

**YOUTH DELIVER THE FUTURE
INVESTING IN YOUTH PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT:
RESEARCH THAT IMPROVES POLICIES AND PROGRAMS**

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Opening Plenary Remarks

By

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Delivered by

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I send you all warm greetings from Seattle and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The theme of youth development resonates loudly with the Foundation's priority of investing in causes that uplift the human condition. Since 1995, the Foundation has invested \$129 million to improve information and services to protect young people from HIV/AIDS and from unwanted pregnancy.¹

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is dedicated to making strategic investments in areas that promise high returns. We believe that investing in the health and development of young people is a sure bet for high returns in the future. If we want our youth to deliver a prosperous, safe and progressive future, we must equip them with the values, freedoms, knowledge and skills they need. We must provide them the opportunities to apply themselves. We must address the factors that matter most. Let me highlight four of the most pressing ones – gender, health economy and education.

Gender

Let me start with gender. In far too many places in the world, especially in Africa and South Asia, girls are denied the basic life opportunities that boys receive and take for granted. Discrimination may begin early and continue through life. Some cultures prefer male offspring, or engage in harmful traditional practices that discriminate against girls, or withdraw girls from school to generate income for the family. All together, females face inequities that are hard on them and ultimately erode society. The uneven playing field has resulted in higher rates of HIV/AIDS infections among girls.

The practices are often rooted in belief systems that some communities have held dear for many centuries – practices that may originally have been well intentioned but end up doing more harm than good. Considering that women make up about half of the youth population, gender-based discrimination is an enormous waste of human potential. It robs a nation of the benefits of vital resources and leads to numerous health problems for young females.

Your Excellency, I am aware that you are working to address some of these issues through your foundation the Women and Youth Foundation (WAYEF), and we commend your effort and your leadership by example. We believe that it will take a concerted effort to combat these inequities. We also believe that progress on gender issues and female empowerment will bring us closer to securing the health of all of our youth.

Health

We must also ensure that our youth are able to grow into the healthy and productive adults our world needs tomorrow. Young people today are faced with a myriad of health problems, some of

¹ The grants include the Africa Youth Alliance, initiatives with youth in China, and activities on early marriage in India and Nepal. We supported the Guttmacher Institute research in Africa called "Protecting the Next Generation."

which have been with us for a long time – unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted diseases. Some are new, like HIV/AIDS. All these conditions have grave consequences, but more importantly, all are preventable.

For example, we know that an unwanted pregnancy can abbreviate a girl's education and diminish her future economic potential. We also know that about a third of all maternal deaths can be linked to unwanted pregnancies. Further, methods to prevent the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies are available to us. We must find ways to inform youth and offer services that protect the health of young girls and young mothers before they conceive a pregnancy that may threaten their lives but also the lives of their babies.

Child spacing and family planning can prevent about a third of all maternal deaths. Family life education can help young people delay childbearing and allow them to complete the education. In doing so, access to information and services can determine whether young people will enjoy economic independence or face a life of struggle. If we ensure the right conditions for our youth to become healthy adults, we will set them on the path toward economic security, for their lifetimes and those of future generations.

Economy and Education

Economic vitality is critical to the survival of any nation and a good education is a fundamental ingredient for producing a capable workforce that sustains a thriving economy. Young people have the right to attain an education at a standard that enables them not just to compete in, but also lead the transformations of, a global market.

In a short period of time – shorter than we can imagine and barely prepare for – the boundaries of international employment will quickly disappear, thanks to the internet and other telecommunication advances. It will no longer matter whether you live in Calabar, Caracas, Calcutta, Cairo, or Copenhagen – you will be competing for the same jobs. We must prepare our youth with sound education and relevant job skills to help them meet the challenges of today.

CONCLUSION

Today we have an opportunity of significant dimension. Today, the world has the largest number of young people ever recorded in history. There are nearly two billion people ages 15-24 years-old in the world, most of who are in Asia and Africa. We have the opportunity now to empower the next generation.

Preventing illness and promoting responsible sexual behavior gives young people the chance to have healthy lives and the opportunity to become productive, contributing members of society. On a societal level, young people are a key population group at a critical time and focusing on them is perhaps the key to achieving four of the eight Millennium Development Goals. They are: achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; improving maternal health; and combating HIV. In addition, education and economic development will contribute towards the Millennium Development Goal aimed at poverty reduction.

On this august occasion we salute the efforts of the First Lady and her NGO. We encourage governments, traditional leaders, and donors to recognize the importance of investing in young people in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. We wish you well in your deliberations and look forward to progressive and tangible outcomes.