

At the Frontier: Young People and Climate Change



state of world population 2009 youth supplement

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This is the fourth edition of the *Youth Supplement to UNFPA's State of the World Population Report*. This Youth Supplement addresses climate change and young people, through the lens of what impact climate change is predicted to have, and what that will mean for young people's lives, livelihoods, health, rights and development. The Youth Supplement explores these issues because the young people of today will be standing in the frontline in the coming decades, meeting the challenges posed by climate change.

As the Youth Supplement shows, young people will be dealing with the threats and opportunities of climate change whether they choose to do so or are forced to do so, and whether they like it or not. Some of the young people featured in the Youth Supplement have started their passage to adulthood with a strong interest in something completely different, but having identified the issue of climate change and realized how it relates to their lives and

communities, they shifted their focus.

Young people all over the world are today standing up and calling for proper attention to climate change. They are both angry with scenarios that in some cases seem inevitable and confident that their contributions will make a difference. The young people featured in this report tell stories that give us a glimpse of what impact climate change might have on young people from different backgrounds and cultures, giving a deeper understanding of how the lives of young people will change, as the projected impacts of climate change arrive.

Climate change is not an isolated phenomenon; on the contrary it will affect young people in all aspects of their lives. The impact of climate change will in many cases be strongest in developing countries, and thus climate change poses a threat to development, as it risks hampering access to water, food, sanitation and security, among other things. Indeed, if we don't implement adequate responses to climate change, the

long term realization of the Millennium Development Goals are at risk.

As more young people than ever before live in the world, on the eve of events that will affect them during their whole lives, capacitating and involving young people in the response to climate change is crucial. Poverty, discrimination and gender dynamics are all dynamics that will influence how young people carry out this task. Unless young people are equipped with tools such as education and health, including reproductive health, their empowerment, involvement and contributions will not be possible, or at least a lot less successful.

Climate Change:

“Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea level”¹

Our climate is slowly but surely changing. On all continents and in most oceans, there are observations of changes in natural systems. Observations include, but are not limited to, changes in marine and freshwater biological systems, earlier timing of spring events, reduced ice cover and warmer lakes and rivers. These are all phenomena that represent the impact of a changing climate, but are at the same time only early signs of what might be.

Emissions of greenhouse gas is the most significant, human caused, contributor to climate change. Technology and industrialization has provided us with revolutionary means to create wealth and improve health, but our way of life, based on unsustainable patterns of production and consumption,

has also lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions by 70 percent, between 1970 and 1994, with the most dramatic increase occurring during the last decade of this period. If the global greenhouse gas emissions are not reduced in the 21st century, it is very likely that the effects of climate change will be more severe, compared to what has already been observed and what is anticipated today. In the long term perspective, it is likely that climate change will go beyond the capacity of human and natural mitigation, if emissions are not reduced.²

Young People at the Frontier:

In this year’s *Youth Supplement to the State of the World Population*, we meet seven young people who have experienced, or live in the midst of, circumstances that are likely to increase in frequency and force, when impacts of climate change arrive broadly. Among these are floods, reduced agriculture production and sanitation problems. While some would say that the events that

the young people profiled in this publication have experienced are clearly early signs of climate change, some would say that it is impossible to draw such conclusions. What is fairly certain however, is that the stories in this publication are examples of what life will bring to millions more young people in the future, if we fail to take action in order to adapt to and mitigate climate change, and reduce carbon emissions.

Poverty is inextricably linked to climate change vulnerability, as well as the capacity to adapt to, and mitigate the impact of emergencies and durable changes of living conditions. Poorer people have less access to water, food, livelihoods, infrastructure, health, housing and services. Hence, a disruption or decrease in access to such commodities, i.e. projected impacts of climate change, will have a proportionally heavier impact on the lives of poorer people. Further, the regions where the impacts of climate change are predicted to be more severe are often inhabited by poorer people.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change vulnerability also has gender and age aspects: Women account for about two-thirds of the poor people in the world, and about seventy percent of the world's farmers, meaning women will face the lion's share of the challenges in many rural areas.³ Young people between 10 and 24 years constitute over 1.5 billion people in the world, of which 70 percent live in developing countries. Thus, young people, especially young women, are particularly vulnerable to projected climate change impacts.

The young people of today are standing at the frontier of climate change. Today's actions of governments, the private sector

the lives and opportunities for young people must be viewed holistically.

Climate change is coinciding with a current global trend of urbanization. As of 2008, more people in the world live in urban areas than rural, with many of these being young people.⁴ This is both a challenge and an opportunity, as urban areas emit high levels of greenhouse gas, but provides possibilities for a more climate friendly organization of waste management and transportation, among other things.⁵ Young people in cities are characterized by a similar dualism – they are more educated than their parents, but face greater risks of ending up as slum dwellers, compared to adults.⁶ Thus,

unemployed are young people.⁷ Lack of employment risks leading to a life in poverty, thus more likely to be deprived of opportunities to acquire necessary skills and means to prepare them for climate change effects, and adapt to such effects. Young people's capacity to adapt will be increasingly weakened if their health concerns, including reproductive health concerns, are not adequately addressed. The lack of opportunities and capabilities, combined with the exposure to climate change effects, increases the pressure to migrate and leave their places and countries of origin.

If young people have the ability to take decisions on when and how to form a fam-

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