

Nairobi, 28 February 2011 (IRIN) - With the majority (88 percent) of the world's 1.2 billion adolescents living in developing countries, investing in their education and training could break entrenched cycles of poverty and inequality, says the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2011 State of the World's Children report.

"We need to focus more attention now on reaching adolescents - especially adolescent girls - investing in education, health and other measures to engage them in the process of improving their own lives," Anthony Lake, UNICEF executive director, said in a statement issued at the launch of the report, *Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity*, on 25 February.

Lake said: "Adolescence is a pivot point – an opportunity to consolidate the gains we have made in early childhood or risk seeing those gains wiped out."

In Nairobi, UNICEF's regional director for eastern and southern Africa, Elhadj As Sy, told IRIN: "Africa has the largest proportion of children, adolescents and young people in the world. Almost half its population is younger than 18 years and almost two-thirds are younger than 25 years.

"As the gap between rich and poor, men and women, urban and rural keeps widening, and inequality generates a 'nothing to lose' generation, paying more attention to adolescents and young people is especially critical for the African nations. ."

According to UNICEF, strong investments during the last two decades have resulted in "enormous gains" for young children up to the age of 10, with a 33 percent drop in the global under-five mortality rate.

"On the other hand, there have been fewer gains in areas critically affecting adolescents. More than 70 million adolescents of lower secondary [school] age are currently out of school, and on a global level, girls still lag behind boys in secondary school participation," UNICEF said in a statement. "Without education, adolescents cannot develop the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the risks of exploitation, abuse and violence that are at their height during the second decade of life."

Among the challenges facing today's adolescents, UNICEF said, are health risks such as injury, eating disorders, substance abuse and mental health issues - "it is estimated that around one in every five adolescents suffers from a mental health or behavioural problem".

Challenges

The agency said global challenges facing adolescents include the current bout of economic turmoil, climate change and environmental degradation, explosive urbanization and migration, ageing societies, the rising costs of healthcare and escalating humanitarian crises.

To enable adolescents to effectively deal with these challenges, UNICEF recommends improved data collection to increase the understanding of adolescents' situation; investing in education and training to lift adolescents out of poverty; expanding opportunities for youth to participate and voice their opinion; promoting laws, policies and programmes that protect the rights of adolescents, and stepping up the fight against poverty and inequality through child-sensitive programmes to prevent adolescents from being prematurely catapulted into adulthood.

Lake said: "Millions of young people around the world are waiting for greater action by all of us. Giving all young people the tools they need to improve their own lives will foster a generation of economically independent citizens who are fully engaged in civic life and able to actively contribute to their communities."

Source: [IRIN](#)