

“Where the youth bulge is expanding in low-income countries . . . , the levels of frustration and conflict are certain to rise. The urgent question facing the developing world is how to improve young people’s job prospects now.”

## For Poor Countries’ Youth, Dashed Hopes Signal Danger Ahead

RICHARD CURTAIN

**Y**oung people in developing nations tend to be portrayed in the media with recurring, stereotypical images. The shy adolescent girl with headscarf and painted fingernails. The teenage mother with her malnourished child. Masked youths throwing rocks. Young men in jeans toting AK-47s. The youthful employees at a call center in India.

### DEVELOPMENT Global Trends, 2007

Snapshots like these only begin to convey the dilemmas and hardships of growing into adulthood in low-income countries. Yet the world in coming years can expect to see many more such images. The number of young people in poor nations—1.3 billion—has reached a historical high, and will continue to grow for the next two decades, peaking in 2035. In Africa, the so-called youth bulge will not peak until 2050, when 12- to 24-year-olds will reach an astonishing eight times their number in 1950.

Young people in the developing world, as a result, face very different prospects from those in affluent nations. Not only do their economic circumstances differ greatly, but the pressures they experience from their peers in the job market are poles apart. Young people in rich countries have the good fortune of seeking work in prosperous economies, and having fewer competitors for these jobs, unlike the baby boomer generation. In contrast, the burgeoning cohort of young people in poorer countries means many more of them are competing for fewer jobs in stagnant economies.

The expectations of today’s young in developing countries differ from earlier generations

because their identities have been shaped by the images and values of globalization. Young people, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Surveys, rate the importance of increased global trade and faster communication much more favorably than their elders in all regions in the developing world (except Latin America).

Yet those entering adulthood in low-income nations encounter a cruel and frustrating economic reality. Half of the world’s active job seekers are young people, even though they make up only one in four of the working-age population. In addition, huge numbers of young people are stuck in low-paid work, locking them into extreme poverty. The resulting gap between rising expectations and limited options leads often to conflict, especially in countries with weak economies and poor governance. Without new infusions of opportunity, conditions can only grow worse as the youth bulge continues to expand.

### GROWING UP GLOBAL

Why are the needs of young people in developing countries important? After all, moving from childhood to adulthood is a stage in life that everyone goes through, more or less successfully. How different are the hurdles facing adolescents and twenty-somethings living outside the high-income countries?

Four features of the current generation of young people in poor countries stand out. First, they are more educated and healthier than earlier generations. Three out of four 15- to 24-year-olds in developing countries are literate compared with three out of five of the 35- to 44-year-old age group. Higher education levels have raised their expectations about what they can aspire to.

Second, many more young people now live in large cities, seeking more education and testing

---

RICHARD CURTAIN is a public policy consultant based in Melbourne, Australia, who has worked with UNICEF and the UN Population Fund. This article is third in a Current History series on global youth.

the job market. Living in a big city can free young people from the traditional constraints of family and community and open them to new experiences and values, both good and bad.

Third, more young people through their access to education, urban living, and the media are exposed to the images and values of globalization. This process has been called “growing up global,” the title of a recent report by the US National Academy of Sciences on transitions to adulthood in developing countries.

The result for many young people, according to developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, is the forging of dual identities. One identity is based on a worldwide culture of practices, styles, and beliefs about freedom of choice and the rights of the individual. This helps explain, for example, why young people interviewed by Pew Global Attitudes surveys in the majority Muslim countries of Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Pakistan have a more favorable view of the United States than their elders do.

Young people’s other identity is based on local traditions of family and community. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Pew Global Attitudes surveys show that strong majorities, regardless of age, believe that their culture is superior and are concerned about protecting their way of life. These two identities, with their divergent sets of values, often produce conflicting attitudes.

Some young people resolve this conflict by rejecting the dominant form of the global culture. They may do this by adopting a strict version of their own traditional culture. A good example is the growing tendency of young Muslim women in the United Kingdom and France to use head coverings, particularly in the face of sometimes strong reactions.

Others turn to a set of principles based on an explicit rejection of the values of the dominant globalized culture. This may involve, for example, adopting anti-consumerist lifestyles to promote a sustainable environment. Still others may espouse a highly critical view of the West based on

global inequities. The *International Herald Tribune* quotes a young assistant architect from Istanbul: “It is enough to look at the economic imbalances to see why people think badly about Westerners. The United States, France, England, Germany, and many other countries have become what they are by exploiting either the natural resources or manpower of other countries. Therefore, Westerners, in this ongoing system based on exploitation, will always remain selfish and greedy.”

## THE EXPECTATIONS GAP

A fourth defining characteristic of today’s younger generation in poor countries is the gap between their expectations and the opportunities open to them. Because of the pressure of their ris-

ing numbers, many are denied the chance to take advantage of their newly acquired education and health assets.

Voices of Youth, a series of consultations undertaken by the World Bank in recent years, has highlighted this problem. In Bangladesh, young people report that “the main threat in terms of finding a job is the tight

labor market,” the result of too many applicants for too few skilled jobs. In this situation, many young Bangladeshis see the labor market as “corrupt and nepotistic, where qualifications do not matter as much as the ability and willingness to pay a bribe or [use] kin connections. . . .”

Two common strategies for dealing with tight labor markets in the developing world are: getting as many degrees as possible or paying the necessary bribe. These experiences often have long-term damaging effects not only on individuals but also on the social cohesion of their communities.

Indeed, financial insecurity undermines young people’s capacity in a variety of ways, causing them to stall on their way to attaining adult status. They find it much harder to avoid behaviors that put their health at risk; to set up a separate household, find a partner, have healthy children; and to participate politically.

Young people without education or skills have an even harder time. More than 500 million



**On His Way—But Where?**

A boy on a bike negotiates a busy Cairo street.

young people are estimated to live in extreme poverty. They face highly uncertain prospects, since slow economic growth is a general feature of the regions—sub-Saharan Africa, parts of South Asia, and the Middle East—where the youth share of the population is the greatest.

For many, extreme frustration leads to violence in various forms that destabilizes societies and reinforces a vicious cycle of poverty. The evidence for this is not hard to find, since most conflict-ridden poor countries have large youth populations.

Governments and international agencies have not addressed in any major way the issue of how to upgrade existing opportunities and create new avenues to help address the stymied expectations of the youth bulge. The World Bank's recently published World Development Report for 2007, entitled *Development and the Next Generation*, focuses on the need to invest in enhancing human capital. Yet the question of how the demand for these skills will be generated is not addressed.

Promoting more and better education begs the question: To

what end? The image one is left with is of young men and women in their twenties, diplomas in hand, healthy and well-dressed, waiting for the call that never comes.

## YOUTH AT RISK

International agencies and governments in poor countries tend to employ one of three contrasting perspectives in considering young people—seeing them as vulnerable, as a threat, or, less commonly, as an asset.

Most governments and UN agencies regard adolescents, especially girls, as needing protection and support. The Bangladesh government, for instance, notes in its poverty reduction strategy that adolescent females have poor access to nutrition and reproductive health services and high-risk exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Adolescent mothers in Bangladesh account for a fifth of all births and have high rates of maternal and infant deaths. Thus, the key anti-poverty goals set for adolescent health are to reduce teenage pregnancy, provide reproductive health awareness and services to all adolescents, help prevent sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, and reduce sexual abuse and exploitation.

Governments in postconflict situations tend to view their young people as marginalized from mainstream society, locked in a downward cycle of despair, needing protection, but usually from themselves, because of their high-risk harmful behavior. In Serbia, for example, adolescents and young adult men are seen as prone to “widespread risky lifestyles” that involve smoking, alcoholism, drug addiction, and sexual behavior.

In Sierra Leone, a decade-long civil conflict has badly affected the youth population, many of whom are now, according to a government report, “disabled, school dropouts, unemployed, commercial sex workers, drug addicts, diamond diggers, HIV/AIDS infected, sexually/physically abused young boys and girls, pregnant girls, teenage mothers, and . . . homeless.” In terms of exposure to HIV/AIDS, youth and adolescents in Sierra Leone are defined as a high-risk group in the same category

as commercial sex workers, uniformed personnel, migrant populations, and truck or taxi drivers.

Many of the measures concerning

young people in the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) refer to these vulnerabilities. These measures are the extent of illiteracy, gender balance in formal education, HIV prevalence among young pregnant women, and young people's lack of “comprehensive and correct knowledge” of HIV/AIDS.

According to official estimates, illiteracy affects one in four young people aged 15 to 24 years in low-income countries (defined as \$875 or less annual gross national income per head). However, this is certainly an underestimation of actual illiteracy levels, since many governments rely on self-reported answers. National surveys that ask respondents to read a simple sentence show higher rates of illiteracy.

The Millennium Development Goal of achieving gender balance in secondary and tertiary education has a long way to go. In South Asia, only one in two girls attends secondary school; the proportion in sub-Saharan Africa is an even smaller three in ten. In developing regions as a whole, 80 females for every 100 males are enrolled in tertiary education. Sub-Saharan Africa has the widest gender gap in tertiary enrollment (68 females to 100 males), followed by South Asia (71 females to 100 males).

The adolescent fertility rate, although not one of the MDG targets, is an important poverty indicator

---

*The presence of a youth bulge in a country is a key factor increasing the risk of civil conflict.*

---

because it affects several Millennium Development Goals. Reducing the number of adolescent mothers would improve disproportionately the overall level of maternal health because teenage mothers, especially those who are poor, have a much higher risk of major complications from childbirth. Mothers aged 19 years and below account for nearly one in five births in the least developed countries.

Another measure of vulnerability is exposure to HIV/AIDS. Young women in sub-Saharan Africa are more prone than men to become infected with HIV/AIDS and at an earlier age. The UN agency dealing with AIDS reports that women aged 15 to 24 years are, depending on their country, between two and six times more likely to be HIV-positive than men of a similar age. This reflects the unequal gender relations, including among youth, in most societies.

Lack of access to decent paid work is another important measure of vulnerability. However, measuring unemployment in developing countries is notoriously unreliable. Defining the unemployed as only those actively seeking work overlooks the fact that the poor cannot afford to keep looking for work. The international definition of "employed" is also too narrow. It includes work for as little as an hour a week, thus hiding the underemployed who want full-time productive jobs. The "employed" category also includes "unpaid family workers," many of whom would welcome paid work if it were available.

The International Labor Organization has recently estimated that one in five employed young people worldwide is a member of the working poor, living on \$1 or less a day. In sub-Saharan Africa, the situation is especially bad: close to six out of ten young people have employment but are still living on \$1 or less a day. In South Asia, four out of ten young people are working but remain in extreme poverty.

These measurement limitations mean that unemployment rates affecting young people in developing countries grossly underestimate the size of the problem. Even so, among 15- to 24-year-olds, one in three was recorded as unemployed last year in North Africa, and one in four in western Asia. In this same age group, according to another study, one in three is not currently employed or in school in Central and Eastern Europe; the same is

true of one in four in sub-Saharan Africa and one in five in Central and South America.

## THE CONFLICT CONNECTION

While young people in the developing world are seen as vulnerable, they also are often regarded as threatening. In particular, the threat to civil order posed by young men concerns many poor countries. In Latin America, youth-initiated violence and crime are common. In Moldova, the government sees the underlying cause of youth violence as young people's exclusion from the mainstream of economic life. In Kenya, officials acknowledge that young people often resort to crime, street begging, and drugs because of limited options in a depressed economy. Nigeria has seen youth violence rise in schools as well as in the wider society. Youth violence is also a major concern in the post-conflict countries of Bosnia, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and East Timor.

Leone, Uganda, and East Timor.

Evidence of young people's links with conflict is strong. Young men represent the largest group of both victims and perpetrators of urban violence. The

cities with the highest youth homicide rates are in Latin America, the United States, and the transition economies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Youthful populations have also been linked historically with political violence. The presence of a youth bulge in a country, in combination with other economic and social conditions, is a key factor increasing the risk of civil conflict. According to Jack Goldstone, this demographic pressure helped produce the English and French Revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The same demographic pressure applies in many developing countries today.

The relevant measure is the youth share (variously defined as 12 to 24 years, 15 to 24 years, or 15 to 29 years) of the adult population (aged 15 years and above). A Norwegian researcher, Henrik Urdal, has shown that countries have a high propensity for internal armed conflict, terrorism, and rioting if they have poorly performing economies, weak governance, and a large youth share of the adult population.

It is no surprise to learn that countries with high youth bulges are mostly in sub-Saharan

---

*Slow economic growth is a general feature of the regions—sub-Saharan Africa, parts of South Asia, and the Middle East—where the youth share of the population is the greatest.*

---

Africa and the Middle East (Syria, Yemen, Iran, and Jordan). The potential for conflict at sub-regional levels within heavily populated countries, such as India and Indonesia, can also be identified this way. A new study by Urdal of 27 states in India between 1956 and 2002 shows that the likelihood of armed conflict, political violence events, and Hindu-Muslim rioting increases with the presence of a youth bulge. This applies especially in states that also have large male surpluses and high levels of urban inequality.

Do poor countries with large youth bulges recognize the problem? Some sub-Saharan countries, such as Burkina Faso, Lesotho, and Sierra Leone, do give a prominent place in their poverty reduction strategies to the needs of young people. Other countries, such as Kenya, Tanzania, Bangladesh, and Nicaragua, only give minor attention to youth issues. And the governments of Pakistan, Nigeria, Uganda, and Nepal—despite their huge youth populations—give no recognition at all to the needs of young people in their national poverty reduction strategies.

## MEASURES OF WORTH

Less commonly, governments in low-income countries view youth in positive terms, not merely as vulnerable or threatening but as assets to be invested in and supported. This focus encourages the provision of more resources to provide all young people with a basic level of education and to enhance their life skills with relevant occupational or entrepreneurial training. Other policies include providing better access to credit and opportunities to study abroad to learn best practices.

Asset-based measures of young people are much less common than measures of their vulnerabilities. One such measure is completed years of education. Reliable data on this are hard to find, but in many countries relatively small numbers of youth progress from primary to secondary school. The reasons are poor preparation, lack of interest, and high costs.

Years of completed education, however, are now increasingly seen as an inadequate measure as new information about learning achievement becomes available. International student assessment surveys show that the level of basic skills among 15-year-old students in Indonesia, Thailand, Tunisia, Brazil, Turkey, Uruguay, and Mexico is about 20 percent lower than the scores of students in high-income countries. The poorest students in these countries have even lower scores. Nor can it be assumed that

completion of primary school confers literacy. Many young people in poor countries with several years of primary school education are functionally illiterate.

The measure most associated with the “young people as asset” perspective is the ratio of the working population to the dependent age population (children to 15 years and adults 65 years and older). This calculation highlights the window of opportunity available to governments to reap the benefits of investing in the enhancement of the skills of the young working population.

They had better act quickly. Of the world’s inhabitants in extreme poverty—living on less than \$1 per day—one in five is aged 15 to 24 years. Where the youth bulge is expanding in low-income countries that are burdened with poor governance and weak economies, the levels of frustration and conflict are certain to rise. The urgent question facing the developing world is how to improve young people’s job prospects now.

## WORKING ASSETS

There are a number of ways, in fact. Some involve scaling up existing efforts, others adopting new approaches. In particular, encouraging youth entrepreneurship has been widely touted, but little action has been taken. This may change with Kenya’s recent decision to set up a “youth employment fund” to promote entrepreneurship, with an endowment of \$14 million. Other governments in Africa and elsewhere may follow suit if the endeavor proves successful.

Because of their skills, available time, and interests, young people have a comparative advantage in entrepreneurial activities based on computers and use of the Internet. Many pilot projects have been tried in developing countries, but few have been evaluated critically to find out which should be scaled up. Since small business opportunities in weak economies are limited, access to high-income markets, through the Internet, offers much better prospects. Also needed is on-the-ground support from rich countries through peer networks based on youth associations. Diaspora networks could be tapped as potential markets.

Improved access to microcredit for young people is essential. The success of microcredit comes from showing that the poor are “bankable,” but the main beneficiaries have been stable groups of older married women. Young unmarrieds are viewed as poor credit risks. Thus, the young self-employed need first to prove the viability of their enterprise by persuading family and friends to support them,

at least initially. This will enable them to develop a credit profile based on their achievements.

Proposed new investments in transportation infrastructure in Africa will be a major job generator. For young people to benefit, construction initiatives should include targets for employing youth age groups, provided they meet basic competency standards set by employers. Construction firms should also be asked to train young people on the job, through the use of mentors. Governments will need to fund front-end skills training separately, based on national skill standards, to ensure that economy-wide gains are achieved.

Overseas temporary work is another option for both semi-skilled and skilled young people. Many small countries with populations of less than 2 million simply lack the opportunities for young people with talent. They do not have the critical population threshold needed to support a diversified economy. The option of working overseas is a major source of income for many low-income countries. Money sent back home usually goes directly to the poorest households.

Several sending and receiving countries have temporary labor migration programs. Jamaica has a bilateral hospitality worker program with the United States, which arranges the temporary migration of Jamaicans to work in the American hospitality industry, primarily as cooks and maids. Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, established in 1974, allows Mexican migrants to work on Canadian farms for up to eight months a year. Selection for the program is restricted to family heads with little formal education and low income. The workers have been able to save to send their children to school, invest in their farms, and improve their homes.

Overseas temporary skilled work can provide unexpected wider benefits for poor economies in the form of a major incentive for more young people to lift their education and skill levels. Universities will be under pressure from their students to increase the quality and relevance of their education to match the standards of the destination countries. The result is a larger domestic skills pool of higher quality.

Governments need to play their part too in enhancing the capacities of their young people. One option, tried in only a few countries, is to set up a domestic Peace Corps–like national service for young people to undertake civic service work through projects such as literacy training and malaria eradication. In Nigeria, university graduates can provide civic service in a rural location such as a high school, community health center, or agricultural extension. Another option for national service in developing countries would help those with basic literacy skills to run small maintenance businesses to meet the demand for rural services in water, sanitation, and electricity. A third strategy would use the skills of educated young people to engage with their illiterate peers by combining literacy training with other activities such as environmental conservation or health promotion.

## POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

The situation facing young people in the developing world deserves much more attention than it has received. Their vulnerability in terms of low incomes, illiteracy, and poor education outcomes has received little focus in the poverty reduction strategies of governments and international agencies. The effects of large youth cohorts on developing countries have been largely ignored by governments and others, apart from those concerned with identifying preconditions for peace and security.

The view of young people as critical assets for lifting economies and societies out of poverty offers the most potential for change, yet it has gained the least attention. Governments, international agencies, and donors could harness far better the capacities of young people. To do this effectively, they need to encourage and support young entrepreneurs, help them find ways to take advantage of technology and globalization to access high-income markets, and promote antipoverty efforts that mobilize young people's collective energies. Above all, governments need to engage directly and constructively with young people themselves. This requires actively including them in the political process and meaningfully responding to their needs and aspirations. ■