

Module 1: Introduction to adolescence and to adolescent health - Adolescent health and development with a particular focus on sexual and reproductive health - Assignment

Francesca Occhi

Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, San Raffaele University Hospital, Milan, Italy

Purpose of assignment: To make a summary of the following documents:

- [WHO. Strengthening the health sector response to adolescent health & development. Geneva: WHO; 2009.](#)
- [UNFPA. UNFPA framework for action on adolescents and youth. Opening doors with 4 keys. New York: UNFPA; 2007.](#)
- [World Bank. World Development Report 2007. Development and the next generation. Washington: World Bank; 2007.](#)

Adolescence, the second decade of life, is a period in which an individual undergoes major physical and psychological changes. In this period there are enormous changes in the person's social interactions and relationships. Adolescence is a time of opportunity, but also one of risk. It presents a window of opportunity to set the stage for healthy and productive adulthood and to reduce the likelihood of problems in the years that lie ahead. At the same time, it is a period of risk: a period when health problems that have serious immediate consequences can occur or when problem behaviours that could have serious adverse effects on health in the future are initiated.

There are economic, public health and human rights reasons for investing in the health and development of adolescents.

Adolescents represent one fifth of the global population; healthy, competent adolescents who enter the work force can raise the economic productivity of a country.

Investing in the health of adolescents helps prevent about 1.4 million deaths that occur globally every year due to road traffic injuries, violence, suicide, HIV and pregnancy related causes. It can also improve the health and well-being of many millions of adolescents who experience health problems such as depression, anaemia or HIV infection; and promote the adoption of healthy behaviours that help prevent health problems that occur later in life, such as cardiovascular diseases and lung cancer resulting from physical inactivity and tobacco use initiated during adolescence. Finally, investing in adolescent health can prevent problems in the next generation such as prematurity and low birth weight in infants born to very young mothers.

Many things need to be done by many sectors to improve adolescent health and development. The health sector has a crucial role to play, through a range of actors, including government bodies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector.<sup>2</sup>

The WHO Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development (WHO/CAH) contributes to the goal of improving adolescent health in two main ways: by recommending comprehensive, multisectoral and evidence-informed adolescent health approaches; and by delineating and supporting the critical contribution of the health sector, including the leadership role of health ministries.

As a beginning, there are 2 main starting points to strengthen: HIV prevention, care of those with HIV; and preventing early pregnancy and pregnancy-related mortality and morbidity. Following, the other public health issues affecting adolescents are nutrition, mental health, substance use and intentional or unintentional violence.

National SRH and HIV programmes should incorporate key elements of the 4-S framework for strengthening the health sector response to adolescent health by:

- gathering and using strategic information;
- developing supportive, evidence-informed policies;
- scaling up the provision and utilization of health services and commodities; and
- strengthening action and linkages with other government sectors.

The UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect. It works in partnership with governments, as well as with other agencies and civil society broadly, to advance its mission) gives us some numbers: almost 1.5 billion people in the world today are between 10 and 25 years old. More than half of all youth survive on less than \$2 a day. More than 100 million adolescents do not attend school. Fifteen million adolescent girls become mothers every year. Among mothers under age 20, infant mortality rates average 100 deaths per 1,000 live births (among mothers aged 20-29 and 30-39, the rate is 72-74 deaths per 1,000 live births). Six thousand young people are infected with HIV everyday; most of them are girls in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

These are not just numbers. These are the realities of young people at the crossroads. The gap between the MDG (Millennium Development Goal) targets and the current state of affairs for young people leaves no time for questions.

The UNFPA's vision: "A world fit for adolescents and youth is one in which their rights are promoted and protected. It is a world in which girls and boys have optimal opportunities to develop their full potential, to freely express themselves and have their views respected, and to live free of poverty, discrimination and violence." Drawing on this vision, the Fund will support governments and partners to:

- Empower adolescents and youth, girls and boys, with skills to achieve their dreams, think critically, negotiate risky situations, and express themselves freely.
- Provide access to health, including sexual and reproductive health information, education, commodities and services.
- Connect young people to livelihood and employment programmes.
- Uphold the rights of young people, specifically girls and marginalized groups, to grow up healthy and safe.
- Encourage young people to participate fully in development plans.

- Recognize the rights of young people to a fair share of education, skills, and services, with a special focus on economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized, and vulnerable groups.

The action of UNFPA can be summarized in 4 Key Points:

1. Supportive policy making that applies the lens of population structure and poverty dynamics analyses
2. Gender-Sensitive, Life-Skills-Based Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Education
3. Sexual and Reproductive health services (such as contraception, HIV prevention, maternal health services)
4. Young people's leadership and participation.

It is now clear that invest in young people is very important, and this is clear not only for teachers or for workers in public education or in social things, but also for policy makers, because they understood that young people will greatly influence the future of their nations. Thanks to the development achievements of the past decades, more young people are completing primary school and surviving childhood disease. However, to succeed in today's competitive global economy, they must be equipped with advanced skills beyond literacy; to stay healthy they must confront new disease burdens, such as sexually transmitted disease and obesity.

Today 1.5 billion people are ages 12-24 worldwide and 1.3 billion of them are in developing countries: the challenge is how to ensure adequate and sustainable support. This situation can be an economic risk, but also an opportunity because of the expansion of a workforce that can build a human capital.

Adolescence is a period of transition in learning, work, family, health and citizenship, and if these transitions take the wrong way the consequences will be very costly to correct because dropping out of school, prolonged periods of unemployment or risky health behaviours can leave permanent scars. Adolescence is the period of life when a human being has to start a productive working life, to adopt a healthful lifestyle, to form a family, to exercise citizenship. Policy makers has to facilitate all of these aims, helping young people acquire, improve and deploy their skills, giving them opportunities, second chances and capabilities, improving the opportunities and the quality of further education and giving them responsibilities.

The youth will always influence their nations. How positively or negatively will depend on the type of education and support they receive. They need a lot of opportunities to keep challenging their ever growing capability to make the right decisions and also extra opportunities to keep correcting their mistakes (second chance).

Mass education programs across the world have not yielded the needed results because of poor quality. Young people need to acquire skills that will improve their lives and promote development.

It is far cheaper and cost-effective to invest in quality education for the youth than to spend later to keep them in prisons a well equipped youth will definitely pay back to society all the investment with interest.