



Joint Statement by Heads of UN Entities for the Launch of the International Year of Youth

This year, 12 August marks a crucial date for young people and societies around the world. Today, we celebrate the launch of the International Year of Youth, under the theme Dialogue and Mutual Understanding. Twenty-five years ago, in 1985, we celebrated the first International Youth Year. The challenges for youth development that were identified during that year laid the foundation for the **World Programme of Action for Youth**, and its 15 priority areas still provide us with a useful guide to enhance the wellbeing of young women and men. While progress has been achieved in some of these areas, much remains to be done to ensure that all our youth become skilled, healthy and productive members of society.

We recognize that adolescence and youth mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, a time when many important social, economic, biological, and demographic events set the stage for adult life. **Education** plays an essential role in this transition to adulthood. Although youth literacy rates have increased considerably since the first International Year of Youth, progress has been uneven, with sub-Saharan Africa and Southern and Western Asia falling behind, and the rural-urban gap widening. We need to increase investments in and access to education, especially secondary education, which is the minimum level of education needed to succeed in our increasingly globalized economy and to guarantee young people a smooth transition to decent jobs. Youth un- and under**employment** incurs significant costs to the economy, society, the individual and his or her family. Lack of decent and productive work, if experienced at an early stage of life, often permanently compromises a person's future employment prospects. Inability to find decent employment can lead to social exclusion, vulnerability and idleness among youth, which may find an expression in anti-social behaviour. To provide the unprecedented number of job seekers entering the labour market in the coming years with decent employment prospects, we need to improve our knowledge of which employment and labour market policies are most effective and commit to implementing them.

The current financial and economic crisis and the preceding spike in food prices have proven a major setback to our efforts to eradicate **poverty, hunger and malnutrition**. Targeted investment in both urban and rural youth is a critical starting point for reducing poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It is crucial to provide incentives and capacities for youth to remain in their **rural communities** and be actively engaged in the rural economy, both in the agricultural and non-farm sectors. Stronger urban-rural linkages should also be created in order for young people to obtain access to markets and decent work opportunities.

Related to the issue of urbanization and the abandonment of the rural settings is the deterioration and exploitation of the natural **environment**. Young people are already imagining more sustainable lifestyles and their involvement in protecting the environment, be it in climate change mitigation and adaptation, the fight against desertification, or the management of forests, is critical to ensure sustainable development for future generations. In this regard, the active participation of youth in the Rio+20 preparations and Conference is crucial and must be supported.

We all agree that **health** is a human right and an integral part of youth development. Many young people die prematurely or see their future health jeopardized by preventable health problems such as HIV infection, too early or unwanted pregnancy, injuries, the use of tobacco or





alcohol, and malnutrition. Investments in health care, including universal access to evidence-based sexual and reproductive health programmes are crucial to prevent unwanted pregnancies, maternal mortality, sexually transmitted infections and other threats to young people's health. We must put young people at the centre of the **AIDS** response and ensure that young women and men have access to accurate information and skills as well as youth-friendly, gender-sensitive services to prevent HIV infection. Engagement and leadership of young people is critical to ensure an effective response that addresses the specific needs and realities of young people.

Youth policies often tend to be driven by negative stereotypes of young people, in particular in the context of **drug abuse, violence and delinquency**. We must use the opportunity that this year presents to change this perception and to recognize that the vast majority of young people are productive members of society. When substance abuse and juvenile delinquency do constitute a problem, it is frequently the result of a comprehensive inability to provide adequate opportunities and services to young people.

Around the world, children and youth are affected by **armed conflicts**. They are killed or maimed, sexually violated, made into orphans, abducted and forcibly recruited for military purposes. They are deprived of education and health care, and left with deep emotional scars and trauma, preventing them from enjoying a decent adolescence that is the foundation for a healthy and prosperous society. Collaborative efforts of the international community have led to progress in protecting children and youth affected by armed conflicts. However, much remains to be done, such as ending impunity of those who violate the rights of children and youth in conflict, securing universal adherence to international standards – such as the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict - as well as providing assistance to former child soldiers. Furthermore, it is critical that we support young people in playing a key role in promoting peace, security and good governance.

Evidence shows that **girls and young women** face a double burden. Not only are they discriminated against as a result of their age, but also due to their sex. Specific policies, legislation, programmes and measures that address the concerns, needs and rights of young women and girls are indispensable to ensure they are adequately prepared and protected in this stage of life. Initiatives focused on strengthening the capacities and skills of young women and girls are essential to enable them to actively and effectively participate in social, political, cultural and economic life. Efforts must be made to break down stereotypes of the role of girls and young women in society. Increasing the participation of young women in decision-making processes and leadership positions is essential to guarantee sustainable progress, human development and democracy.

Similarly, other **vulnerable groups**, such as indigenous youth, youth belonging to ethnic minorities, migrants, out-of-school youth, youth trapped in hazardous work and other worst forms of child labour, as well as youth with disabilities deserve our particular attention. Actions should be strengthened at all levels to better respond to their needs as well as to remove barriers to their access to and active participation in education, training and employment, with the aim of ensuring that all youth become engaged citizens and productive contributors to society.

It is important to recognize that **leisure-time activities, sport, tourism and volunteerism** can contribute to the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, psychological, ethical and cultural development of young people. In particular, sport gives youth a healthy start and teaches important values such as discipline, cooperation and commitment. Sport brings people together on an equal playing field that transcends social, ethnic and cultural divides, and a greater focus on





sport can promote the development of important skills and attitudes that are key to the future of our youth. Like physical recreation, tourism is an important means of individual and collective fulfilment for youth and an irreplaceable factor of self-education, mutual tolerance and learning about the legitimate differences between peoples and cultures. Moving to volunteerism, many youth around the world volunteer in their communities, thereby making tangible contributions to peace and development. Civic engagement is central to building cohesive communities and to promoting young people's integration into society. Greater efforts should thus be made to guarantee that young women and men have the opportunity to participate in these types of activities.

To address the persisting challenges outlined in the priority areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth, the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development has developed a framework approach to guide its work during this International Year of Youth and to maximize synergies with concurrent international observances, namely the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, the International Year of Biodiversity, the International Year of Forests and the tenth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers. The framework identifies three overarching objectives: increase commitment to and investment in youth; increase youth participation and partnerships; and increase intercultural understanding among youth.

Quality investment in youth development yields greater economic growth and social wellbeing for generations to come. Missed investments in young people's intellectual and human potential are costly to reverse, both for youth and for society. In order to achieve positive outcomes in the areas of education, employment, health and citizenship, a holistic approach to youth development is needed, focusing not only on young people themselves, but also on those factors that help shape their behaviours, such as families, communities, schools, the media, the legal system and social norms. To make the best use of scarce public funding, policy makers need to invest in programmes and activities that, based on empirical evidence, have proven to be successful in achieving their intended goals. An effective portfolio of programmes and policies that includes prevention and protection measures, second-chance initiatives and development policies that disproportionately affect young people needs to be developed and implemented. In targeting our investments, a specific focus on Africa, the youngest and poorest developing region in the world, is a necessary element for success.

Moreover, we need to institutionalize mechanisms for the participation of young women and men in decision-making processes and to support youth-led organizations and initiatives. We all know that young people are among the most affected by the key development challenges of our time, but are also at the forefront of developing innovative solutions to these problems. Youth have traditionally been a catalyst of not just social and cultural change, but of technological innovation as well.

The theme of this year and the existence of a number of political hotbeds around the world highlight the importance of cultivating dialogue and intercultural understanding among youth. Their open-mindedness, mobility and affinity to information and communication technologies transcend geographical boundaries. Youth can be a bridge between cultures and can serve as key agents in promoting peace and dialogue. We – the older generations – stand to learn and to benefit from their energy and creativity.

At the beginning of this International Year of Youth, we commit to working together within the UN system to tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities facing young people. We pledge to make youth a priority in our work and to collaborate with them in order to identify ways





in which our organizations can promote their wellbeing more effectively. We call on the international community to support our efforts and to recognize the central role that young people play in the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals and the attainment of peace and security. We urge Governments to enter into meaningful dialogue with young people in order to develop a mutual understanding of how to jointly address the development challenges facing us.

We hope that in twenty-five years from now, the young people of today will look back at this International Year of Youth and recognize that it has laid the foundations for making the world a better place for themselves and for succeeding generations of young women and men in every region, country and community around the world.

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