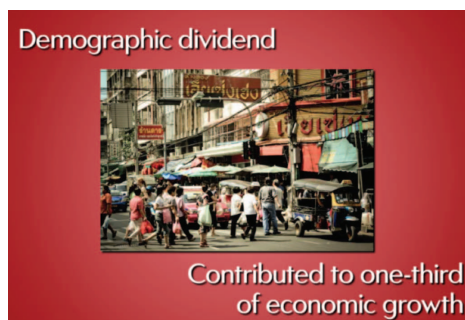


The Time Is Now: Invest in Sexual and Reproductive Health for Young People



KEY MESSAGES

There are 883 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa today. One out of every three is between the ages of 10 and 24—that is 280 million young people. Today, our young people are better educated, have access to more means of information and communication than ever before, and continue to show an interest in entrepreneurship and business development, a critical pillar for future economic growth.¹



A large adolescent and youth population is of major significance to development in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the region has the fastest growing population of young people in the world. And while this scenario may seem challenging, it is in fact an opportunity.

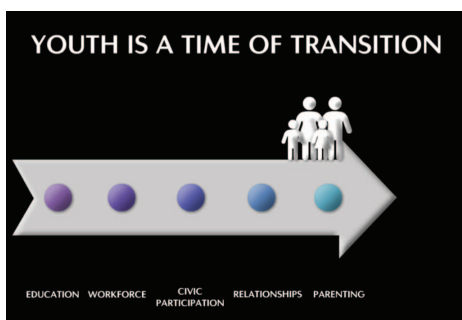
Evidence from the East Asian experience has taught us that when large numbers of young people grow up and enter the workforce, a special window of opportunity opens up for faster economic growth and development, called the demographic dividend. The demographic dividend is estimated to have contributed to as much as one-third of all economic growth in East Asia.²



Learning from the East Asian experience, we need to invest in policies and programs that harness the potential of our young people and ensure they are healthy, educated, and can get a job.

One critical area of investment is young people's sexual and reproductive health. Research shows that investments in reproductive health:

- Protect the well-being of young people;
- Maximize their potential for healthy, productive lives; and
- Improve social and economic development.³



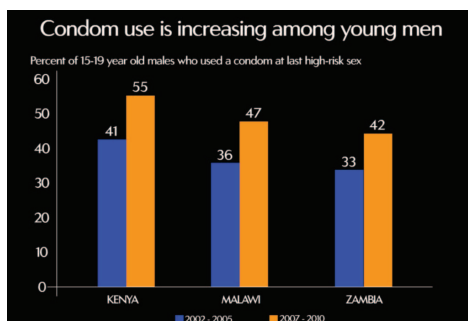
Investments in sexual and reproductive health are important for young people because they are experiencing a time of transition. With the right investments, nations can ensure that young people make a successful journey through this critical period. The right investments will: keep young people, especially our girls, in school; help young people start a productive working life; prepare young people for their responsibilities as citizens; foster healthy relationships between men and women; and encourage young people to delay childbearing and to also make decisions together about the timing and spacing of pregnancies and number of children they have.⁴



Comprehensive sex education is an important first step in empowering young people to make healthy decisions about their behavior. Global evidence shows that these programs help young people abstain from or delay sex; reduce the frequency of unprotected sex and the number of sexual partners; increase the use of contraception to prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections; and in turn, help delay that first birth to ensure a safer pregnancy and delivery.⁵



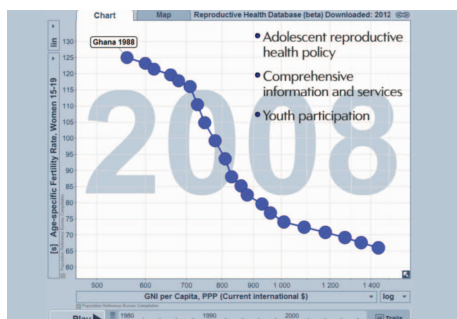
At the same time, youth-friendly services help young people address a range of sexual and reproductive health needs. Data show that among married adolescent girls, about two out of every three girls have an unmet need for family planning, meaning the couple does not want to get pregnant but is not using any form of contraception. And among sexually active, unmarried young women, almost half are not using any contraceptive method but do not want to get pregnant.⁶ Increasing access to family planning is a key strategy to protect the health of adolescent girls and reduce unintended pregnancies, maternal deaths, and unsafely performed abortions.⁷



At the same time, decisionmakers must consider the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescent males and young men. A comparison of DHS data from 2002-2005 to 2007-2010 shows an increase in the proportion of 15-to-19-year-old males who said they used a condom the last time they had sex with someone who was not their partner or was not living with them. This increase is important so more men become partners in preventing unintended pregnancies and reducing the spread of HIV.⁸



Investing in the sexual and reproductive health of young people also increases returns on other investments in health, education, and economic growth. For instance, delaying marriage and childbearing among adolescent girls could help increase school enrollment by 20 percent across the continent. And the more educated a girl is, the more likely she is to use contraception and avoid unintended pregnancy.⁹



Reducing adolescent pregnancy can help increase income at the individual, family, and national level. Over time, Ghana has been able to reduce its adolescent fertility rate from 125 births per 1,000 adolescent girls to 66 births per 1,000 adolescent girls in just twenty years, and has increased its gross national income per capita.¹⁰

Ghana was very successful because the country developed an adolescent reproductive health policy, offered broad reproductive health services for youth, and encouraged young people to advocate for themselves at regional and district level meetings, recognizing that young people have an important role to play in shaping decisionmaking.¹¹



Investing in young people's sexual and reproductive health will enable them to stay healthy so they can grow, branch out, and flower. With the right policies and programs to protect our largest-ever generation of young people, we can ensure they become a driving force for great prosperity, helping nations achieve higher levels of economic and social development.¹²

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POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU

1875 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20009 USA

202 483 1100 **PHONE**
202 328 3937 **FAX**
popref@prb.org **E-MAIL**
