



**World Health  
Organization**

Statement by the Assistant Director-General

## **CHANGE THE WORLD!**

### **International Youth Day, 12 August 2011**

The World Health Organization (WHO) is pleased to join the international community in celebrating International Youth Day 2011 under the theme *Change the World*. This theme calls on all of us to work with adolescents and young people to create a world in which they can grow and develop in a safe and supportive environment and in which they have access to the information and services they require.

A quarter of today's world population are young people aged 10-24 years, numbering more than 1.8 Billion. Most of them live in developing countries. While many young people grow up in good health, many others do not. According to WHO estimates 2.6 million young people die every year, tens of millions experience health problems, and hundreds of millions initiate unhealthy behaviours that will lead to disease and premature death in adulthood.

In August 2010, the International Year of Youth was launched calling for greater investment in young people. The activities promoting the year's theme *Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding* culminated in the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Youth in July 2011. At this meeting heads of state and governments, ministers and other governmental representatives committed to recognize and address the needs and problems of young people. Earlier, in May 2011, the World Health Assembly passed a resolution on youth and health risks which acknowledged that addressing the needs of young people is key to attain the health-related Millennium Development Goals and to prevent non-communicable diseases. The resolution urged Member States to take appropriate action.

WHO is involved in three major global public health initiatives that also focus on the needs of adolescents:

- **The UN General Assembly High Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases in September 2011** will pay particular attention to adolescents. Nearly two-thirds of premature deaths and one-third of the total disease burden in adults is associated with conditions or behaviours that begin in adolescence. Therefore, prevention of tobacco and alcohol use and promotion of healthy eating and adequate physical activity during adolescence, can protect against cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, type-2 diabetes and some cancers later in life.
- **The UN Secretary General's Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health**, launched in September 2010, aims to save 16 million lives by 2015 in the world's poorest countries. The Strategy recognizes that millions of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years are facing health risks due to early, unplanned and often unwanted pregnancy and childbirth.

It calls for the provision of information, social support, and health services to help adolescent girls prevent unwanted pregnancies and to care for themselves and their newborn babies when they become mothers.

- WHO is also a co-sponsor of the **UNAIDS strategy to halt and reverse the spread of HIV by 2015**. An estimated 5 million young people aged 15 to 24 were living with HIV in 2009, a 12 per cent reduction since 2001. This is an encouraging sign that HIV-prevention efforts are making a difference. But these efforts need to be expanded.

We have come a long way in recognizing adolescents and young people as partners in development. In communities around the world, they are making important contributions to health, social and economic development and to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. But we have to redouble action to address the major health risks facing them, and threatening their survival and development.

In celebrating International Youth Day 2011, WHO reaffirms its commitment to continue its work for and with young people to improve their health. Working together, we must change the world and make it a safe place for adolescents to grow and develop.

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