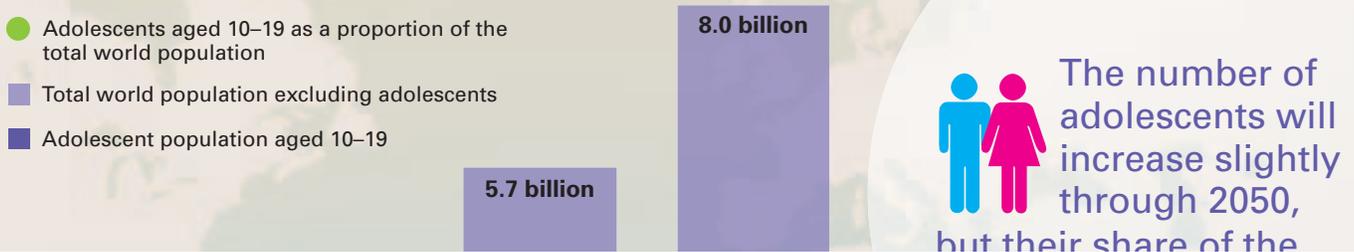
In the least developed countries, adolescents comprise 23 per cent of the population. Their share in developing countries is 19 per cent and in industrialized countries, 12 per cent.

## ADOLESCENT POPULATION: 1950–2050

FIGURE 2.1

### Adolescents’ share of a growing world population peaked around 1980

Population of adolescents 10–19 years old as a proportion of the total population, 1950–2050



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