



aids2031[®]
Working Paper No. 21

**From Risk-takers and Victims to Young
Leaders**

**Towards a different international AIDS
response for young people**

COMMISSIONED BY:
aids2031 Social Drivers Working Group

AUTHORED BY:
CAITLIN L. CHANDLER

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position, or opinions of the wider aids2031 initiative or partner organizations.

Introduction

Today young people are highly visible in the international AIDS response. Almost half of all new infections globally occur in people under the age of 25, and there are 5.4 million young people living with HIV around the world. The 2001 United Nations Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS has goals aiming to reduce HIV prevalence among young people aged 15 to 24 by 2010, and youth AIDS advocates have raised awareness on the special vulnerabilities of young people to HIV at international events. Debates on how to change youth behaviors and "turn the tide" of the HIV epidemic occur in forums from the International AIDS Conferences to the hallways of UN agencies.

Despite the continual recognition of younger people's particular vulnerability to HIV, self-reflective dialogue about which young people the international community is addressing, and what motivates international actors to address "youth" issues is sorely lacking in the international AIDS response. Reflecting on who "youth" is critical if we hope to design effective HIV policies and programs for younger age groups.

This paper demonstrates that certain notions of young people in the international development community – of which the AIDS response is now a part – reveal an overly generalized understanding of "youth" that does not reflect a realistic, nuanced view of young people's identity and lives. Faulty stereotypes of "youth" – such as the perceptions that young people are victims or risk-takers – result in many HIV programs based on generalizations about young people, rather than their actual needs and realities. These stereotypes and generalizations dominate million dollar prevention programs that have little effect on HIV incidence rates amongst young people and undermine a successful movement for young peoples' right to health.

In addition to not understanding who youth are, reaching young people is often done for problematic reasons. Investments in young people are often rationalized as necessary for national security and economic growth. While these views do not seem initially damaging, I will explore in this paper how each of these frameworks contributes to a de-valuing of young people's rights and identities. This devaluation of young people has negative policy and program implications.

An AIDS framework that does not respect the full rights of young people is limited in what it can achieve. The international AIDS community should stop viewing youth as one homogenous category, and instead redefine "youth" according to context-specific definitions. To do this, there needs to be better data disaggregation for younger age groups, and more targeted HIV prevention programs. The international community must also re-think what a rights-based approach to youth development means to ensure an enabling environment for the recognition and respect of the sexual and reproductive health rights of younger age groups. Finally, it must also work to address the underlying factors that can make younger age groups more vulnerable to HIV.

How do we define "youth"?

Youth is a highly evocative term that changes depending on its context, and a concept that has been extensively critiqued in the social sciencesⁱ In international development programs and policy, one framework for defining youth is by age, and there are numerous age-based categories. These categories include: youth, young person, adolescent (early, middle and late-stage), and many of them overlap. The UN defines adolescents as 10 – 19, young people as 10-24, and youth as 15-24. Many AIDS youth advocates use the definition of 15 – 30 to refer to youth.

These age-specific definitions also share the premise that a period of years marked by biological developments in the human body – specifically menstruation for young women and the development of testosterone for young men – constitutes a special life stage. This is immediately evident from UN Millennium Project documents that state: *“What happens between the ages of 10 and 19, whether for good or ill, shapes how girls and boys live out their lives as women and men – not only in the reproductive arena, but in the social and economic realm as well.”*ⁱⁱ If “adolescence” in development discourse centers on the idea of being a time when puberty occurs, then “youth” is sometimes conceived of as the time following puberty when a person is dealing with the fall-out of these biological changes. Yet since the age definitions of youth and adolescent overlap, the terms are often used interchangeably.

Ideas about young people also intersect with our notions of what childhood is and who children are. The UN states someone is a child, and is therefore entitled to protections from the state, until age 18.ⁱⁱⁱ A young person therefore exists in an ambiguous state as both “child” and “adult” (and consequently, neither fully child nor adult). While childhood is viewed as a time of innocence when children are to be “protected” from the perceived ills of the “adult” world, post-childhood is seen as a time when it is acceptable for a person to work, serve the state in an army, and so on – but not necessarily be entitled to the same rights of “adults” — such as the right to sexual expression or to have children.

Categories of younger age groups are meant to aid in addressing specific vulnerabilities and ensuring certain groups are included in programming. But it is worth noting that many young people do not define themselves by their age, or by existing in a certain life stage. In the AIDS and development world, constructions of adolescence, youth, and young people have often come from “adult” programmers, researchers and policymakers. The shared common definitions of younger people in development and AIDS – by age or by a life stage – can also restrict what policies and programs are created for them to what is deemed age or life stage “appropriate.”

Youth advocates and researchers at the international policy level have made the case that young people have different needs from those in other age groups. Younger people do not have access to the same social, economic and financial networks that other age groups do. Age often inhibits access to decision-making processes, and young people lack conventional political capital, particularly when they cannot vote.

Age-related stigma and discrimination continues to exist in most societies – and young people’s rights to health, information and to live free from violence are frequently made expendable by governments.¹ Young people who are also part of other marginalized groups, such as drug users and the homeless, experience “double discrimination” in many societies and are not reached through existing service structures like schools and traditional health care clinics.^{iv}

For these reasons, paying attention to age is crucial in the design of HIV programs. How we define “youth” and the variety of other age-related categories in international AIDS has real consequences for young people globally, and without specific inclusion younger groups can easily be forgotten in programs and policy. However, our current international framework, with its conflicting age definitions and interchangeable categories, is not always relevant at the local level.

The problem in viewing youth as a homogenous category

While “youth” is often defined by age in international health programs, it is used more broadly in AIDS and development discourse to refer to a host of socially constructed ideas about younger people. The typical view of a “youth” in international development discourse is of a person who is currently “transitioning” to adulthood, navigating a set of challenges and dangers. These challenges and dangers are sometimes the fault of youth who make “bad decisions” and are other times the result of large societal structures that put youth “at risk.” Often these challenges and dangers include: potential pregnancy, early marriage, staying in school, finding employment if not in school, sex, and drugs. Conversely, a young person is also thought about as a “future leader,” who can potentially contribute a lot to society and someone who is a consumer “hooked on technology” and heavily influenced by the mass media.

I would like to complicate these common assumptions of young people, because all too often, they mistakenly convey the impression to program designers and funders that “youth” is a homogenous group. These stereotypes reduce the incredible diversities of young people to a faceless mass needing outside intervention, and cause us to lose sight of the different, specific needs of young people. Many youth are also invisible within the “youth” category – the special vulnerabilities and needs of street children for instance are often ignored in global discourses on HIV prevention.^v

The idea of youth as a homogenous group is reflected in the way data is collected around young people – when it is collected at all. Country-level data on HIV prevalence is often not disaggregated by age, and the “youth” category of ages 15 to 24 can obscure important differences. In most societies, someone aged 24 has more social capital than someone at age 15. Some people have begun advocating for improved data collection methods and for better

¹ See, for example, Human Rights Watch’s 2005 report, “The Less They Know the Better, Abstinence-Only HIV/AIDS Programs in Uganda.” (<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2005/03/29/less-they-know-better-0>) and 2004 report, “Real Dungeons: Juvenile Detention in the State of Rio de Janeiro” (<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2004/12/06/real-dungeons-0>).

age disaggregation, but the issue still has not gained much prominence in the international AIDS response.² Age is also not alone enough to inform programs and policy – differences in young people's class, sexuality and gender among others are all critical. Without knowing which young people in a community are more likely to contract HIV and why, how can effective HIV prevention programs be designed?

An example of how viewing youth as a homogenous population impacts an HIV prevention program is South Africa's loveLife. When loveLife was founded in 1999 by a consortium of international partners, it claimed it would "halve the prevalence of HIV among young people in five yearsvi through national media awareness campaigns, youth centers,³ telephone hotlines, youth- friendly clinics and peer educators. South Africa has a diverse youth population, and many young people on the ground who saw loveLife's public awareness campaigns started reporting that it offered confusing and contradictory messages about sex and young people after the program's inception. Writes Warren Parker of South Africa's Center for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE),

"The notion of 12 – 17 year old South African youth as mono-cultural, unified by sexual desire and materialist consumption, directly contradicted obvious diversities of language, culture, and access to disposable income amongst youth, whilst divergent stages of sexual awareness and maturity within the 'target' age group was masked in the conflation of 12 – 17 year old youth as the 'target' group."^{vii}

CADRE's research also shows that some young South Africans found loveLife's messages offensive because they appeared targeted primarily at middle- to upper-class South Africans, ignoring the diversity of South African youth while marketing itself as a national "youth" program.^{viii} In 2005, a study showed that young people who reported participation in at least one loveLife program were less likely to be infected with HIV – but it was also unclear if youth who participated in loveLife programs were "systematically different" from those who did not.^{ix}

The philosophy behind the creation of loveLife drew heavily on the belief that young people could be convinced to change their sexual behavior based largely on "youth oriented" media and marketing campaigns. The founder of loveLife says he was inspired by Sprite, the soft drink company that reversed their falling sales by making Sprite cool and targeting young consumers.^x The idea that young people are primarily "consumers" and could therefore be convinced to consume a healthy lifestyle is based on the view of youth as a homogenous economic group, and picks up on the common international development stereotype of young people as primarily consumers. It also posits (perhaps unintentionally) that putting on a condom or saying no to a partner is a choice as simple as whether or not to buy a soft drink –

² Youth AIDS groups like the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS and Advocates for Youth have called attention to this issue, as has the UN's Interagency Task Team on Young People and HIV.

³ The program's youth centers are "youth-only" spaces where young people can play ball or get online, and where they have healthy living seminars by peer educators. (Interestingly, new research shows that young people do not need separate centers or health services, but rather revisions to existing clinics and centers that train staff to be non-discriminatory and have night and weekend hours – See "What is Youth Friendly" in the Bibliography.)

an assumption that we can easily discount knowing how many other factors play into issues of sexual behavior, like power dynamics.

Interestingly, the program has been discussed at the international level as a good example of reaching young people through espousing a “*positive lifestyle*.” For instance in “*Challenge of evaluating a national HIV prevention programme: the case of loveLife, South Africa*,” loveLife’s programs are described as using approaches that “*provide positive lifestyle experiences for youth, which give them the skills and motivation to reduce their HIV risk*” and “*addressing the various levels at which HIV risk is manifest*.”^{xi} But who those youth are is never addressed. The continued difference between young women’s prevalence in South Africa (16.9 percent) versus young men’s (4.4 percent) since loveLife’s inception also reveals the urgent need to better understand how young people’s gender and sexuality contribute to vulnerability to improve programs.

The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief’s (PEPFAR) recently launched HIV-Free Generation has several initial similarities to loveLife, including its targeting of youth as homogenous group (at least in public rhetoric) and its use of private sector techniques to try to reach young people. In an op-ed in the Kenyan paper The Standard introducing HIV Free Generation in December 2008,^{xii} Mark Dybul, then the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, Michael E Ranneberger, US Ambassador to Kenya, and Titus Naikuni, Group MD and Chief Executive of Kenya Airways, wrote,

"Initially piloted in Kenya, but soon expanding to other countries, HIV-Free Generation applies the tools of the information age and combines the core skills of the public and private sectors to enhance youth-focused HIV prevention."

The HIV-Free Generation website -- <http://hivfreegeneration.warnerbros.com/> -- is hosted by U.S. media company Warner Brothers, and is full of flash applications, videos and games, making the website undoubtedly harder to access in countries where most users access the Internet through pay by the minute services that have lower-bandwidth. An HIV-Free Generation video game called "Virtual Heroes" recently debuted aimed at reaching teens 15 to 19 in Kenya. How this group of teens will actually access the game is not described.^{xiii}

It's difficult to figure out what, exactly, HIV-Free Generation will provide in terms of services for HIV prevention. The website states "programs" will appear in internet cafes, schools and religious centers, and that there will be "real-time market research to track sustained behavior change" – although I couldn't find out what kinds of behavior change the initiative sought. Like loveLife’s initial ambitious target to halve HIV prevalence in young people, the initiative says it aims to "reduce HIV spread by 50 percent over five years among youth aged 10 – 24" in places where the program operates – a hefty goal for a heterogeneous group of people. Nowhere did I find information about young people's needs in Kenya, or find any mention of sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health services, or clean needle exchange centers. I did find a large list of international partners like the Nike Foundation and Coca-Cola – but out of 20 listed partners, not one appeared to be a Kenyan youth organization, nonprofit, or research center. Finally, the only 'actions' on the "Action" section of the website in February 2009 were to download posters promoting PEPFAR. One of the posters features a smiling young black girl with the words below, "Saving lives is not a game...until now. PEPFAR."

Both loveLife and HIV-Free Generation heavily draw on the idea of young people as consumers and in a top-down idea of social change. It is of note that outside international development planners were involved in the creation of both programs, and that local organizations play a much-less visible role (or in the case of HIV-Free Generation are publicly absent altogether). The idea that young people just need to “buy the right message” created by marketing or technology experts seems to also contradict the very agency of young people themselves in figuring out how to collectively mobilize to address HIV and AIDS in their societies.

There are many youth-led projects and young people involved in the wider AIDS response – but existing youth responses to local problems are easily overlooked in the development of large scale AIDS programs. Several good examples of AIDS responses led by young people exist at the global level, such as the Mexico YouthForce, a coalition of 75 youth organizations that united before and during the Mexico International AIDS Conference to conduct advocacy and provide education for young people at the event.⁴ While there is less available literature on youth-led responses at the national and community-level, the participation of young people and youth groups in the regional and international AIDS conferences highlight the vibrant existence of such responses, and the need for development agencies and program planners to consult with existing youth groups and organizations in communities to better inform programming.

Working with existing youth groups and young leaders can help reduce ideas about the homogeneity of young people, but it doesn't solve the problem. Sometimes advocacy efforts under the banner of “youth” can also contribute to the idea of young people as homogenous. Youth organizations can also reflect on how they represent young people, and which young people they can claim to represent.

Risk-takers and victims: Youth as a transitory stage

Literature on young people and HIV tends to vacillate between young people as potential infectors of HIV because of their 'risky behavior' and young people as the helpless recipients of the legacy of AIDS. This can be viewed as partly deriving from the view of young people in a stage of transition – they are hard to blame completely because they are not yet knowledgeable “adults” – but they are no longer children and should therefore be held responsible.

While most societies share the idea that young people are developing into citizens, the idea that youth are in a period of transition has been expanded in international development from a socially constructed concept to a fixed state. Take for instance the United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) guiding “Framework for Action on Adolescents and Youth”, which states:

⁴ For more information, see www.youthaids2008.org.

“Adolescence is a period of many critical transitions: physical, psychological, economic, and social. Childhood is left behind, and pressures to become responsible adults are strong. Most important is the need to shape an identity and develop a personality... The ability to navigate through these transitions depends on how well adolescents are supported by families and society at large.”^{xiv}

A view of young people as existing in a semi-permanent state of transition has dangerous policy and program implications. A view of youth as in a stage of transition or “becoming” often ignores the agency of young people, makes them in need of saving from “adults,” and restricts the fulfillment of certain rights. All of these can lead to programming that does not meet the needs of young people.

Youth are seen as making “risky decisions” – to have unprotected sex for instance – which can *“can derail their transition to healthy, productive adulthood”^{xv}* – despite the fact that HIV positive young people, with access to treatment, care and support services – can lead healthy lives. Contracting HIV is depicted as one of the deviant paths a person can do down in their “transitional development.” For example, the 2005 UN World Youth Report states:

“HIV/AIDS, delinquency, conflict, drug use and other threats to a young person's well-being constitute a particular danger during discretionary time...[as do] greater numbers of latchkey children, who either return home to empty dwellings or roam the streets.”^{xvi}

Here HIV is conflated with drugs and violence, something a young person can ‘get into to’ if left unsupervised. Young people who lack a stay at home parent are seen as predatory, “roaming” the streets the same way an animal might.

This view of youth as potential risk-takers, especially risk-takers sexually, contributes to societal stigma surrounding young people as “deviant,” and negatively impacts the quality of health services available to young people.^{xvii} It also can lead to health care workers being discriminatory when it comes to young people accessing sexual and reproductive health services, for instance lecturing young people on sexual practices or denying them services because they have clearly made the “wrong” decisions to be seeking them in the first place.

The young person as risk-taker also has an accompanying sibling that plays the opposite card – the young person as silent victim. The language of victimization is often used to draw attention to young people’s needs when it comes to AIDS. One only need to scan the titles of numerous reports and media headlines, from *“Clinton rallies to save youths from HIV: Global effort seeks to protect generation at risk;”^{xviii}* (where all young people are portrayed as in imminent danger of contracting HIV) to UNICEF report titles, *“Africa's Orphaned and Vulnerable Generations: Children affected by AIDS.”* The language of victimization, frequently used in international development, is useful in getting people’s attention, but less so in contributing to understandings of young people’s agency, reducing them to silent, passive sufferers.

In addition, when structural factors are discussed in relation to youth vulnerability to HIV, youth are usually described as caught in overwhelming cycles of gender inequality, poverty,

and so on. Rarely are youth described as making choices, but rather, they are seen as victims of larger social processes. Take for instance this description of younger peoples vulnerability in the 2004 UNAIDS Epidemic Update: “A variety of factors place young people at the centre of HIV vulnerability. These include lack of HIV information, education and services; the gambles many must take in order to survive; and the risks that accompany adolescent experimentation and curiosity.” Here structural factors influencing decisions are described as “gambles” – not rational choices -- and young people are conflated with adolescent risk-seekers due to their age and the biological changes that accompany it. The fuzzy definitions and age categories around younger people make it unclear which age group is actually being described.

A view of young people that also removes agency is evident in discourses around young women contracting HIV in Southern Africa, where there has been a focus on intergenerational sexual relationships as the reason why more young women are contracting HIV than their male peers.⁵ In many AIDS reports, young women are frequently depicted as victims of the manipulation of the older men, who lure them away with clothes and candy. “Social pressure should be put on older men to avoid forcing or coercing young girls into sex, or enticing them with sugar-daddy gifts,” states one UNAIDS fact sheet on the region from 1999.^{xix} A recent 2008 Population Services International, Uganda Ministry of Health and YouthAIDS campaign in Uganda distributed billboards city-wide with slogans like, “Would you let this man be with your teenage daughter? So why are you with his?”^{xx} Indeed, PSI even sent U.S. actress turned African AIDS “activist” Ashley Judd to Congress in 2005 to proclaim, “The social norms in many developing countries that determine what is ‘tolerable’ for a man to do to a woman have also created an environment in which girls as young as 15 are encouraged to seek financial or material gain by entering empty sexual relationships with men a generation or more older than them.”^{xxi}

Missing in much of the sugar daddy discourse is the recognition some young women choose intergenerational partnerships to help provide for their families, gain social status, or have better sex – not because they are manipulated. In Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala’s recent literature review of intergenerational partnerships in southern Africa, she states, “studies revealed that urban young women perceived themselves to be active decision-makers, and their identity as modern empowered women was largely predicated upon a strategy of extracting financial and material resources through sex.”^{xxii} Leclerc-Madlala also points out that young women identified other potential benefits from having an older partner, including feeling loved and gaining social capital.

This is not to claim that some women do not enter into relationships with older men under false pretenses, but rather to show how blaming the “sugar daddies” removes the idea of agency from young women and positions them as helpless victims. When young people are “victimized” in relation to HIV and stripped of perceived agency, it makes it easier for outside development actors to think that they know best when it comes to HIV interventions for young people, instead of basing policies and programs on a realistic understanding of youth needs. The sugar daddy debates also point to the need to better understand ways young people

⁵ Thank you to Rachel Jacobson, former Program Director of the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS, for suggesting this as an example of the way victimization around young people occurs.

are structurally vulnerable to HIV, and the relationship between structural vulnerability and individual agency.

Also interesting is the repeated push in international discourse for countries to work against “early sexual debut” because data has shown “early” sexual debut can result in higher rates of HIV.^{xxiii} The use of the word “early” to describe age of sexual debut conveys the impression that there is a “right” and a “wrong” age to begin having sex. Such moralistic overtones towards young people can contribute to stigma towards young people’s sexuality, and divide young people into the victim or risk-taker category.⁶

Youth as a means to an end

Today, the case for investing in young people's health is made for a variety of reasons – but rarely because young people have a right to sexual and reproductive health services, including HIV prevention and treatment. Instead, investment in the health of young people is rationalized as an instrument through which broader development goals like increased economic productivity and a conflict-free world can be realized. Justifications that view youth as a means to an end are dangerous because they fail to recognize the value in investing in younger people because they are human beings – contributing to the stigmatization of youth and devaluing of their opinions and needs in policy and program creation.

Historical perceptions of younger people as "dangerous" continue to shape our understanding of them. In the 1960s, many Western foreign policy circles began to view young people in the Global South as potential first-world security risks, capable of creating social and political unrest that would have global financial repercussions. Recently formed UN agencies began shifting from direct humanitarian relief to addressing long-term social problems – including the "development" of children. When UNICEF was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965, Norwegian parliament member Aase Lionaes praised UNICEF for recognizing the security risk of an unequal world.

"Today the people of the developing countries are fully alive to their own misery; and they are determined to leave it behind. They contemplate the riches of the West - our surplus food, our fantastic technology, the health and good things that we enjoy in life, all our material well-being - and they compare them with the misery of their own children. This contrast creates a dangerous tension factor which threatens the peace of the world." ^{xxiv}

Here we can see that 'undeveloped' children and peoples who don't have access to the same material goods as their Western peers are viewed as a potential security threat to the West. Fear of youth today is evident in development and AIDS reports that continue to draw on disproved theories to describe young people as security risks. The “youth bulge” theory, for

⁶ They also frequently ignore the positive benefits sexuality can have in a young person’s life – for instance Schaap’s research shows us that sex plays many important functions in the lives of street children in Bangalore, India, including short-term pleasure, a sense of freedom, and a way to cope with stress.

instance, has become one of the leading rationales international development experts use to convince governments they should fund the needs of young people in the developing world.⁷ The "youth bulge" theory, which stipulates that when over 20 percent of a population is young, there's a greater possibility for violent conflict, draws on stereotypes of young men in the developing world as pathologically prone to violence and barbarity – stereotypes created by colonizing powers to prove their right to govern other nations for the “good” of its citizens and the world.^{xxv} And although proponents of youth bulge theory often argue it should justify the expansion of services for young people – such as creating employment opportunities, health services and education – it can easily be used to justify increased criminalization of young men, and societal stigma and discrimination towards young people simply because of their age.^{xxvi}

UNFPA is one of the main promoters of investing in young people because of the “youth bulge,” listing it as the most compelling argument in their 2005 “The Case for Investing in Young People as Part of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy.” In the same document, UNFPA discusses the limits of using a human rights based approach for young people: “a rights-based approach will require massive injection of resources and will take decades to realise. This means that in the here and now, priorities for action still need to be set.”^{xxvii} UNFPA’s argument for using non-human rights language to make the case for investing in young people is interesting because it is the lead UN agency tasked with working on issues of HIV prevention for young people. UNAIDS has endorsed a human rights framework for AIDS policy and programming – and UNFPA’s website states an aim to base HIV policy and program for youth on “rights-based” approaches^{xxviii} - but it seems contradictory to advocate for the rights of young people when it comes to HIV related services, but not when it comes to broader youth needs that also contribute to their vulnerability to HIV.

Youth bulge theory is also starting to be used as a rationale to fund HIV prevention and treatment. “The pandemic has reversed a generation of gains in human development, hitting young and middle-aged adults of all socioeconomic classes and leaving a dangerous youth bulge,” states a Council on Foreign Relations brief.^{xxix} We can assume the “dangerous youth bulge” referred to here is partially composed of children and young people who have lost parents to AIDS, and the security risk of young people growing up as “AIDS orphans” has been widely discussed in UN and AIDS forums. Interestingly, rhetoric on AIDS orphans also fail to mention the majority of AIDS orphans still live with one parent, countering the notion that they are out on the streets.^{xxx} Theories speculating that AIDS orphans could be destructive forces are based on fear and not evidence – but these theories are discussed as credible in international AIDS policy discourses.^{xxxi/xxxii} They also do not reference an emerging body of research on the resilience of children and young people to live through civil conflicts and harsh realities and still participate fully as citizens in their societies.^{xxxiii}

Another popular theory to have emerged in international development discourse is the idea of youth as valuable economic capital, critical to growing a nation’s economy. In UN and World Bank youth reports, young people are viewed as units that can be "deployed" to contribute to

⁷ The “risks” of today's youth bulge in several countries in the Global South (including Nigeria and Pakistan) is also a subject of constant discussion in the UN's Youth Reports, the World Bank's 2007 human development report and several think tanks.

growing a country's gross national product.^{xxxiv} This view of young people is consistent with the idea that economic growth is the true measure of development, and that other important indicators such as the fulfillment of human rights, will follow an increasing GDP.^{xxxv} The view of young people as an economic asset to a nation is also reflected in national youth policies – created in many countries within the last 15 years as a guide map for how to address the "changing conditions of young people in the 21st century."^{xxxvi} Many national youth policies draw on UN and international institutions' research and ideas about young people. South Africa's National Youth Policy cites (among others) UNFPA and UNIFEM in stating, "As the share of a country's working age population increases, the opportunity may emerge to create an economic growth spurt, provided young people can be productively employed." The "demographic dividend" principle is in South Africa's framework discussed as an ideal outcome of youth development. It's unclear how the demographic dividend would result in "overall development and inclusion of youth,"^{xxxvii} another aim of the framework, or how striving for a demographic dividend also correlates with the objective to create, "a central process of building a non-sexist, non-racist, democratic society."

Undeniably, the people writing UN Youth Reports and other policy documents face a difficult challenge – how to get governments to care about young people when many young people cannot vote or remain invisible in the eyes of governments. In the same way that many women's rights activists in the 1980s began using the language of economics to describe why women's rights should be protected, so too youth advocates have adopted words like, "economic assets," "human capital" and so on to describe the potential of young people.⁸ But viewing young people as future economic outputs undermines a world in which young people are equally respected as adults in their own right. Viewing youth as tomorrow's economic capital maintains a view of youth as future contributors to society, and not present day ones.

Meanwhile, arguments that utilize scare tactics – like the "youth bulge" theory – to get investments in youth may produce a short-term benefit, but they do not produce long-term benefits because they do not justify investments in the underlying issues that make younger age groups more vulnerable to HIV infection, including age discrimination. Having to rationalize investment in youth for economic and security reasons shows how far we are from a world in which young people's rights are fully realized. Narrowing a view of young people's citizenship to a purely economic realm is unnecessarily reductionist and counters a rights-based approach to youth development – the approach that is needed in youth HIV work.

Missing rights

Youth entitlement to universal human rights is a relatively recent addition to the development lexicon. Since the 1990s, there has been increased recognition internationally of the human rights of children and youth, coinciding with the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by all but two members of the UN (the US and Somalia), which explicitly

⁸ Hence, youth development is defined in the 2007 UN World Youth Report as "*actions and investments that enable young people to build and utilize their human capital and become productive adults.*"

⁸The economic argument case is also frequently made for investing in girls – see for instance, The Girl Effect – www.thegirleffect.org.

details the rights of children up to the age of 18.^{9/xxxviii} The CRC is often used by youth advocates to justify the rights of young people, although there is no legally binding human rights document that explicitly recognizes the human rights of young people over the age of 18. The UN's more recent 2005 World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) is the UN's current guiding document on youth issues, identifying fifteen "fields of action," including HIV/AIDS. WPAY states that young people are entitled to "all human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The idea of a "rights-based approach" to youth policy as a result of these developments is scattered throughout most UN agencies, including UNICEF and UNFPA, and other international institutions. Yet this rights-based approach entails certain rights and not others. While the right to participate in processes that affect them for instance is mapped out on UNICEF and UNFPA's websites, young people's sexual rights get almost no mention, except the right of young people to be protected from sexual exploitation and abuse. Positive sexuality is practically invisible. For instance, the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescent girls is not mentioned on the UNFPA website on protecting the rights of adolescent girls: <http://unfpa.org/adolescents/girls.htm> and UNICEF's website page on adolescents entitled "Full citizens, full rights," also does not mention sexual and reproductive rights: http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/index_rights.html. The absence of young people's sexual rights is consistent with the UN's General Assembly failing to recognize the sexual rights of all people. Yet many people do begin having sex while they are considered to be "adolescents" or "young people," and sex is not always the result of exploitation or abuse.

Young people have clearly stated they view themselves as entitled to full rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. One of the key messages of the Mexico YouthForce at the 2008 International AIDS Conference was: "Rights: we have a right to comprehensive, accurate information and services to protect our sexual health." Youth advocates consistently ask for HIV education to include discussions of sexuality. "Putting theological, moral beliefs over fact-based evidence is a violation of our human rights. Please, do not let sexuality education become the latest "it" phrase of political rhetoric," said Elisabet Fadul at a plenary session at the Mexico 2008 International AIDS Conference.^{xxxix}

Yet young people in many places are thought to be generally incapable of making good decisions about when and with whom to have sex or children because of their age. At the same time, sometimes young people are also depicted as hyper-sexual and as engaging in new unacceptable forms of sexual practices. Many programs or "interventions" are conceived with the attitude that young people should not be having sex unless they are married. Basing programs and policies for young people on morality fueled the U.S.'s pressure on international AIDS prevention programs to provide abstinence only sex education for young people, despite numerous reports that have documented abstinence only programs' failure to prevent HIV transmission.^{xl}

In promoting the language of youth rights to some but also couching arguments for meeting youth needs to governments in the rhetoric of fear, economics, and sweeping generalizations, the international youth development community can appear contradictory and uncertain of its

⁹ To read the Convention, visit: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

own views on “youth.” While laudable progress has been made in some places on recognizing the value of youth participation and young people’s rights, international youth development goals to meet youth needs still seem a distant possibility.

Re-thinking young people in the international AIDS response

While young people are frequently written about as victims or perpetrators of the HIV pandemic, they are also repeatedly described as individually needing to 'lead the way' or be the 'social transformation' to change the epidemic. Lesko describes this as “youth optimism” that “portrays the world as a set of opportunities, a place of problems waiting for the revitalizing touch of the younger generation.”^{xli} This also stems from the belief that young people are in a transitory stage, and can therefore solve giant issues of social inequality that have been unresolved by other generations.

While the view of youth as "the solution" may stem from a reaction to stereotypes of young people as deviants and troublemakers, it also is an incomplete view of young people. This view of young people in AIDS can remove responsibility from other actors to work with young people for young people’s rights. For example, parents' roles and responsibilities are often lacking in youth prevention discourses at the global level, despite the evidence showing young people whose parents discuss sexuality issues with them are more likely to use condoms.^{xliii} When youth are portrayed as the solution, they are expected to be the solution without meaningful partnership with other actors.

In this paper, I have attempted to show how the category of “youth” is at times problematic when it comes to looking at young people’s needs in the context of the HIV epidemic. Certain representations of youth in AIDS and development, including the strains of thought that youth are a homogenous group, that young people are in a transitory stage, and certain frameworks for youth development, such as the idea young people are an instrument through which broader development goals can be realized, and that young people have some rights but not others, restrict the program and policy possibilities for a successful HIV response.

Re-thinking AIDS policy and programs for young people means enacting a shift in how young people are theorized within the discourses of international institutions. This shift should start with the recognition that young people have different vulnerabilities and challenges than other age groups, but place a rights-based framework front and center in youth discourse and programming. A rights-based framework views young people as entitled to the same basic rights and freedoms of adults, including sexual and reproductive rights. It also places young people in the center of fully defining and advocating for their own needs in partnership with others.

What does this critique mean when applied towards changing the international AIDS response? The recommendations below are meant for AIDS and development funders,

program and policy-makers, primarily those that work at international organizations and institutions.

1. Work to uphold the full rights of young people

International institutions interested in making a long-term difference in young people's lives should explicitly recognize all rights that should be guaranteed to young people, including sexual and reproductive rights. Embracing young people as human beings entitled to their full rights might not seem revolutionary, but it would be a major shift in how young people are theorized in international development. It also means committing to change from within, such as training employees of these institutions on what an honest rights-based approach to youth programming means and on the diverse identities and needs of young people. In addition, international partners can work to:

- Eliminate barriers to young people accessing services and information because of their age. This includes removing laws that require parental consent for young people to seek HIV or health-related services and age barriers to harm reduction services such as clean-needle exchange programs.
- Fund networks that advocate for the needs of younger people that are often invisible to programming, and fund country-specific programs that find new ways of reaching out to young people who experience high levels of stigma and discrimination in society.

2. Improve data disaggregation on younger age groups

There needs to be better data at the country level to understand how HIV is affecting younger groups of people. Data should be disaggregated by smaller age categories, since the category of youth as 15 – 24 can obscure important differences. Data should also be disaggregated by gender, sexuality and other potential social constructs depending on the local context.

3. End tokenistic youth participation

The right of young people to participate in policy and program creation that affects them is an important right. Yet despite many international institutions using the rhetoric of meaningful youth involvement in program and policy design targeted at young people, few actually achieve it. Young people are tokenized and frequently one young person is asked to speak on behalf of all young peoples' issues at international AIDS meetings and events.

As Amnesty International's guide, "youth -- activism -- engagement -- participation good practices and essential strategies for impact" states, "There is no one, right way to structure youth participation in an organization." But there are several good documents that provide ideas and youth participation frameworks – including the Amnesty guide and Family Health International's Youth Participation Guide: Assessment, Planning, and Implementation.

Youth involvement and participation also mean giving young people influential staff positions in organizations and programs that target youth. Institutional barriers often prevent younger people from being programmatic staff members of UN agencies – for instance, rules that dictate a person must have a certain number of years paid work experience to be staff (and not

just a temporary consultant) bar youth leaders who may have several years of unpaid work experience from being hired. Young people are often hired as administrative assistants and not for their skills and experiences as researchers, scientists, journalists and so on. The AIDS response should:

- Ensure the diversity of young people is represented in decision-making about young people (not one person to speak on behalf of “youth”)
- Eliminate institutional barriers for young people to work as programmatic staff in organizations and programs that target youth

4. Recognize many young people are already leaders

Viewing young people as future leaders or citizens does not mirror a world in which young people frequently enable social and political change through their present day leadership. The international community should support and work with existing young leaders.

- Fund research on successful youth-led responses to HIV at the local level to increase international and national awareness of the agency and ability of young people to address HIV
- Follow existing recommendations for how to support young leaders and youth-led organizations in the document Youth Leadership: Recommendations for Sustainability - www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth_sustainability.pdf.

5. Re-assess national programs that target “youth”

International age definitions and ideas about "youth" may not be particularly useful in designing local HIV prevention or treatment programs. International agencies and donors should let local partners define the age target based on understanding the local needs and data. National AIDS prevention programs should be tailored to different groups of young people – not to the country’s “youth,” since not all youth are equally at risk for HIV.^{xliii}

- Let local partners define age targets based on local needs and data (do not apply international definitions and ideas unless they reflect the local reality)
- Tailor national AIDS prevention programs to different groups of young people – not to the country’s “youth.”

An AIDS response that begins with the recognition of young people’s rights and diverse identities will ensure that HIV programs and services more accurately reflect the needs of young people. Changing the way young people are thought about in the AIDS response means recognizing young people are in many ways the same as “adults” – a heterogeneous group of people with complex identities, different backgrounds and varied desires. Thinking about young people differently would allow the AIDS community to approach youth prevention and treatment in a new way, and it would also radically alter the experience of young people who are currently involved in the response.

References

- ⁱ See, N. Lesko 2001 and D. Durham 2000.
- ⁱⁱ Judith Bruce and Erica Chong, “The Diverse Universe of Adolescents, and the Girls and Boys Left Behind: A Note on Research, Program and Policy Priorities.” Pg. 1. Available at: http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/Bruce_and_Chong-final.pdf.
- ⁱⁱⁱ As defined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by all but 2 member states.
- ^{iv} Aggleton and Wood.
- ^v Schaap and Cheruvillil, pg 2
- ^{vi} Kaiser Family Foundation: <http://www.kff.org/about/lovelife.cfm>
- ^{vii} Warren Parker, “Ideology, hegemony and HIV/AIDS: The appropriation of indigenous and global spheres.” University of KwaZulu-Natal, PHD Thesis, Dec. 2004.
- ^{viii} Warren Parker, “Claims and Realities in Program Evaluation: Reflections on loveLife, South Africa.” Toronto International AIDS Conference, August 2006.
- ^{ix} pg 1532 “Young people's sexual health in South Africa: HIV prevalence and sexual behaviors from a nationally representative household survey” AIDS 2005
- ^x See article on Brand Channel.com about loveLife (http://www.brandchannel.com/features_profile.asp?pr_id=143)
- ^{xi} *Challenge of evaluating a national HIV prevention programme: the case of loveLife, South Africa* p.i71 Sexually Transmitted Infections Journal
- ^{xii} To read the full Op-Ed, visit: <http://www.eastandard.net/commentaries/InsidePage.php?id=1144000905&cid=15&>
- ^{xiii} Kaiser Daily Report. "Video Game Aims to Teach Young People in Kenya About HIV/AIDS Prevention." Thursday, March 5, 2009.
- ^{xiv} UNFPA. “Framework for Action on Adolescents and Youth” pg 8.
- ^{xv} p. 142, UN's World Youth Report 2007
- ^{xvi} UN's 2005 World Youth Report. Pg. 71.
- ^{xvii} Aggleton and Campbell, Young People's Sexual Health
- ^{xviii} San Francisco Chronicle, July 12, 2002. Available here: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2002/07/12/MN203644.DTL&type=health>
- ^{xix} See http://data.unaids.org/Publications/IRC-pub03/lusaka99_en.html
- ^{xx} See <http://www.aids-freeworld.org/content/view/147/135/>
- ^{xxi} <http://www.psi.org/resources/pubs/cross-gen.pdf>
- ^{xxii} Madlala S20.
- ^{xxiii} See for instance UNAIDS 2004 Epidemic Update and UNAIDS 2008 Epidemic update (http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2008/jc1510_2008_global_report_pp95_128_en.pdf).
- ^{xxiv} Nobel Peace Prize website, Nobel Lecture, 1965 (http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1965/press.html)
- ^{xxv} See for instance Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.
- ^{xxvi} A. Hendrixson
- ^{xxvii} UNFPA, “The Case for Investing in Young People as Part of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy,” 2005 Pg. 37.
- ^{xxviii} <http://www.unfpa.org/hiv/people.htm>
- ^{xxix} ,” according to this January 2006 CFR [Task Force report](#) on Africa, “
- ^{xxx} Schaap and Cheruvillil

-
- ^{xxx} For instance, see “HIV and National Security, Where Are the Risks?” Laurie Garrett, Council on Foreign Relations
(http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/HIV_National_Security.pdf)
- ^{xxxii} Schaap and Cheruvillil, pg 3
- ^{xxxiii} Pg. 7 Marc Sommers, “Youth and Conflict: A Brief Review of Available Literature.” USAID and EUIP3, May 2006.
- ^{xxxiv} M. Luttrell-Rowland
- ^{xxxv} P. Uvin
- ^{xxxvi} South Africa's National Youth Policy
- ^{xxxvii} South Africa National Youth Policy Framework
- ^{xxxviii} P. Uvin 597
- ^{xxxix} AIDS 2008 Youth Rapporteur Report
- ^{xl} Advocates for Youth.
- ^{xli} Nancy Lesko. Talking About Sex: The Discourses of loveLife Peer Educators in South Africa.” Journal of Inclusive Education, Vol. 11, No. 4, July 2007, p 530.
- ^{xlii} Lesko, *ibid*, p 529
- ^{xliii} <http://www.unfpa.org/hiv/iatt/docs/mostatrisk.pdf>

Bibliography

Advocates for Youth. "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs: Ineffective, Unethical, and Poor Public Health." July 2007.

Accessed at: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/pbabonly.pdf>.

Aggleton, Peter and Catherine Campbell. "Young People's Sexual Health: A Framework For Policy Debate," Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, Winter 1999.

Accessed at:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go1966/is_4_8/ai_n28754801/pg_2/?tag=content;coll.

Aggleton, Peter and Kate Wood. "Promoting Young People's Sexual and Reproductive Health – Stigma, Discrimination and Human Rights." Institute of Education, University of London.

Amnesty International, "youth -- activism -- engagement – participation; good practices and essential strategies for impact." August 2006.

Accessed at: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGACT760032006&lang=e>.

Bertozzi, Stefano, Audrey E Pettifor, Catherine MacPhail and Helen V Rees. "Challenge of evaluating a national HIV prevention programme: the case of loveLife, South Africa." Sexually Transmitted Infections Journal, February 2007.

Bruce, Judith and Erica Chong. "The Diverse Universe of Adolescents, and the Girls and Boys Left Behind." UN Millennium Project.

Accessed at: http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/Bruce_and_Chong-final.pdf

Caldwell, John C., Pat Caldwell, Bruce K, Caldwell, Indrani Pieris. "The Construction of Adolescence in a Changing World: Implications for Sexuality." Studies in Family Planning, Vol. 29, No. 2, Population Council, Jun. 1998.

Dehne, Karl L. and Gabriele Rieder. "Adolescence: A Dynamic Concept." Reproductive Health Matters, Vol. 9, No. 17, May 2001.

Dhingra, Naina. "Improving U.S. Global AIDS Policy for Young People." Advocates for Youth, Washington D.C., 2007.

Durham, Deborah. "Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2." Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 73, No. 3. July 2000.

Erulkar, Annabel S., Charles J. Onoka, and Alford Phiri. "What is Youth-Friendly?" Adolescents' Preferences for Reproductive Health Services in Kenya and Zimbabwe." African Journal of Reproductive Health. Vol. 9, No. 3, Dec. 2005.

GYCA and Global Youth Partners. "Our Voice, Our Future: Young people report on progress made on the UNGASS declaration of commitment on HIV/AIDS" UNFPA, 2005.

Gavin, Michelle. "Africa's Restless Youth." Global Youth Series. Current History. Vol. 106, 2007.

Grinder, Robert E., and David L. Englund. "Adolescence in Other Cultures." Review of Educational Research, Vol. 36, No. 4, Oct. 1966.

Easterly, William. White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good. Penguin Press HC, 2006.

Heinsohn, Gunnar. "Ending the West's Proxy War Against Israel." Wall Street Journal, January 12, 2009.

Hendrixson, Anne. "Angry Young Men, Veiled Young Women: Constructing a Population Threat." The Corner House Briefing 34. December 2004.

HIV-Free Generation Press Release, December 5, 2008.

Human Rights and HIV/AIDS: Now More than Ever. 10 Reasons why human rights should occupy the center of the global AIDS struggle. Accessed at:

Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report. "Video Game Aims To Teach Young People in Kenya About HIV/AIDS Prevention." March 5 2009.

Kleinschmidt, Immo, Audrey Pettifor, Helen V. Rees, Annie E. Steffesonson, Catherine MacPhail, Lindiwe Hlongwa-Madikizela, Kerry Vermaak and Nancy Padian. "Young people's sexual health in South Africa: HIV prevalence and sexual behaviors from a nationally representative household survey." AIDS 2005.

Leclerc-Madlala, Suzanne. "Age-disparate and intergenerational sex in Southern Africa: the dynamics of hypervulnerability." AIDS 2008, 22 (suppl 4): S17 – S25.

Lesko, Nancy. Act your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence. Routledge Falmer, 2001.

Lesko, Nancy. "Talking About Sex: The Discourses of loveLife Peer Educators in South Africa." Journal of Inclusive Education, Vol. 11, No. 4, July 2007.

Luttrell-Rowland, Mikaela. "Gangs, Soldiers and 'Idle Girls': constructions of youth and development in World Bank discourse." Research in Comparative and International Education, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2007.

Mesman, Annelies. "Youth Rapporteur Report." XVII International AIDS Conference, AIDS 2008 and the Mexico Youth Force.

Nobel Peace Prize website.

Accessed at: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1965/unicef-history.html

Nobel Peace Prize website, Nobel Lecture, 1965

Accessed at: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1965/press.html

Parker-Pope, Tara. "The Myth of Rampant Teenage Promiscuity." New York Times, January 27, 2009.

Parker, Warren. "Claims and Realities in Program Evaluation: Reflections on loveLife, South Africa." Toronto International AIDS Conference, August 2006.

Parker, Warren. "Ideology, hegemony and HIV/AIDS: The appropriation of indigenous and global spheres." University of KwaZulu-Natal, December 2004.

Pettifor AE, Rees HV, Kleinschmidt I, Steffenson AE, MacPhail C, Hlongwa-Madikizela L, Vermaak K, Padian NS. "Young people's sexual health in South Africa: HIV prevalence and sexual behaviors from a nationally representative household survey." AIDS, 2005.

Schaap, Meindert and Sonia Cheruvillil. "This Life is Different: Street Children's Sexual Realities and the APSA-Sexual Health Intervention Programme." Paper submitted for the aids2031 & International Center for the Research on Women's Sex, Law and Rights in a World of AIDS Workshop in Cuernavaca, Mexico 2009.

Sommers, Marc. "Youth and Conflict: A Brief Review of Available Literature." USAID and EUIP3, May 2006.

Stephens, Sharon, editor. Children and the Politics of Culture. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 1995.

Uvin, Peter. "From the right to development to the rights-based approach: how 'human rights' entered development." Development in Practice, August 1, 2007.

UN Inter-Agency Task Team on HIV and Young People. "Guidance Brief: Overview of HIV Interventions for Young People."

UNAIDS Inter-agency Task Team on Young People and HIV. Preventing HIV/AIDS in young people: A systematic review of the evidence from developing countries. 2006.

Accessed at : whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_938_eng.pdf

UNFPA. "The Case for Investing in Young People as Part of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy." 2005.

UNFPA. "Framework for Action on Adolescents and Youth." 2007.

Accessed at: [http://www.unfpa.org/publications/detail.cfm?ID=341&filterListType=.](http://www.unfpa.org/publications/detail.cfm?ID=341&filterListType=)

United Nations World Youth Report. "Young people's transition to adulthood: progress and challenges." 2007.

United Nations World Youth Report. "Young people today and in 2015." 2005

The World Bank. "World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation."

World AIDS Campaign, et al. "Youth Leadership: Recommendations for Sustainability." 2009.

Accessed at: http://www.aids2031.org/pdfs/youth%20sustainability_web.pdf.