

Adolescent health and wellbeing: a key to a sustainable future

As knowledge has accumulated about human development during puberty and beyond, and about the development of the brain in particular, it has become clear that the notion of adolescence as a stage of sexual maturation is far too simplistic.¹ Many interlinked neuroendocrine changes and processes influence adolescent behaviour, as well as the way young adults think and make decisions.² A better understanding of these changes and their dynamic extension into early adult life offers not only an opportunity for a new approach to minimising risks to health and wellbeing, but also a moment to engage young people during years that have such far-reaching consequences for their future adult life, and even for future generations.

The *Lancet* Commission on adolescent health and wellbeing highlights this triple dividend.³ The Commission's central argument is that we have a unique opportunity to focus on this previously neglected age group in a way that is beneficial for adolescents, for society, and perhaps even for the health of our planet.⁴ Adolescents and young adults, if given the opportunity, are curious, engaged, and innovative. They challenge the status quo, accelerate progress, and advance human potential. However, in many parts of the world, including in high-income countries, the lives and prospects of adolescents and young people have deteriorated in recent years. Unemployment is high; social protection is eroding (for example, people younger than 25 years in the UK were excluded from a recent increase in the minimum wage); and conflict, social exclusion, and alienation, across the Middle East especially, cause the death and displacement of many young people, and the radicalisation of some. For a safer and more secure future, we must pay much more urgent attention to the hopes and needs of young people and adolescents.

This Commission follows two previous *Lancet* Series in 2007 and 2012.^{5,6} The first Series highlighted what was then an emerging area of health and medicine called "adolescent health". It drew the broad contours of the discipline—sexual and reproductive health, mental health, substance use, and chronic disease. The second Series sought to put the adolescent person at the centre of our thinking about human health. It called for stronger links between adolescent health and wider global health programmes and policies, highlighting serious data gaps

and the failure to consider early preventive actions to reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases later in life. Since publication of these Series, some progress has been made. UN agencies now take adolescents far more seriously than a decade ago.⁷⁻⁹ The *Every Woman Every Child* Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health,¹⁰ launched by the UN Secretary-General in September, 2015, was a clear signal that adolescents mattered enough to rebrand the entire strategy. But there is still much more to do. Although many agencies have shown an interest, none leads or unites. Adolescent girls are often singled out, but while it is important to address gender inequity, boys matter too and can even offer important solutions to entrenched gender stereotypes.¹¹

The biggest opportunity during the next 15 years and beyond is to make adolescents the human face of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹² To shift the

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Panel: Sustainable Development Goals

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| Goal 1 | End poverty in all its forms everywhere |
| Goal 2 | End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture |
| Goal 3 | Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages |
| Goal 4 | Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all |
| Goal 5 | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls |
| Goal 6 | Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all |
| Goal 7 | Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all |
| Goal 8 | Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all |
| Goal 9 | Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation |
| Goal 10 | Reduce inequality within and among countries |
| Goal 11 | Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable |
| Goal 12 | Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns |
| Goal 13 | Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts* |
| Goal 14 | Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development |
| Goal 15 | Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss |
| Goal 16 | Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels |
| Goal 17 | Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development |

*Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change. SDG text is taken from the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.¹²

trajectory of the world on to a sustainable and resilient path at a time of immense challenge, as highlighted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,¹³ we must seize the opportunity that adolescents present for multisectoral and intersectoral action. For SDGs 1–12 and 16, adolescents are a key target group (panel).¹² And in addition to being a target group, adolescents should be actively involved in working towards the SDGs at all levels—as agents for change at the community, national, and international levels. Adolescents and young people are our best chance to achieve radical change for a prosperous, healthy, and sustainable world. The adolescents of today will be the policy makers of 2030. All children younger than 5 years today—for whom much has been achieved during the Millennium Development Goal era¹⁴—will be our future adolescents in 2030. The opportunity to extend gains made in the early years into a cycle of life-course achievements has never been greater.

The *Lancet* Commission has worked for more than 2 years and represents a partnership with four academic institutions: the University of Melbourne, Australia; University College London, UK; the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK; and Columbia University, USA. 30 Commissioners from 14 countries, under the leadership of George Patton and with the financial support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation and others, have reviewed evidence, conducted original new work, and identified opportunities, challenges, and recommendations. What this Commission is hoping to contribute is a framework and an impetus for communities (and especially young people), countries, and international agencies to act. Its proposals for stronger accountability through monitoring of critically important indicators are an invitation and commitment to harness the potential of the largest generation of adolescents in human history.

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Sustainability—engaging future generations now

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In September, 2015, leaders of the world's nations came to UN's Headquarters in New York and made history. They set out an inspiring trajectory for the world and its people for the next 15 years by adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹—an ambitious

blueprint that applies to every nation and aims to leave no one behind. The new agenda brings together efforts to maintain peace, promote human rights, and eradicate poverty while safeguarding the natural environment. It is crystallised in a comprehensive and integrated set