

Investing in the Power of Young People, Transforming our World

Statement of the UNFPA Executive Director for International Youth Day

12 AUGUST 2015

Today, UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, commemorates International Youth Day, under the theme, “Youth Civic Engagement,” by celebrating the actions young people around the world take to improve their well-being and that of their communities.

In 65 countries, more than half the population is younger than 24. Denying these young people the right to meaningful participation in decision-making is a gross violation of their human rights and a failure of the democratic process. It is also a waste of human capital that can propel nations towards development.

Young people are driving change towards a better future for all in every corner of the world. They are leading global action on climate change, campaigning to end discrimination, speaking out to uphold democracy and the freedom of speech, connecting our world with innovations in information technology, and building peace in societies ravaged by war.

In a world of increasing conflict, young people must be our strongest partners if peace and security are to win out over war. We need their fullest capability and broadest engagement for people, the planet and prosperity to flourish.

The next 15 years offer a unique opportunity for a demographic dividend that will accelerate conflict-recovery and sustainable economic growth and development in many countries if we empower, support, educate and create employment for young people today. Young women and men need protection from violence, and they have a right to access essential education and health services, including for their sexual and reproductive health. They also have the right to be at the tables where decisions and peace are made.

Yet, for the most part, young people remain excluded from decision-making processes. Although 16 per cent of the world’s population is 20-29 years old, this age group represents only 1.6 per cent of parliamentarians, most of whom are men. Young people rarely join political parties, and the majority do not vote in elections.

It is misleading, however, to conclude that young people are uninterested or simply do not care. Today’s young people are better educated and volunteer more for causes than previous generations. They are also a key driving force behind making companies, organizations and governments more socially and environmentally conscious.

To fully participate in the lives of their communities, young people need to overcome multiple legal, social and cultural barriers and discrimination. Adolescent girls, in particular, are often burdened by child marriage, sexual violence, unplanned pregnancies and HIV, preventing their full civic engagement.

In September, world leaders will formally adopt *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, a historic, transformative, inclusive, universal agenda for our people and the planet. To have any chance of succeeding in building a better future for humanity, we must remove the obstacles confronted by young people and invest in their health, well-being, education and livelihoods to unleash and leverage their full potential as global citizens. We must ensure that all young people have access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including comprehensive sexuality education.

UNFPA is proud to work with networks of adolescents and youth to mobilize support for the United Nations Secretary-General's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health.

Our efforts to promote youth leadership and participation enable young people to develop the skills, knowledge and support needed to make informed decisions about their bodies, lives, families, communities, countries and the world.

Together, we can ensure that the post-2015 development agenda promotes the human rights, health and well-being of the largest generation of young people in history.

Together, working in partnership with young people, we can enable them to survive, thrive and transform our world, and deliver a better future for all of us.
