

Young People Need Us **NOW** More than **Ever**

...And We Need Them.

So far, 2010 must surely be frustrating for governments which started the year hoping and praying for signs of a more vigorous recovery from crisis. Even in those countries fortunate enough to have posted successive quarters of economic growth, their rebound is decidedly fragile. Those less fortunate continue to grapple with high unemployment, excessively tight credit, and steeper cuts in public spending. While all countries are grappling with uncertain economic prospects, in developing countries generational concerns present another challenge. This is because young people in the developing world are coming of age in numbers greater than ever before. A recent *World Development Report* that focused on youth strongly suggested that countries need to seize this window of opportunity to invest.

Yet for many young people, the financial crisis has meant even fewer life options and falling spirits. Many are struggling to finish school or find jobs in pursuit of a more promising life. In the best of times, young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults. Even before the financial crisis struck, developing countries needed to create a billion new jobs over the next decade just to keep up with a new wave of first-time job seekers. With this crisis, job creation is an even more challenging task.

As a world community we simply cannot afford to abandon these young people to the ups and downs of the global economy. By nature, they yearn to realize their full potential, earn a living wage, save for marriage, a home, and above all, take their rightful place in society. Too often we regard our young men and women as the workers, entrepreneurs, parents, citizens, and leaders of tomorrow. In fact, they are today's citizens and we must recognize their potential to make extraordinary changes to the world around us.

Addressing young people's needs and aspirations is vital for both social and economic progress. Either we do nothing—and risk alienating them from the mainstream and instilling in them a personal legacy of distrust and hopelessness. Or we invest in the biggest source of human potential that the world has ever had, and reap the benefits of that investment through greater growth and social well-being for generations to come.

The current crisis poses risks for our collective future. A recent British Council report on the young people of Pakistan predicts a "demographic disaster" if that country does not address the needs of its young generation. More than 70 percent of Pakistani youth reported being worse off financially than last year. Pakistan is not alone. World Bank analysis shows that child and youth poverty in some Eastern European countries has increased by 5 to 10 percent over the past year. And across the world, young people's hopelessness in the face of the crisis is reflected by dropping out

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of the labor force altogether at three times the rates of adults. Even more troubling is the growing level of despair among youth that is reflecting disillusionment not only with their government but with democracy itself.

Things do not have to be this way. We have seen time and again how countries that invest in their young men and women end up with more economic growth and social cohesion. Governments which encourage their students to stay in school see significant national returns on each additional year of schooling. This is especially true when countries invest in educating their adolescent girls to secondary school level and beyond.

Governments and private companies can also finance and expand effective job-training programs which can groom young people for the demands of a global economy that requires more and more highly skilled workers. For example, in the Dominican Republic's Juventud y Empleo project, comprehensive job training has bumped up young people's salaries by as much as 10 percent. The returns to the investment in the young beneficiaries are expected to exceed the program costs within two years of their graduation. Such returns are observed across Latin America.

The current crisis has spurred governments to work more intensively with the international donor community, NGOs, and corporate sponsors to champion new models of youth employment programs that focus on a more comprehensive market-driven approach—with relevant job and life skills training, internships, and job placement opportunities. The World Bank is mobilizing around this issue as well—having joined forces with the Nike Foundation to set up an Adolescent Girls Initiative to pioneer employment projects for girls in Liberia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Nepal. The Bank is also preparing three new youth development programs in Kenya, El Salvador, and Papua New Guinea, in addition to others in the Dominican Republic and Honduras, reflecting a new sense of urgency and recognition that young people can play a significant role in reducing poverty and spurring economic growth. And the Bank is working in partnership with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Youth Employment Network, with leading NGOs including the International Youth Foundation, and with the overall donor community to develop a body of knowledge on effective youth employment interventions that will succeed even after the crisis has subsided.

To be sure, it will take time for countries to get back into the global economy, to restore their confidence in trade and investment, in creating jobs, and other measures of economic vitality. But we cannot wait until the crisis ends to pay serious attention to the plight of today's young people. Consider that they now constitute the largest youth cohort in human history—more than a billion people between the ages of 15 to 25 years old—with the vast majority of them growing up in developing countries. Sub-Saharan Africa, according to the US-based Population Reference Bureau, is home to the world's largest population of young people and is projected to stay this way for decades.

If we do nothing to address these issues, the consequences will be severe. According to a recent World Bank study of Latin America and the Caribbean, underinvestment in youth costs countries as much as 2 percent of their GDP every year even in the best of times, and the situation is getting worse. As a result, fewer young people will be able to contribute to the economic growth that will help fuel a more widespread, stable global recovery, and more will eventually lose hope in themselves and in a vision for a better world.

Now is the time for governments and donors to act. Given their sheer number in a world beset with poverty and its related tribulations, we need to empower young people to take charge of their own lives and discover their full potential. Whether they succeed has everything to do with whether we succeed as a world, and as a society. But they cannot do so alone. **Y**

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