



The linkages between the MDGs and Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Young People



The linkages between the MDGs and Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Young People

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed upon by governments of the world in the year 2000, have set the priorities for international development for the past decade. In the 10 years since the MDG targets were set, analysis indicates that there is still progress to be made on key issues relating to young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Youth Coalition addresses some of these issues in this factsheet.¹

Young people at the heart of MDG 2

More than 1.3 billion people – one in five people alive today – are adolescents aged 10 – 19.² Paying attention to this large group of the global population is crucial if we want to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. MDG 2 – Achieve Universal Primary Education – is the goal dedicated to knowledge. It is a very ambitious goal, the target being to “ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” but certainly falls short of looking into the quality and scope of the education. For instance, it leaves out some key concerns related to the development of adolescents and young people including sexuality education. Promoting the provision of comprehensive sexuality education will forward the achievement of the MDGs. Equipping young people with knowledge and life-skills related to sexual and reproductive health can greatly contribute towards achieving MDG 3 (achieving gender equality and empowering women), MDG 5 (reducing maternal mortality) and MDG 6 (combating HIV and AIDS).

The need for comprehensive sexuality education

Comprehensive sexuality education seeks to empower and equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality – physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships. It views ‘sexuality’ holistically and within the context of emotional and physical development.³

The International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education developed by the United Nations in 2009 defines key concepts of comprehensive sexuality education as: 1. Relationships; 2. Values, Attitudes and Skills; 3. Culture, Society and Human Rights; 4. Human Development; 5. Sexual Behaviour; and 6. Sexual and Reproductive Health.⁴

A clear rationale can be identified for the need of comprehensive sexuality education by looking at the alarming statistics on the situation of young people and sexuality worldwide.:

- Every year, approximately 10 million teenage girls marry – a majority of them without completing secondary education.
- Approximately 16 million of the adolescent girls aged 15-19 who give birth to a child account for more than 10 per cent of all births worldwide (WHO, 2008).
- At least 2.5 million adolescent pregnancies every year lead to unsafe abortions.⁵
- Each year at least 111 million new cases of preventable sexually transmitted infections (STI) occur among young people, while an estimated 5.4 million youth currently live with HIV.^{6,7}

What makes sexuality education comprehensive?

Effective sexuality education can provide young people with age appropriate, culturally relevant and scientifically correct information. It includes structured opportunities for young people to explore their attitudes and values, and to practice the skills they need to be able to make informed decisions about their sexual lives.⁸

The International Technical Guidelines on Sexuality Education lists 18 characteristics of programmes that have been effective. These characteristics include:

- Addressing specific situations that may lead to risky sexual behaviour or unwanted or unprotected sexual intercourse, how to avoid and get out of these situations
- Assessing the reproductive health needs and behaviours of young people
- Addressing personal values and perceptions of family and peer norms about engaging in sexual activity and having multiple partners
- Focusing on specific risk and protective factors that affect particular sexual behaviours and that are amenable to change by the curriculum-based programme.

The most prevalent sexuality education curricula are designed to reduce risks related to STIs, HIV and AIDS or unintended pregnancies. These programmes are often too medical-oriented, fear-based and seldom address the varied needs of young people. The curricula rarely address relationships, social and cultural factors and positive aspects of sexuality, such as sex as a natural, pleasurable, life-affirming event.

Research has suggested that abstinence as a behavioural goal is not the same as the abstinence-only education programmes.⁹ To bring about a behavioural change among young people, comprehensive sexuality education strategies should be adopted to increase knowledge and skills of young people in making healthy and informed choices rather than limiting their rights and choices. Furthermore, comprehensive sexuality education needs to be paired with programmes aiming at providing access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive services for youth.

MDG Target 2a: Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling

- 2.1 Net enrolment ratio in primary education
- 2.2 Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary
- 2.3 Literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men

Comprehensive sexuality education and Human Rights

The United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that all children and young people have the right to access information that will allow them to make decisions about their health (Article 17), including family planning (Article 24). They have the right to education that will help them learn, develop and reach their full potential and prepare them to be understanding and tolerant towards others (Article 29).

Sexual and reproductive rights are a vital part of human rights. Many international consensus documents recognize the right of young people to seek/access information regarding their sexual and reproductive health. For example, articles 6.13 and 6.15 of the Programme of Action (PoA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) call on countries to meet the needs and aspirations of youth to ensure their integration and participation in all spheres of society including participation in the political process and preparation for leadership roles. Furthermore, the PoA urges countries to actively involve young people in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities that have a direct impact on their daily lives, highlighting the importance of sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health concerns in this regard.



The linkages between the MDGs and Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Young People



190 Maclaren Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 0L6 Canada
Telephone: + 613-562-3522 / Fax: + 613-562-7941
admin@youthcoalition.org / www.youthcoalition.org

Recommendations

Looking at the MDGs through a lens of sexuality and youth, it is clear that indicators measuring progress are lacking within the MDGs framework. For example, MDG 2 (Universal access to primary education) does not measure the quality of education, and consequently, comprehensive sexuality education risks being omitted from the education agenda and from the implementation of programmes striving toward the achievement of the MDGs. Another example to consider is the MDG 5B target on Universal Access to Reproductive Health. This target has an indicator (5.6) which measures the unmet need for family planning; however, the indicator does not explain nor address the reasons why the need for family planning is 'unmet'. Unmet need occurs when young people have inadequate access to the knowledge, skills and services they require to make informed decisions. Therefore, it is crucial to not only measure unmet need, but to also address it through appropriate programmes and services such as comprehensive sexuality education.

Governments, civil society and community leaders should recognize the important linkages between the Millennium Development Goals, young people's sexual and reproductive rights and comprehensive sexuality education. The Youth Coalition, an international organization of young people working for sexual and reproductive rights, calls for:

1. Inclusion of non-discriminatory, rights-based, gender-sensitive comprehensive sexuality education in primary and secondary education curricula and in programmes targeted at out-of-school youth as a way to achieve the MDGs 3, 5 and 6 and indirectly other goals as well. To ensure that the content of comprehensive sexuality education responds to the needs of young people, young people should participate in the process of content development.
2. Increased funding and political support for comprehensive sexuality education at the national level and development of appropriate indicators.
3. Education systems strengthening for provision of sexual and reproductive health information for young people, including training of teachers, dialogues with parents and guardians and establishing links to the health system.

Learn More

For more information about the MDGs and young people, please read *Learning to Speak MDGs - 2nd edition* produced by the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, available for download on our website: www.youthcoalition.org.

Acknowledgements

The Youth Coalition would like to acknowledge the support of CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality and YouAct in the development of this factsheet.

About the Youth Coalition

Youth Coalition is an international organization of young people (ages 15-29 years) committed to promoting adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive rights at the national, regional and international levels. We are students, researchers, lawyers, health care professionals, educators, development workers, and most importantly, we are all dedicated activists.

The Youth Coalition aims to ensure that the sexual and reproductive rights of all young people are respected, guaranteed and promoted, and strives to secure the meaningful participation of young people in decision-making that affects their lives, by advocating, generating knowledge, sharing information, building partnerships and training young activists.

References

1. For more information about the Millennium Development Goals, please visit the website: <http://www.undp.org/mdg/>
2. UNICEF, Adolescence: The big picture, updated 19 March 2009, accessed 10 June 2009 at http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/index_bigpicture.html
3. IPPF Framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, London, 2006
4. UNESCO: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001832/183281e.pdf>
5. WHO: Why is giving special attention to adolescents important for achieving Millennium Development Goal 5?, Fact Sheet WHO/MPS/08.14, 2008, accessed at http://www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/events/2008/mdg5/adolescent_preg.pdf
6. IPPF: Framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, London, 2006
7. UNAIDS: 2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic
8. UNESCCO 2009: International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education
9. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2005/02/sex-education.aspx>

