

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

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Task: To read specified documents including the presentations & support documents and articulate the 'central messages' on each framework



### **Overall Comments**

'Adolescents' have been identified as a special group with specific needs only from the early 1980's. The challenge confronting public health professionals was in getting policy makers and implementers realize the need to work on specially designed interventions for adolescents. As enough global research and material have shown, adolescents are robust and healthy mostly, but what was not glaring were the hidden morbidity and burden of ill-health that adolescents encounter due to risky behavior and early on-set of reproduction and its ensuing dangers. Due to global recognition in the '80s International Organizations have made an effort to ensure that 'adolescents' are being recognized as a separate group who cannot be clubbed with children and have specific needs, risks, problems and challenges and hence specific policy & program frameworks have been designed to ensure that investing in adolescents will lead to far-reaching social, economic and health related out-comes which would benefit the individual, families, community and the Nation/World as a whole.

Below is my synopsis capturing the 'central messages' on each framework for the 3 documents that were suggested:

[World Bank. World Development Report 2007. Development and the next generation. Washington: World Bank; 2007.](#)

The underlying theme/message of the document is looking at adolescents & youth (12-24 years) from an 'economic view point' and how Governments need to recognize them as a 'large human

capital base' and invest accordingly. Hence in order to ensure appropriate utilization of this capital and make it a viable proposition the 'youth lens' strategy (looking at opportunities, capabilities and second chances) should be adopted for making sound policies and workable programs which deliver the requisite outcomes by investing soundly and effectively in adolescents & youth. The document highlights the need to focus on the 5 youth transition milestones (continuing to learn, starting to work, developing a healthful lifestyle, beginning a family and exercising citizenship), to ensure long- term impact on the human capital which will help reap positive benefits to individuals, families and the Nation.

The document overview also mentions the various gaps currently seen in primary education and its long-term disadvantages (quality, drop-out rates etc.), importance of nutrition and reproductive health based interventions, looking at gender-based issues and that youth can contribute as positive citizens if they get the requisite knowledge and skills to empower them to pro-actively participate in political and social fora. It provides various important strategies and examples(evidence based) to Governments and mentions/urges them to muster economic and political resources to stimulate reform by resolving 3 main issues viz; better coordination and integration with National policy, stronger voice of the youth in decision-making and shaping their future and better metrics for ensuring robust evaluation of youth-oriented programs and policies. An important relevant proverb that captures the essence of this document is "*as you sow, so shall you reap*". Hence investing in youth will bring in rich dividends in all facets of life.

[UNFPA. UNFPA framework for action on adolescents and youth. Opening doors with 4 keys. New York: UNFPA; 2007.](#)

The UNFPA 'Framework of Action on Adolescent and Youth' document has been developed keeping in mind the need to address this very important group mainly because of the sheer numbers (around 1.5 billion) and the inherent potential to make a big difference and help in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This framework mentions 4 main Keys (supportive policy making keeping in mind the population structure and poverty dynamics analysis, gender-sensitive life-skill based sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, SRH services which are youth-friendly and encourage youth leadership and participation in the true sense), around which it suggests that UNFPA can market itself better and provide an essential package of support to national governments and also help in scalability and sustainability.

Further this document proceeds to outline the essential role UNFPA would play at the policy and program level with a view to promote 'intergenerational alliances'--- which is the underlying link for the 4 keys. In order to undertake this herculean task UNFPA will be essentially guided by 4 overarching principles namely; achieving social equity, protecting rights of young people, maintaining cultural sensitivity especially for SRH programming and affirming a gender-perspective for both girls and boys. This Framework of Action is a document that is meant for guidance to Country offices and is still being refined as it is an evolving process and the end objective is to develop operational guidelines, monitoring framework and tools for facilitating the implementation of the Four Key components of the Framework for Action.

[WHO. Strengthening the health sector response to adolescent health & development. Geneva: WHO; 2009.](#)

The WHO document reiterates the need and commitment to invest in the health of adolescents and hence looks at a framework that works to strengthen the health sector response to adolescent programming, especially departments that work on HIV and reproductive health within a

Country. This document talks of a 4-S framework (gathering and using strategic information, developing supportive evidence- informed policies, scaling up provision of health services and strengthening other sectors), which has been developed with key objectives to address at four levels viz; community level, district health management level, National level and WHO country offices level, in focus countries. It looks at a health systems strengthening approach to promote better adolescent and youth programming. This country –wise focus aims to demonstrate the possibility and importance of applying the 4-S approach to improve health programs designed to address adolescents and youth and demonstrate the viability of this kind of program effectiveness to other countries.

This document also outlines the various steps that need to be adopted at the health facility/managers level, district and National level and the systemic processes that need to be adopted for effective implementation.

### **Concluding Comments**

All the documents referred to above and the presentations on this topic and other readings and my personal experience of having worked on adolescent/youth programs in India highlight the fact that adolescents and youth are the future of any Nation and are an imperative group to invest in. The UN and many International Organizations have provided wonderful frameworks, strategies and support to Governments to recognize this group as special and the need to involve them at all levels for programming. Despite evidence-based programming and policies, in India it is seen that while currently definite resources have been earmarked for adolescent interventions under the flagship program (National Rural Health Mission), the National AIDS control program and the School Health Programs (Ministry of Human Resource development), gaps are seen in implementation and utilization of funds at the field level. Many State Governments are still grappling with the programming aspects and in actually operationalizing the youth-friendly services. Reproductive and sexual health education introduced by the National AIDS Control Organization faced a set-back when political and media based back-lashes happened.

I would like to conclude by mentioning that while evidence shows that working with adolescents and youth to improve their social, economic, health (including reproductive health) and overall well-being is very essential to improve the quality of life, there is still a need to build the capacity of policy makers and implementers to actually deliver on the ground in a systematic way to achieve the desired results.