

Carrying Malawi Forward:

Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health for Young People

Key Messages Handout



There are over 15 million people in Malawi today. One out of three is a young person between the ages of 10 and 24.¹

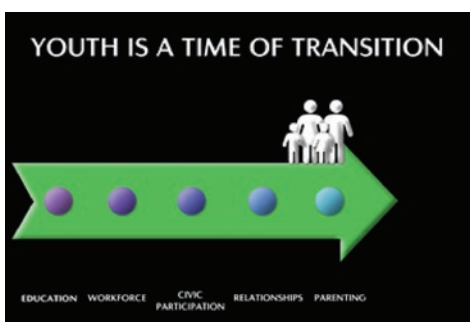
With the right resources and opportunities, their advanced skills, energy, and innovation will drive economic growth and social development for all of Malawi.



Photo credit: Getty Images.

One way to support our young people is by investing in their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Research shows that investments in sexual and reproductive health protect the health and happiness of young people, build their potential for healthy, productive lives, and improve social and economic development.²



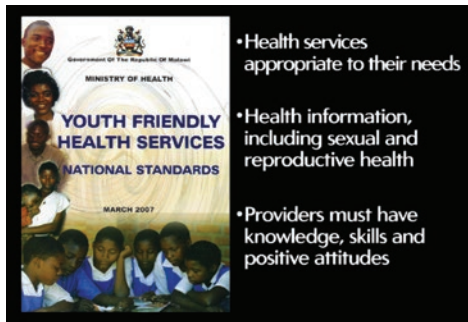
Young people face many challenges, but the right investments can help them make a successful transition to adulthood. The right investments will:³

- Keep young people in school.
- Give them information and skills to get jobs and begin productive working lives.
- Prepare them for their responsibilities as citizens to build more democratic societies.
- Increase the age of marriage.
- Encourage healthy relationships.
- Increase their access to contraception so they can decide together when and how many children to have.

Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education

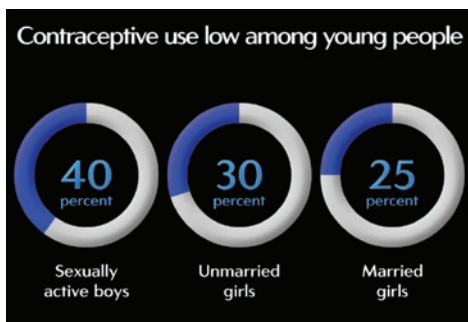
Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education is another way we can support safe transitions to adulthood.

Evidence shows that these programmes help young people abstain from or delay sex; reduce the frequency of unprotected sex and the number of sexual partners, which helps reduce the spread of HIV and other STIs; increase use of contraception to prevent unintended pregnancies; and delay their first birth to ensure a healthier mother and a safer pregnancy.⁴



Access to youth-friendly health services that recognise the rights of young people and are tailored for their specific needs are also critical.

Malawi's National Youth Friendly Health Services Standards state that all young people should be able to access health services and health information—including on sexual and reproductive health—appropriate to their needs and that service providers must have the required knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes to provide youth-friendly health services.⁵



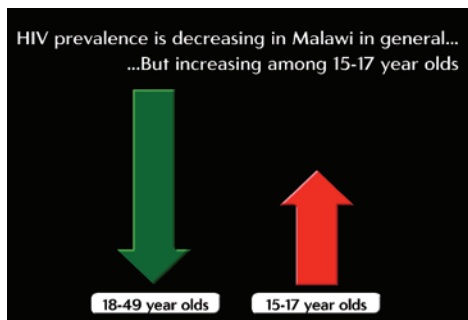
Youth-friendly health services can improve health across a broad range of outcomes, like contraceptive use, which remains low among young people.

Among 15-to-19-year-olds, less than half of sexually active boys, less than one-third of unmarried sexually active girls, and only one-quarter of married girls are using modern contraception.⁶



Increasing contraceptive use among young people could help reduce Malawi's high numbers of unintended adolescent pregnancy, prevent maternal death, and reduce the number of abortions.⁷

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Improving young people's access to sexual and reproductive health information and services can also help reduce the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

This is important because although rates of HIV are decreasing in Malawi overall, rates have actually increased among 15-to-17-year-olds.⁸



Photo credit: Richard Lord.

Preventing the spread of HIV requires reaching both young women and young men with sexual and reproductive health information and services.



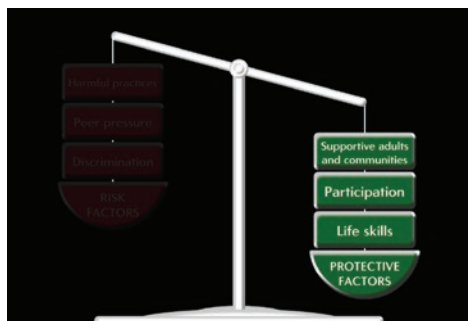
Photo credit: Jason Larkin.

Young men can also be engaged as supportive partners for contraceptive use and, when they do become fathers, for maternal and child health.

Engaging young men in sexual and reproductive health is an effective strategy for combatting harmful gender norms and improving gender equality broadly, which benefits both boys and girls and supports the achievement of national development goals.⁹



Ensuring that both boys and girls are able to take advantage of opportunities throughout their lives means addressing the risk and protective factors that influence sexual and reproductive health behaviour early in life.



Even though some risk factors may always be present in a young person's life, adults, communities, and young people can work together to nurture protective factors.

Ultimately, we want the protective factors to outweigh the risk factors so young people can stay healthy and take advantage of education and employment opportunities throughout their lives.¹⁰



Photo credit: Jason Larkin.

For example, preventing early marriage and childbearing not only protects the human rights of young girls, it also supports investments in schooling by increasing the likelihood that a girl will complete her education.



Photo credit: Pond5.

This has a positive impact on lifetime earnings, since research shows that each year of secondary education can increase her future wages by up to 25 percent. And the more educated a girl is, the more likely she is to use contraception and avoid unintended pregnancy.¹¹

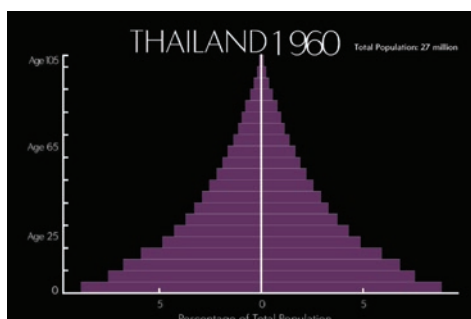


Even though it has decreased in recent years, Malawi has one of the highest adolescent fertility rates in the region, with over 106,000 adolescent pregnancies every year. This costs the economy an estimated \$57 million. It also contributes to high fertility and rapid population growth, since women are more likely to have many children throughout their lives when they start childbearing at a young age.¹²



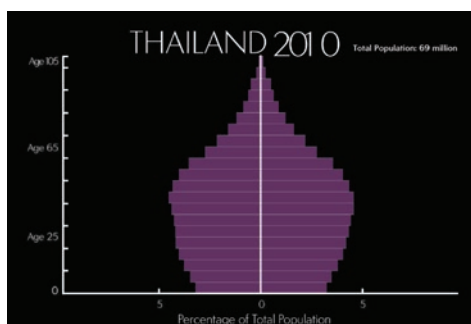
Investing in adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights is an effective strategy for managing rapid population growth, which is a key step to achieving economic growth.

Countries around the world have shown us that by managing population growth and investing in young people, it is possible to experience rapid and transformative economic growth.



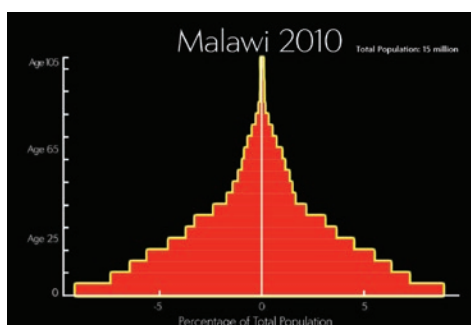
Looking at Thailand's population pyramid from 1960, we see that after a period of rapid population growth, the majority of the population was under age 25.

During the 1960s and the decades that followed, Thailand increased access to and use of voluntary family planning to slow rapid population growth. With fewer births, Thailand has been able to invest more resources per child, leading to more secondary school completion, as well as delayed marriage, and delayed childbearing.



By 2010, Thailand's age structure of the population evolved to have fewer children and a productive adult labour force.

Thailand has demonstrated how increased access to reproductive health care combined with investments in health, education, and a productive labour force can help a country transform their demographic prospects.¹³

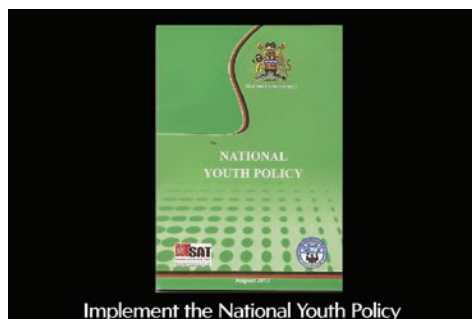


Today Malawi has a population structure similar to the pyramid of Thailand in 1960 with a majority of the population under age 25. Investments in the sexual and reproductive health of young people will help to ensure a healthy transition to adulthood, lower birth rates, and create the conditions necessary for the demographic dividend.¹⁴



Photo credit: Richard Lord.

This kind of economic progress is not automatic. As we see from Thailand's experience, it requires a series of investments across sectors to ensure that young women and men are healthy, educated, and equipped with skills and opportunities to contribute to the country's economic growth.



Malawi can expand on its previous successes by making investments in the sexual and reproductive health of its young people a priority for national development.

This includes implementing the National Youth Policy as a key strategy to increase funding and support across all sectors for young women and men in Malawi.



Photo credit: Richard Lord.

Malawi must also standardise and rigorously implement comprehensive sexuality education and expand youth-friendly health services for all young people.



Photo credit: C Robin Wyatt
www.robinwyatt.org/photography | robin@robinwyatt.org.

Leaders at all levels should actively involve young people at all stages of policy and programme development and implementation, and empower youth to be advocates for their own rights. Our investments are most effective when young people are included as stakeholders and active citizens.



If we recognise the rights of our young women and men, especially their right to sexual and reproductive health care, and support them as they transition to adulthood, they will carry our nation forward, into a brighter future.

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Acknowledgements

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