



## Investing in Young People's Health and Development: Research that Improves Policies and Programs

International Conference

Abuja, Nigeria  
April 27-29, 2008

There are **1.77** billion youth ages 10-24 in the world; 87% of them live in low-income settings.  
*Population Reference Bureau*

Young people constitute the **FASTEST** growing segment of the world's population.  
*Girls Count*

Almost 15% of girls in developing countries marry before the age of 15 and **25-50%** of girls in developing countries become mothers before their 18th birthday.  
*Girls Count*

**The Need.** The statistics above are daunting. Yet globally, researchers, program managers, policymakers and youth are working to change them. In April 2008, the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health with its partners—the Center for Population and Reproductive Health at the University of Ibadan and the Department of Community Health at Obafemi Awolowo University—hosted an international conference “Investing in Young People’s Health and Development.” At the conference, more than 160 experts shared the results of their research and program efforts on population, development, sexual and reproductive health, poverty reduction and gender equity issues as these affect young people.

**The Objectives.** The conference objectives were to:

- Provide an international forum for exchanging research and programmatically generated evidence on how to meet the health and developmental needs of young people in low - resource settings.
- Provide a forum for the international research and development community to reach and communicate consensus on policy, program and research priorities for youth development.
- Increase resources and commitment to youth-directed investments in health and development at the international, national and local levels.

**The Program.** Nearly 300 (285) abstracts were submitted for consideration. After peer review, 140 abstracts were selected for oral presentation and 60 for poster presentation. Over 550 people participated in the conference, with the youngest being 10 years of age. More than 200 participants were under age 25. The participants came from 36 countries, representing every region of the world, and 40% resided outside Nigeria.

There were 32 research sessions, including six preformed panels and four poster sessions, covering a total of 120 oral and 40 poster presentations. Ten expert luncheon roundtables enabled participants to have in-depth discussions on youth-relevant topics beyond those in the conference program, such as nutritional challenges, urbanization, networking activists for health, male circumcision, employment, and malaria.

To enable policymakers to benefit from the wealth of evidence presented at the conference, heads of national adolescent health programs were invited from ministries of health in Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria and Sudan. The policymakers participated in a special session to discuss



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issues around scaling up effective interventions. Nigerian legislators also engaged in direct dialogue with youth. A Conference Call to Action was prepared for dissemination.

To enable the public's access to significant conference findings, the Population Reference Bureau brought journalists from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda to report on the conference, along with Nigerian journalist colleagues. Their reporting was preceded by a workshop where PRB familiarized the journalists with adolescent health issues and basic journalistic principles. USAID-funded ENHANSE/Internews supported a media center where journalists could prepare and file stories. These journalists produced three daily newsletters and filed numerous stories in their home country newspapers.

A variety of well-attended skill-building and in-depth workshops were offered before and after the conference by Advocates for Youth, Family Health International, Guttmacher Institute, International Center for Research on Women, Population Council, University of California at Berkeley, and the World Health Organization. The workshops focused on topics including: youth-led advocacy, monitoring and evaluation of youth-focused programs, exploring masculinity and violence with young men, youth as mentors, faith-based curricula for working with youth, communicating research to effect change, peer education, and health sector response.

**The Research Messages.** There were many resonating research messages. At a minimum, the face of adolescent health and development research is diverse, expansive, and intense. At the same time, there is strong commonality in topical interests, such as on age periods of development, factors influencing healthy transitions to adulthood, models for individual, familial and social management of sexuality and initiation of childbearing, and gender security. A substantial number of studies focused on contextual influences, such as interpersonal relationships that mentor positive growth, including those between young persons and parents, family members, friends, and risk-protective environments of institutions, such as schools, faith-based organizations, legal codes and regulations, and societal norms. The importance of embedding young persons in a multiplicity of supportive networks was highlighted. Education was also noted to be critical for empowering young people because schools often serve as the gateways for exposure to and absorption of life-protecting information and learning curricula. One key message was that educational programs need to be linked to national youth development strategies and that the responsibility for their implementation should be inter-ministerial. Several innovative program models to expand beneficiary coverage were shared, including reaching newlyweds and tapping faith-based organizations. Most importantly, youth spoke out as researchers and educators and said their future is NOW.

**Next Steps.** The Call to Action, which distills the meeting's key findings and actions needed to invest in youth, will be shared with donors, programs, policymakers and researchers urging them to mobilize new resources and scale up efforts. Presenters will be encouraged to submit their research papers for publication in scientific journals to build the evidence base on which program officials and policymakers make their decisions. Finally, conference partner organizations plan to pursue initiatives themselves to increase funding and update program best practices based on the evidence shared at the conference.

Presentations and abstracts as well as the Call to Action can be found on the conference website at [www.jhsph.edu/gatesinstitute](http://www.jhsph.edu/gatesinstitute). For more information contact Natalie Culbertson at 410-955-2232 or [gates@jhsph.edu](mailto:gates@jhsph.edu).



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