Chapter 6

OUR YOUTH, OUR FUTURE:
MOVING FORWARD TO ADDRESS YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

Youth as an Emerging Development Issue in Kenya

Kenya is a young nation, with 75 percent of its population being under the age of 30 years and 22 percent being between the ages of 15 to 24 years. For Kenyan young people – and for young people worldwide – the critical transition from childhood to young adulthood is delicate and challenging and is dependent on support and guidance from the family, community, school, and society at large. Adolescence is also a period in which critical life altering actions are taken and decisions are made (in schooling and training, relationships and marriage, sexual initiation, and risky behavior).

In Kenya, a mismatch exists between the aspirations of young people and the opportunities available to them. The majority of young Kenyans have high hopes and ambitions. However, a demographic bulge of young people, poor macroeconomic performance, a lack of labor market opportunities, an education system that suffers from problems of access, quality, and relevance, and a society that negates the self-expression of young people mean that many young people are unable to translate their aspirations into a productive and fulfilling future. High expectations, disappointing employment and life prospects, and marginalization among young people can fuel frustration and desperation. In response, some of these youths turn to criminal behavior, violence, substance and drug abuse, and commercial sex work. These activities have negative repercussions on the young people themselves and contribute to growing physical insecurity for society as a whole.

Youth Outcomes Specific to Kenyan Youths

The main risks facing young Kenyans – a lack of educational opportunities, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, crime and violence, substance and drug abuse, and social exclusion – are not uncommon in either developing or developed countries. However, this study has revealed that some risk outcomes are of particular concern in Kenya:

- **Literacy and Education**: Youth literacy rates in Kenya are among the highest in Africa, but, the country fairs less well in secondary schooling with only 25 percent of eligible young people enrolled in secondary school. However, gender
gaps in education are relatively narrow, especially when compared to those of many other African nations.

- **Labor Force Participation:** Kenya has relatively low labor force participation rates both for young people aged 15 to 24 and adults aged 25 to 54. A study of 15 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa found that only Malawi, Uganda, Nigeria, and Ethiopia had lower participation rates for these age groups (Liebrandt and Mlatsheni, 2004).

- **Crime:** Recent crime statistics reveal that crime rates in Kenya are going down. However, reports indicate that the Kenyan people still have a general feeling of insecurity (East African Standard, 2005; Daily Nation, 2005a; and Daily Nation, 2005b). In Kenya, as in many other countries, young people are viewed as being – and are frequently among – the main perpetrators of crime. Over 50 percent of all convicted criminals in Kenya are young males aged between 16 and 25. As is the case in other African countries, most crimes committed by young people in Kenya are financially motivated (United Nations, 2004). Even though youth crime and violence is a problem in Kenya, little has been done in terms of interventions to combat this issue.

- **Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS:** Kenya’s HIV prevalence rates are lower than those of countries in Southern Africa but are high compared to other nations in East, West, and Central Africa. Among these, Tanzania is the only country with higher HIV incidence rates than Kenya’s. HIV rates in Kenya are significantly higher for females than males, which is also the case in other parts of Africa. Kenya has lower rates of teenage pregnancy than other Sub-Saharan African countries. Although abortion is only legally permitted in Kenya when the woman’s life is in danger, many young women resort to unsafe abortions to terminate unwanted pregnancies. In Nairobi, it has been estimated that 95 percent of all abortions are administered to women under the age of 25 (Ankomah et al, 1997). Unsafe abortions are a threat to the health and well being of young Kenyan women and account for 35 percent of maternal deaths and 50 percent of hospital gynecological admissions in Nairobi (Lema et al, 1989 and Rogo, 1993).

- **Mental Health:** The mental health status of young Kenyans is poor compared with their peers internationally. Ten percent of young Kenyan males and seven percent of young females report being depressed, and as many as 7 percent of young males and 10 percent of young females report having attempted suicide. Yet mental health is a hidden problem in Kenya because the stigma associated with mental illness means that the problem is often left untreated and undiagnosed.

- **Physical and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse:** Abuse and exploitation are common among both young females and males. As many as 21 percent of 10 to 24 year
olds have been sexually abused. Teachers are reportedly among the main perpetrators of both physical and sexual abuse (Centre for the Study of Adolescence, 2003 and Central Bureau of Statistics et al., 2004). Female genital mutilation also continues to be highly prevalent in Kenya; 20.3 percent of women aged 15 to 19, 24.8 percent aged 20 to 24, and 33 percent aged 25 to 29 have reported being circumcised.

- **Participation:** As in other countries, the age hierarchy of Kenyan society means that young people have limited opportunities to express themselves and to participate in society and political life. At the community level, young people are commonly perceived as being idle, disrespectful, and not concerned about the community’s well-being. Thus, they are frequently excluded from public debates. Moreover, the reluctance within Kenyan society (for example, among parents and politicians) to discuss youth-related issues such as sexuality and abortion compounds this problem.

**Underlying Risk and Protective Factors Affecting Kenyan Youth**

Young people in Kenya are greatly affected by the environment within which they live and operate. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the evidence suggests that the following factors underlie the behavior of and outcomes associated with young people:

- **Macro/Institutional Level:** Macro-level factors that have a significant impact on young Kenyans include: (i) the poor performance of the economy, which in turn limits job opportunities for young people; (ii) corruption, which negatively impacts economic growth, encourages police harassment of youths, limits education and job opportunities for those who refuse to pay bribes, and negatively affects service delivery; (iii) poverty, which prevents young people from accessing higher education and is linked to negative youth outcomes such as crime, teenage pregnancy, and depression; (iv) an education system that does not adequately prepare young people for the job market and that few people can access, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels; (v) gender discrimination, which negatively affects young women; and (vi) cultural norms that limit young people’s self-expression and participation in society.

- **Community:** The communities within which young people live can be a source of both risk and protection. In the Kenyan context, risk factors at this level include negative attitudes towards young people (for example, the opinion that “young people are immature and irresponsible”) and harmful rites of passage such as female circumcision. Communities are a source of protection when there are supportive adults present and where the communal philosophy enhances protection, for example, when the community believes that, “it takes a village to raise a child.” Some communities such as slums serve as a source of both risk and protection. Young people from slums are more likely to have negative
outcomes such as school dropout, early sexual initiation and substance abuse. However, young people living in slums also report having a sense of belonging and community not necessarily found in more affluent residential areas.

- **School/Work:** Outside of their homes, young people are affected either negatively or positively by their immediate environments, particularly their schools and workplaces. Risk factors associated with the school environment include physical/sexual abuse and low expectations. In Kenya, physical and sexual abuse by teachers is of particular concern as teachers have been reported as among the main perpetrators of abuse. Low expectations of students, particularly girls, also have a negative impact on young people. On the other hand, supportive teachers with high expectations of their students can play a protective role in the lives of students. Young people who feel connected to their schools are also less likely to engage in risk behavior, whereas being out-of-school and/or unemployed are risk factors. For example, substance abuse is reportedly much higher among young people who are not in school (NACADA, 2004).

- **Family:** Families play a vital role in the development of young people. Young people who grow up in homes where there is abuse and violence are especially at risk. Since the advent of HIV/AIDS, the number of young orphans in Kenya has increased - this group of youths is vulnerable, especially in cases where they are exploited by relatives or forced to drop out of school to care for younger siblings. The family can be a source of protection when parents have positive parenting skills and high expectations and when young people feel connected to the family regardless of their parents’ marital status. Another key source of protection for young people exists when family networks enable them to access services, information, employment or other opportunities.

- **Peers:** The behavior of their peers has a significant impact on young people. Most young people tend to confide in their peers and turn to them for advice when faced with a crisis. Peers are, therefore, a vital source of risk and protection for young people. Those with friends who engage in risky behavior are much more likely to engage in the same risky behavior. On the other hand, peers can be a source of protection as well. Peer education has been used as a strategy in youth programs such as those that aim to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Involvement in youth organizations can also be a protective factor.

- **Individual:** Risk factors at the individual level include disability, substance abuse, hopelessness, depression and thoughts of suicide. Protective factors include self-esteem and spirituality/religiosity. A study by Kiragu and Zabin (1993) found that religiosity (defined as feeling connected to a particular religion) was the only protective factor for early sexual initiation among young people in school.
Youth Policies and Programs

Youth development is a relatively new theme in Kenya and, as such, there are few programs devoted to this issue. Both the government and non-state actors play an integral role in youth development.

Government
The Youth Division of the MGSCSS takes the lead on youth issues, having prepared a Youth Policy in 2003. Other government agencies with a role to play in youth policy include the Ministry of Education (general education and vocational training), the Ministry of Labor (youth employment), the Ministry of Planning and National Development (population, sexual and reproductive health education, and adolescent reproductive health), the Ministry of Health (health and HIV/AIDS issues), and the Ministry of Transport and Communication (information and communication technology). Each of these ministries has developed policies related to young people. What is consistent across all of these agencies is that they are all finding it difficult to translate their policies into actions partly because young people’s issues cover so many different sectors.

Non-state Actors
Besides the government, non-state actors, including NGOs, the private sector, faith-based institutions, and communities play a role in youth development. NGOs, for example, have been involved in providing education, training, and health care. The private sector and other non-state actors play a significant role in providing education in Kenya from the early childhood to the tertiary level. Most hospitals in the national health system are run by the private sector or faith-based institutions. Many NGOs are involved in providing sexual and reproductive health education and services, and some are now making efforts to provide financial services and ICT services targeted to young people.

Youth-led Groups
Young people have also formed groups to act on their own behalf. These groups are involved in income-generating activities, recreation, education, and advocacy and awareness (for example, about environmental conservation and HIV/AIDS prevention). These groups play a positive role in the lives of young people, including being a source of information, giving them a sense of belonging and self-esteem, and helping them to feel empowered through their collective action.

Principles, Approaches, and Directions
Given the importance of youth development in the context of Kenya’s future, policymakers need to take urgent action to move the youth development agenda forward. Actions are required from the macro level (by improving public institutions such as the educational system, the public health care system, and changing social/cultural norms and values) to the micro level (promoting supportive families, communities, neighborhoods, and local institutions and organizations for youth development). Because
youth development is a new issue, little in the way of empirical evidence is available on best practices in terms of approaches and interventions. Lessons from international experience, however, suggest that youth programs should be based on the following principles (see Barker and Fontes, 1996, James, 1997 and 1999, and Holland, 2005):

(a) Ensuring the presence in young people’s lives of caring, knowledgeable adults (parents, teachers, mentors, community members, and program directors) or other trained individuals who understand and care about young people, and who can provide support to them over the long-term.

(b) Setting high standards and expectations for the young people themselves, which means guiding their behavior and insisting that they take full personal responsibility for their actions.

(c) Providing young people with a sense of community.

(d) Helping young people acquire and keep jobs, including connecting them with jobs and employers, encouraging them to pursue their goals and succeed at work, and mentoring and training them while on the job.

(e) Looking at young people as an asset rather than as a problem to be solved because they will behave according to the expectations that are placed on them.

(f) Devising a comprehensive approach to youth development that considers the complex nature of the challenges faced by young people rather than adopting many piecemeal activities.

(g) Understanding that young people are comprised of many subgroups with very different needs. For example, very different approaches are necessary to deal with those young people who are already engaged in risky behavior and are no longer linked to formal institutions (like schools) than to deal with young people who have some protective factors in their lives.

(h) Focusing on prevention rather than mitigation because it is more cost-effective and because it saves many young people from falling into lives of poverty and suffering.

However, given the Kenyan context and the issues identified in this study, youth development should also follow these additional key principles:

- **Focus on Youth Participation:** Changing attitudes about the appropriate role of young people in society and, in turn, providing them with real opportunities to participate and express themselves must be a fundamental principle of youth development, particularly in Kenya and other African countries that tend to value the elderly at the expense of young people. Encouraging young
people’s participation in society and political life builds their self-esteem and gives them an opportunity to make a positive contribution to their communities, it also helps change the negative images associated with young people.

- **Apply a Gender Dimension to Youth Development**: Youth development is intrinsically linked to prevailing gender roles and expectations in that young men and women face different risks and opportunities. Therefore, the gender dimension must be considered in every policy and intervention related to youth development.

- **Use the Media to Reach the Masses**: Using the media and social marketing – which draws on commercial marketing principles – has been highly effective worldwide in changing social norms and behavior and meeting nutrition, family planning, and health objectives. In the case of young people, social marketing can be used to target the whole population or specific groups (for example, young people themselves or the parents of at-risk youth). In Africa, using the media, particularly the radio, to reach target groups with information has been found to be cost-effective.

With this in mind, we suggest that policymakers need to focus on the following issues in the youth development field: the school-to-work transition, HIV/AIDS prevention and youth-friendly health services, community and neighborhood support for youth, and the development of youth organizations and institutions.

**Schools, Education, and the School-to-Work Transition**

Education is obviously central to youth development. While the government has made major efforts to improve the education system, much remains to be done, particularly at the secondary level where access and relevance continue to be key constraints. Moreover, schools can be a risk factor for children given the incidence of sexual abuse by teachers. At the same time, schools can be a positive force in the lives of young people as a place where they can interact and be socialized and that provides them with supportive teachers. Thus, policymakers need to make educational improvements a high priority, including widening access to post-primary education, reducing drop-out rates, and improving the quality of schools. Specifically, we recommend the following actions:

- **(a)** Expand access to secondary education by increasing the student capacity in secondary schools.
- **(b)** Experiment with voucher programs in areas where the direct costs of schooling or the opportunity costs of going to school are high (along the lines of successful programs in countries such as Mexico and Brazil).
(c) Review and reform the school curriculum to include technical, entrepreneurial, and self-employment, and life skills, reproductive and sexual health education, and conflict resolution.

(d) Apply strict disciplinary measures to teachers found guilty of sexually abusing children, including banning them from working within the education sector.

(e) Add school-based information and education campaigns to teach children and adolescents the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships, as well as their right and responsibility to report sexually abusive and exploitative relationships.

(f) Explore alternative education approaches, including intervention strategies such as distance education, night classes (as in the adult basic education model), and the use of information and communication technologies. The skills needed on the labor market are constantly changing therefore, traditional education and training systems need to adapt accordingly (Holland, 2005).

(g) Revise technical, industrial and vocational education and training (TIVET) so it reflects the needs of industry and the labor market. Specifically, Kenya should apply the lessons of an exhaustive study on the experiences with TIVET in Kenya, which include: (i) ensuring that the government plays a strategic role as an enabler and facilitator of TIVET rather than as a service provider; (ii) strengthening the role of the private sector and NGOs, which are generally more efficient and responsive than the public sector in providing TIVET; (iii) ensuring that TIVET reflects the skills needed in the informal sector labor market, and in particular that it contributes to the increased productivity and earnings of this important sector in the Kenyan economy.

**HIV/AIDS and Health Services**

As in other African countries, HIV/AIDS is probably the most serious risk to young people in Kenya, and therefore it is crucial that swift and decisive action be taken in this area. In general terms, existing programs focused on incentives for changing behavior among youth need to be extended, such as making condoms easily accessible, delaying sexual debut, reducing the number of sexual partners, encouraging male circumcision, and aggressively treating STIs. Specifically, the following actions are recommended:

(a) **HIV/AIDS education in schools:** Lift the current ban on discussing contraception with young people in school and adopt policies and programs to ensure the effective dissemination of information on sexual and reproductive health and contraceptives in schools from an early age. To do otherwise would simply be irresponsible. Kenya would do well to
learn from neighboring Uganda, which includes HIV/AIDS education for children in its schools.

(b) **Youth-friendly health services:** In the public health care system, action is required on two fronts. First, adopt service protocols, tools, and techniques that are sensitive to the concerns and problems of young people and their families, including those related to mental health. Second, train medical and nursing school students and graduates in these new protocols, tools, and techniques. The protocols should take into account the need for confidentiality and the different needs of male and female patients.

(c) **Public health campaigns:** Emphasize public education campaigns, which are the most effective way of reaching a large proportion of the young people. Existing programs (for example, those that focus on preventing HIV/AIDS) should be strengthened and expanded and others should be launched (for example, a campaign to de-stigmatize mental illness). Social marketing campaigns using different media outlets have also proven to be highly effective in influencing behavior and attitudes. However, their ability to reach out to young people varies depending on their message and method. Nursing and medical professionals can play a pivotal role in discouraging unhealthy sexual practices among children and adolescents in the course of their daily work, given that they are often very influential at the community level.

**Community and Neighborhood Support for Young People**

Community-driven development (CDD) is an important method for engaging and involving young people in making the decisions that affect their communities. Because Kenya has applied this concept in both urban and rural areas, it should be possible to reach a large number of young people through existing CDD programs. Resources for CDD projects for young people should be earmarked to ensure that young people actually benefit from this expenditure.

Other suggestions include:

(a) Strengthening the accountability of the police and improving the relationship between police and the communities in which they work. These are seen as the most promising approaches to increasing the effectiveness of the police. Increasing patrols in crime hotspots also appears to reduce crime in high-risk areas.

(b) Finding ways to strengthen community centers to make them more effective in providing recreational facilities for young men and women.
Youth Institutions and Organizations
Youth institutions and organizations can provide many benefits for young people. They give them a sense of belonging and connectedness, provide them with positive role models and opportunities to learn, and engage them in activities with a social purpose (such as HIV/AIDS prevention, conservation, peer education, and recreational and cultural activities). With this in mind, we make these three recommendations:

(a) **Inter-ministerial Youth Committee:** Given the fact that issues concerning young people cut across many different sectors, an inter-ministerial committee is required to coordinate all of the government’s actions related to young people. The role of this committee should be to plan, monitor, and review all youth-related activities carried out across the public sector in cooperation with other non-state stakeholders and partners.

(b) **National Youth Service:** Youth service organizations, sometimes called youth corps, can perform several vital roles in developing countries. They can deliver critical services to the population, in schools (as teachers’ assistants for understaffed schools), health centers (as peer educators on HIV/AIDS and sexual and reproductive health), and the community (by organizing environmental improvements, caring for the sick and elderly, or providing paralegal services). In providing these services, they are also offering young people a critical first job experience, thus helping to prepare them for a real job in the labor market. However, most of the youth services that have been established in developing countries so far are weak and under-resourced, and Kenya’s National Youth Service is no exception. Therefore, we recommend that the government should explore options for strengthening the National Youth Service. International experience has demonstrated that these types of organizations can be highly effective when: (i) adults are present in the program; (ii) the work done by young people is valued by the young people themselves; and (iii) the young people receive adequate training and supervision.

(c) **National Youth Council:** Youth councils have been used in many countries to coordinate youth organizations, to promote, popularize and help to implement youth policies, to mobilize and organize young people, and to act as the political voice of young people in dealings with the government and other stakeholders. However, in many countries, youth councils have also been dominated by a small elite group of young people and have not been responsive to the needs of the majority of young people (including the most marginalized). Thus, before setting up a National Youth Council as has been proposed, the government should examine the lessons that can be learned from the experience of youth councils in other countries.
Conclusion: The Cost of Doing Nothing

The issues facing Kenya’s young people are vast and complex but they are not insoluble. The government is best situated to address some of the issues highlighted in this report, while others will require the support and commitment of its development partners and civil society including NGOs, religious institutions, parents, and society at large. Most importantly, young people need to be a part of the solution and not just be viewed as a problem to be solved. Young people constitute a vital human resource that needs to be tapped. In the final analysis, when we develop Kenya’s young people, we are developing Kenya’s future. The importance of investing in young people is well summarized in the following excerpt from a World Bank Social Development Paper called “Investing in Youth Empowerment and Inclusion” (World Bank, 2004c):

“Everywhere from Kabul to Nairobi to Tirana, young people desire more access not just to job opportunities, but to a better quality of life, including leisure, information and entertainment. Everywhere they resent being marginalized in decision-making processes and are eager to have greater control over their lives. Unless these gaps are addressed, conflict, violence, and a missed generation for global development will be the costs of neglect that more developed societies will also pay one way or another…”.