



unicef   
for every child

# Adolescents and a sustainable future

An investment opportunity  
for the private sector

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## The opportunity

Adolescents are a major force for positive social and economic change: they can contribute to a competitive labour force, sustained economic growth, improved governance and vibrant societies.<sup>1</sup>

Progress over the past two decades has led to a healthier generation of adolescents. Improvements have been made in early childhood health and nutrition, in delaying young women's childbearing age, and in school enrolment rates. Now, a rapidly changing global economic and technological landscape presents an unprecedented opportunity to build on this progress and develop the skills, resources and capacities of hundreds of millions of young people.

The opportunity is particularly important in emerging markets, as 90 per cent of the 1.2 billion adolescents in the world lives in low- and middle-income countries. Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could yield over US\$1 trillion for the private sector by 2030, potentially unlocking 85 million jobs across many industries.<sup>2</sup> Investments in key areas can bring significant returns, as studies show that:

- Investing just \$22 per capita each year in improving secondary school education could generate economic benefits of about 12 times the costs.<sup>3</sup>
- Investments of \$5.20 per capita each year in improving adolescent health and well-being could save 12.5 million lives and prevent 30 million unplanned pregnancies.<sup>4</sup>
- Programmes to reduce child marriage, at about \$3.80 per person, can bring an almost six-fold return on investment and cut child marriage by around a third.<sup>5</sup> Eliminating child marriage could lead to welfare benefits of \$566 billion globally by 2030.<sup>6</sup>

### Highlighting the Need

- **1.2 billion adolescents** – 90 per cent – live in low- and middle-income countries
- **70 million girls and women aged 15–19** report being the **victims of physical violence** by age 15
- **16 million children** are born to 15–19-year-old mothers every year
- Adolescent boys are disproportionately the **victims of rising levels of homicide and road traffic injuries**
- **One in every four girls** worldwide was **married before the age of 18**
- More than **61 million boys and girls** of lower secondary and **140 million** of upper secondary school age are **currently out of school**
- **125 million adolescents** live in countries or areas affected by armed conflict

## The challenges

While the opportunities for reaping the social and economic dividends of investing in adolescents are clear, several challenges must be addressed collectively:

- **Learning and skills:** One in four of the poorest adolescents has never attended school, and one in two has either dropped out of primary school or is still in primary school many years after expected completion.<sup>7</sup> An alarming number of youth lack the education and skills needed to compete in today's job market.
- **Nutrition and health:** Adolescents, especially girls, have poor nutritional profiles: they are at high risk of micronutrient deficiencies and other forms of undernutrition, and increasingly also at risk of overweight or obesity.
- **Child marriage:** One in every four girls worldwide marries before the age of 18, significantly impeding her potential.<sup>8</sup> The risk of child marriage is heightened in emergencies. In some contexts, it is seen as a way to protect girls, and in others, to reduce the number of people in a household and the related economic burden of, for example, feeding and clothing the child.
- **Violence:** Every seven minutes, an adolescent boy or girl is killed by an act of violence.
- **AIDS:** Unlike for adult populations, AIDS-related deaths among adolescents are not decreasing.

## UNICEF's track record

UNICEF has more than 70 years of experience. It works in over 190 countries, where it addresses the health, nutrition, education and protection needs of more of the world's children than any other organization. And with a proven track record in partnering effectively with the private sector, UNICEF achieves sustainable results for children and adolescents.

UNICEF works in the most challenging and least accessible places, reaching children – including adolescents – in both emergency and development contexts.<sup>9</sup> UNICEF aims to support adolescents through caring families and adults and through opportunities for education and economic growth in societies that have laws, policies and services that guarantee their rights to health, well-being, education and full participation in society. Engaging children and adolescents has long been a part of UNICEF's mandate. UNICEF continues to develop cutting-edge initiatives to enhance their voices and engagement and has helped achieve policy and programme goals through these initiatives with young people as its partners and collaborators.

## UNICEF'S sustainable response

UNICEF's mandate – to save children's lives, defend their rights and help them fulfil their potential from early childhood through adolescence – is not a simple one. And in a world of escalating humanitarian emergencies, the response must not only meet survival and immediate needs, but also address long-term challenges. Partnerships are key – with governments, civil society, the private sector and adolescents themselves.

UNICEF focuses on four results areas to support adolescents' transition into adulthood: learning and skill development, health and well-being, safety and protection, and full participation in society.<sup>10</sup> All these results are closely linked – success in one area drives progress in another. Likewise, failure in one leads to failure in another, which cannot be allowed to happen. For this reason, UNICEF views its work holistically, with an eye on sustainability, continuous impact and scale.



### 1 Adolescent girls and boys learn and acquire critical skills

Education is a universal human right: it is essential for reducing poverty, improving health and fostering strong societies with active civic engagement.

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) recognizes this. It states that all children should complete a full cycle of pre-primary, primary and secondary education, with meaningful learning outcomes. This requires that children have an opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills they need for life and work. To facilitate learning for all girls and boys – particularly the most disadvantaged – UNICEF focuses on strengthening the building blocks of educational services, particularly on delivering them directly to settings with limited resources such as emergencies.

Working in partnership, UNICEF and the private sector can help adolescents learn and acquire critical skills through:

- **Multiple learning pathways:** designing and delivering flexible and accredited alternative learning programmes that allow working adolescents and young mothers to continue their primary and secondary education.
- **Teaching and learning:** improving curricula, teacher development, learning materials and assessment so adolescents learn and develop skills for life and work.
- **School-to-work transition:** providing career guidance, internships and entrepreneurship education, so disadvantaged adolescents can successfully transition from school to decent, meaningful work.
- **Data:** enhancing both data systems and use of data to make evidence-informed decisions that result in improved learning outcomes.

## Alternative learning programme for out-of-school Bangladeshi adolescents

UNICEF partnered with ILO and BRAC, a Bangladeshi development organization, to provide the most disadvantaged and vulnerable out-of-school adolescents with decent employment through a six-month employability programme. Traditional apprenticeships were adapted to include supervised on-the-job training combined with soft-skills learning. Following the training, the adolescents were certified and received job placements. More than 95 per cent of the learners (of whom 50 per cent were girls) graduated and became wage earners. Employment and monthly incomes increased by six times the increase of non-participants, significantly improving participants' living conditions.



### Key UNICEF Target for 2021

10 million adolescents have participated in skills development programmes

**2 Adolescents' health and well-being are maximized**

Adolescent well-being requires health and nutrition services that are both comprehensive and responsive to the unique needs of girls and boys.

UNICEF is fixing this by helping providers adapt services and the mechanisms through which they are delivered. Adolescents, their families and community members are part of the solution and, together with UNICEF, are promoting increased use of services and adoption of healthy behaviours.

This is contributing to SDGs 2, 3 and 5: zero hunger, good health and well-being, and gender equality.

**Key UNICEF Targets for 2021**

23.6 million adolescent girls and boys tested for HIV and received the results of the last test

100 million adolescent girls and boys receive anaemia and malnutrition preventive services

Working in partnership, UNICEF and the private sector can improve adolescents' health and well-being through:

- **Data collection:** Address gaps in data collection and analysis around adolescent health and nutrition so adolescents receive the services they need.
- **Capacity building:** Improve the ability of health-care facilities, community platforms and referral systems to provide important services and information to adolescent girls and boys. Specifically, this will address: 1) pregnancy care, childbirth and postnatal care; 2) HIV prevention, care and treatment; 3) gender-based violence as well as other forms of violence; 4) nutrition; and 5) substance abuse and mental health.
- **Information technology:** Provide schools, health services and youth organizations with platforms and other ways to communicate information to adolescents. This in turn will, for example, help them choose improved nutrition, promote gender equity and increase uptake of HIV testing.
- **Investing in complementary services:** Make appropriate water and sanitation services available in schools, communities and health-care facilities to promote menstrual hygiene management.



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**3 Adolescent girls and boys are safe and supported**

Adolescents face physical, sexual and emotional abuse and violence in many places: at home, in school, in the community and on the Internet. Girls and boys face different risks, as do many of the most vulnerable adolescents that include those who are displaced in their own countries or as refugees; are growing up in violent or neglectful homes; are living with disabilities; have their own children; are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual or intersex; or are from minority groups.

UNICEF is mandated to safeguard all children, including adolescents. UNICEF works with governments and key stakeholders to improve services that protect *all* adolescents, especially the most vulnerable. With partners, the organization combats all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. Its work ranges from making sure schools are free from violence to protecting girls' safety in humanitarian settings, to bring about a world in which there is gender equity (SDG 5) and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16).

**Key UNICEF Targets for 2021**

10 countries implementing a costed national action plan or strategy to end child marriage

80 per cent of UNICEF-targeted girls and boys in humanitarian situations provided with psychosocial support

Working in partnership, UNICEF and the private sector can support adolescents' protection and safety by:

- **Capacity building:** improving the knowledge and abilities of child protection professionals and other frontline workers to provide gender-responsive and adolescent-friendly services, even in hard-to-reach locations
- **Behaviour change programming:** promoting and encouraging candid dialogues about violence with families, authorities, the private sector and communities using multiple innovative and effective platforms
- **Outreach:** developing referral networks and outreach programmes and ensuring adolescents know where and how to safely access services
- **Ending child marriage:** advocating for an end to child marriage and the enactment of laws and protections that explicitly prohibit it
- **Data:** bolstering data systems to identify and monitor violence against adolescent girls and boys, linking them with case management mechanisms so that adolescents are protected and receive services, even in emergencies
- **Safety:** reducing road traffic injuries and harmful emissions by improving safe routes and safety technologies

## Supporting efforts to end child marriage in Ethiopia

Two in every five girls are married before their 18th birthday in Ethiopia, and 14 per cent of women were first married or in a union before the age of 15. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, the Government of Ethiopia has set an ambitious target of ending child marriage by 2025. The National Alliance to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting focuses on enabling girls at risk of child marriage and their families, as well as the community more broadly, to prevent child marriage. The programme is delivered through multiple strategies, including ensuring that adolescent girls can use laws and policies to protect and promote their rights; training teachers to address gender in their teaching; and addressing gender-based violence in schools. As a result (along with ongoing social and economic changes), the percentage of women marrying before age 18 in 2016 had fallen to 58 per cent from 63 per cent in 2011. UNICEF is increasingly working with the private sector to support and develop innovative communication interventions to address harmful social norms, support adolescent girls' progression through the education system and contribute to ending child marriage.



**4 Adolescent girls and boys are civically engaged in their communities**

Adolescents can play an invaluable role in improving their communities, schools, villages, cities and countries. Civic participation helps them develop their confidence, take difficult decisions and influence critical issues and events affecting their lives. UNICEF believes *all* adolescents can contribute to society, including girls, adolescents with disabilities and members of minority groups. This applies to all societies, including those prone to disaster, conflict, climate change and other shocks.

Meaningful adolescent engagement contributes to all the SDGs, especially SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

**Key UNICEF Target for 2021**

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3.2 million adolescents participated in or led civic engagement initiatives

Working together, UNICEF and the private sector can empower adolescent girls and boys to be civically engaged by:

- **Creating platforms:** supporting the systematic participation of adolescent girls and boys in policy dialogue and service delivery so that adolescents’ voices are heard and their ideas are considered; this may link to student councils, youth clubs and local governance structures
- **Designing new methodologies:** providing adolescents with opportunities to lead on solving problems in their communities by innovating and creating solutions
- **Promoting innovation:** creating and promoting websites, apps and social media that encourage adolescents to provide feedback and influence decisions on issues including community problems, disaster risk reduction, peace building and conflict resolution

**Adolescents in Indonesia are engaged in disaster risk reduction and mobilizing community solutions**

Indonesia is one of the countries most at risk of tsunamis, landslides and floods. Though about 30 million Indonesians aged 10–24 live in high-risk areas, young people are rarely part of formal decision-making processes to prepare for these risks. In this context, using the UNICEF-developed Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation, a group of adolescents mapped potential risks, developed stories on pressing issues affecting them and presented them at community events, village council meetings and school events. They also promoted innovative solutions for these issues and engaged in dialogue with policymakers and community members to mobilize the resources needed to apply the solutions. Building on this experience, the Ministry of Education and Culture is strengthening adolescent participation in conducting assessments in safe schools, and the Ministry’s Emergency Response Personnel are being supported to better equip responders to implement adolescent-specific activities in affected areas. This is a great example of humanitarian programmes serving as an entry point to influence long-term development gains to address the needs of adolescent boys and girls.

**How the private sector can invest**

While the numbers are daunting, the private sector can help turn the growing youth bulge into an economic and social dividend. UNICEF believes the private sector is not a postscript; it must be part of solutions to the world’s gravest challenges. A broad range of partners – philanthropists, foundations, business and individuals – can invest at global, regional and country levels, catalysing sustainable solutions and systemic change to create a more equitable planet for all.

More specifically, private sector partners can work with UNICEF to achieve results for adolescents in the following categories:

**Innovation and technology:** UNICEF has a strong track record for investing in innovation and technology. Technology helps to accelerate results, and UNICEF is continually looking for new solutions and products to achieve more.



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**Financing:**

UNICEF requires financial contributions to implement programmes. Support from non-traditional donors is increasingly important to sustain momentum in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Expertise:**

Partners from a range of fields, sectors and industries are needed to contribute novel approaches and fresh perspectives, fill knowledge gaps, advocate for better services and greater respect for adolescents, and mobilize important stakeholders to deliver solutions to meet the most pressing needs.

**Data and evidence generation:**

UNICEF understands that data collection, evidence generation and learning are central to programmatic success and looks to partners for support.

**Advocacy, communication, and influence:**

UNICEF works closely with the private sector to support UNICEF’s programmes and activities. They also work on addressing the impact of business policies and operations on children, and on leading advocacy with and through business on child rights. UNICEF and its partners – along with their products and services or communication and advocacy platforms – influence, reinforce and advance key messages and priorities with a unified voice.

**Generation Unlimited**

In 2018, UNICEF and a diverse group of stakeholders from public, private and civic spheres – including young people – launched a global partnership called Generation Unlimited. Its purpose is to unlock investments and unleash the voice and participation of young people in shaping a brighter future. The partnership focuses on Secondary Education, Skills for Learning, Employability and Decent Work and Empowerment, especially for girls. Investing in UNICEF’s results for adolescents contributes to the aspirational objectives of Generation Unlimited.



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**Why partner with UNICEF?**

**Global impact:**

When supporting UNICEF, partners are empowering millions of vulnerable adolescents and engaging them in solutions that affect their lives. UNICEF’s global reach and close collaboration with governments, civil society, adolescents and the private sector mean its impact has a multiplier effect: they allow the organization to leverage investments for solutions at scale.

**Influence:**

UNICEF actively engages with and convenes government and other partners on initiatives for adolescent education, protection, health, nutrition, shelter, sanitation and hygiene, and civic engagement. UNICEF provides networking opportunities with other global leaders during international advocacy meetings, conferences and special high-level events.

**Visibility:**

Recognition opportunities – including on social media – allow supporters to publicize their partnership with UNICEF and showcase their commitment to children and adolescents.

**Opportunities for co-creation:**

UNICEF is seeking global strategic partners to achieve impact at scale. By leveraging the power of the private sector’s innovation and financial resources, UNICEF can respond to the immense challenges to economic mobility and equitable opportunity that adolescents face in developing countries.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF follows the WHO definition of adolescents which is ‘persons from 10 through 19 years of age’.  
<sup>2</sup> Sustainable Development Commission. Better Business, Better World: Sustainable Business Opportunities in Africa.  
<sup>3</sup> Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing, 2016; Peter Sheehan et al., “Building the foundations for sustainable development: a case for global investment in the capabilities of adolescents,” *The Lancet* 390, no. 10104 (2017): 1792–1806  
<sup>4</sup> Ibid  
<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.unfpa.org/press/lancet-investing-adolescent-health-education-could-bring-tenfold-economic-benefit>>  
<sup>6</sup> <<https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/EICM-Global-Conference-Edition-June-27-FINAL.pdf>>  
<sup>7</sup> See presentation of Professor Pauline Rose, Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, at UNICEF Global Education Network Meeting, 2017  
<sup>8</sup> <<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage>>  
<sup>9</sup> <<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do>>  
<sup>10</sup> Every Woman Every Child. *The Global Strategy for Women, Children’s and Adolescent’s Health (2016-2020)*, DFID’s Youth Agenda (2016).

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