

# Young People as a focus in Poverty Reduction Strategies

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## Introduction

How do young people fare in the national poverty reduction strategies of developing countries? The easiest way to assess this is to conduct a content analysis of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The following is an outline of the key results of a search of the PRSPs completed to April 2006, using the search terms 'youth', 'young people', 'adolescents' and '15-24 years'.

Youth issues have become more prominent in the work of international agencies since 2000. The World Bank, as well as being an active member of the Youth Employment Network, has also developed a Child and Youth Strategy and held since 2003 a number of international and national consultations on youth-related issues. So looking for trends over time in how youth issues are addressed in PRSPs can be a useful gauge for assessing the impact of these initiatives.

## How do PRSPs define young people?

While the age range used in the Millennium Development Goals for young people is 15 to 24 years, the PRSPs vary greatly in the age ranges they use to refer to young people. Sierra Leone defines the youth population as being between the ages of 15 to 35 years. The Kenyan PRSP defines the youth age group as aged 16 to 39 years. Lesotho's PRSP defines children as aged between 0-18 years of age and youth as 19 to 24 years.

Serbia uses the age range 15 to 30 years to define young people, with the subgroup defined as: children are persons younger than 18 years of age; adolescents are persons aged from 10 to 19 (including early, middle and late adolescence); and young people are the group aged 10 to 24. The Serbian PRSP offers a good explanation for this using this higher age limit of 30: '...due to mass poverty, high unemployment rate among young people, late marriages, as well as the influence of the broader community, young people in our country undergo the stages of change later in their lives and thus "stay young longer".'

## Are young people consulted?

Consultation is a key feature of PRSPs. The World Bank and the IMF view ownership by key stakeholders of the poverty reduction strategy as a major advance over their past practice of reliance on elite level, often private agreements.

What has happened in practice? Half of the PRSPs mention 'youth' as one of the groups consulted in their preparation (see Table 1). However, in the most recent PRSPs (post

September 2003), slightly fewer PRSPs record that youth were consulted (41 per cent). This finding suggests that the efforts of International agencies, such as the ILO and the World Bank, to highlight the importance of consulting young people, noted above, do not appear to be having a major impact on who is consulted in the formulation of PRSPs.

**Table 1: Youth mentioned as a group consulted as part of the PRSP process, completed PRSPs to April 2006**

	Yes	No	Total
N	27	28	55
Per cent	49.1	50.9	100.0
* Serbia and Montenegro have separate PRSPs, The national strategy for growth and reduction of poverty for Tanzania has been excluded			

One benefit of consulting young people is to find out first hand what poverty means to them. Lesotho's PRSP reports that the young people who participated in the Children and Youth Thematic Group defined poverty as a lack of money, food, access to resources, shelter, clothing, work, education, medical care, information and arable land.

### **Focus on young people as a group in poverty**

Most PRSPs acknowledge that young people are a group experiencing poverty. Four out of five PRSPs make at least some reference to young people in their analysis of the nature and extent of poverty in their country (see Table 2). However, the degree of attention on young people in this analysis can vary from a major focus, a minor focus, a reference to youth only as one of several groups or make no mention of young people at all.<sup>1</sup>

Table 2 shows that only a fifth of the completed PRSPs identify young people as a major group experiencing poverty. A further third of PRSPs identify youth as minor group in poverty. A quarter of PRSPs merely refer to youth as one of several groups experiencing poverty. However, for a fifth of PRSPs, young people as a group in poverty are invisible.

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<sup>1</sup> The key search terms used were: youth, young people, adolescents and 15-24 years

**Table 2: Youth identified as a group in poverty in completed PRSPs to April 2006**

	Major focus	Minor focus	One of several groups only	No Mention	Total
N	12	19	14	10	55
Per cent	21.8	34.5	25.5	18.2	100.0

The focus in PRSPs on young people as a group in poverty has improved somewhat over time. Nine out of ten of the more recent PRSPs (ie post September 2003) make some reference to young people, compared with 8 out of ten for all completed PRSPs. The share of PRSPs with a major focus on young people in poverty has increased to a quarter, up from a fifth. This slightly greater focus over time on young people in PRSPs may indicate that the efforts of International agencies to promote youth issues may be having some impact.

### **How are young people viewed?**

When Governments view young people as a group of poverty, from what perspective are they doing this? Four broad perceptions of young people can be discerned from a close reading of the PRSPs, with three of categorisations negative. The most prominent group identified in PRSPs refers to ‘vulnerable adolescents’ in need of protection from others. A second group of young people are those identified as marginalised from mainstream society, locked in a downward cycle of despair. They are also often viewed as needing protection, but in this case usually from themselves, because they engage in high-risk harmful behaviour such as drug taking and high risk sex.

A third categorisation views ‘youths’ as a threat because they are prone to engage in anti social behaviour such as violence or crime. Fourthly but less commonly, young people are viewed in positive terms as assets to be invested in and supported.

### **More differentiated view of young people missing**

PRSPs, for the most part, assume that young people within a broad age range are a homogeneous group. Gender differences are only recognised in some PRSPs, usually where the need is an obvious one, such as better access to reproductive health services for adolescent females, as noted above for Bangladesh, Tanzania and Uganda.

Nor is there a distinction made between important age sub-groupings of young people such as 10 to 14 year olds, 15 to 19 years and 20 to 24 year olds in terms of differing needs and forms of support. Socio economic differences among young people are rarely referred to, with the exceptions of the PRSPs of Sierra Leone and Bangladesh. However, no data are presented to outline the extent of the problem or to provide a benchmark on how progress in poverty reduction among subgroups of young people can be monitored.

Indeed, Sierra Leone's PRSP is the only one to identify major subgroups of poor young people. These are: '...the disabled, school dropouts, unemployed, commercial sex workers, drug addicts, diamond diggers, HIV/AIDS infected and sexually/physically abused young boys and girls, pregnant girls, teenage mothers and the homeless'.

The needs of young people will differ greatly according to the whether they are in pre adolescence, early adolescence, late adolescence or post adolescence stages.<sup>2</sup> These stages, in terms of vulnerabilities and risks, will also differ greatly for males and females. The available options and support at each of these stages will also differ for young people according to their socio economic asset base, level of education, marital status, living arrangements and urban/rural residence.

No substantive information of either a quantitative or qualitative kind about differences among young people is presented in any of the PRSPs. There is, for example, no information about the vulnerabilities and health outcomes young adolescents, in the 10 to 14 age group. Girls in this age group are of particular significance in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Half of all new cases of HIV infection are occurring among young people aged 15 to 24 years and girls/young women account for three in four of these new infections.

### **Young people in PRSP action plans**

How prominent are young people at the business end of the PRSPs? Does identifying young people as a group in poverty result in concrete actions? The answer is mixed. While seven out of ten PRSPs mention young people in their action plans, only four out of ten address youth issues as a key goal and three out of ten action plans give youth issues a minor focus (see Table 3). As many as three out of ten action plans do not refer to youth issues at all.

**Table 3: The proportion of completed PRSPs to April 2006 with a focus on Youth in their action plan, number and per cent**

	Major focus in a key goal	Minor focus in a key goal	No mention at all	Total
N	22	17	16	55
Per cent	40.0	30.9	29.1	100.0

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<sup>2</sup> See Chong, E; Hallman, K; and Brady, M; 2006, Investing Where it Counts: generating the evidence base for policies and programmes for very young adolescents: guide and toolkit. Population Council, New York, p10-11.

Moreover, the focus over time on youth issues in PRSP action plans has slipped. Up to September 2003, just over half of the PRSPs had a major focus on youth in a key goal of their action plans. However, only a fifth of the post September PRSPs give the same prominence to issues facing young people. The proportion of the recent PRSPs not mentioning youth at all in their action plans has nearly doubled compared with the earlier PRSPs.

### **Youth bulge and PRSP response**

The youth bulge in the population in association with other key socio economic indicators is an important indicator of potential problems and opportunities for governments and society.<sup>3</sup> One measure of the youth bulge that captures tensions between the young and older generations is the proportion of 15 to 24 years in the population aged 15 years and above. This measure has been used in a sophisticated multivariate analysis to identify its importance in explaining conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Taking into account a country's level of development, the type of regime in power, level of economic opportunity, and total size of population, the size of a country's youth bulge can be a key predictor of domestic conflict.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the determinants of armed domestic conflict for the period 1950 to 2000 shows that countries with poorly performing economies, weak governance, and a significant youth bulge have a high propensity for violence and conflict. In particular, Urdal has found that less developed countries with youth bulges of 35 per cent of their adult population have three times the risk of conflict compared with developed countries.

This benchmark of a youth bulge of 35 per cent can be used as an indicator of the likely importance of youth issues as a major public policy concern. Table 4 compares how important the youth bulge is in a country's adult population and the prominence given to youth issues in the PRSP's action plan. Burkina Faso, Lesotho and Sierra Leone acknowledge the prominence of the youth bulge in their adult populations by giving young people's issues due recognition in their action plans.

Other countries despite having a large share of youth in their adult population address youth issues in their PRSP action plan in a minor way. These countries are: Kenya, Tanzania, Sao Tome and Principe, Laos, Bangladesh, East Timor, Djibouti and Nicaragua.

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<sup>3</sup> See Sommers, Marc, 2006, Youth and Conflict: a Brief Review of Available Literature. USAID, May.

<sup>4</sup> Urdal, Henrick, 2004. The Devil and the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950-2000. Social Development Papers Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction Working Paper No. 14, World Bank. Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup> The following variables were used to measure these factors: level of development: infant mortality rate, type of regime: autocratic, democratic or in between; economic opportunities: average annual change in GDP per capita in five year period prior to year study relates to; and total population size to reflect likelihood of greater ethnic, linguistic, religious and other differences in larger populations.

However, the most glaring omissions in relation to a policy focus on young people are to be found in the PRSPs of Uganda, Cape Verde, Madagascar, Nigeria, Pakistan and Nepal. In terms of size of their youth bulges, the most prominent gaps between policy and young people are to be found in Pakistan (34.7 m), Nigeria (26.3m), Uganda (5.8m) and Nepal (5.8m).

Other information shows that the Governments of Pakistan, Nigeria, and Uganda as well as Kenya are planning to or have developed national youth employment action plans, under the auspices of the UN's Youth Employment Network.<sup>36</sup> However, it is not known how comprehensive these action plans are in terms of the range of youth issues addressed. Their focus on employment suggests that the policy focus in these plans is likely to be narrow.

**Table 4: Focus on youth in PRSP action plan compared with size of youth share of the total population aged 15 and above, 2006, PRSPs completed between September 2003 and April 2006**

Countries with PRSPs completed Sept 2003 to April 2006	Major focus on youth in action plan	Minor focus only on youth in action plan	No mention of youth in action plan	Proportion of pop 15 yrs+ aged 15 to 24 yrs, 2006
Burkina Faso	Yes			37.8
Lesotho	Yes			37.2
Sierra Leone	Yes			35.0
Moldova	Yes			22.9
Serbia	Yes			17.7
Kenya		Yes		38.8
Tanzania		Yes		38.1
Sao Tome and Principe		Yes		37.6
Laos		Yes		35.5
Bangladesh		Yes		35.5
East Timor		Yes		35.0
Djibouti		Yes		34.5
Nicaragua		Yes		34.5
Mongolia		Yes		31.7
Montenegro		Yes		17.7
Uganda			No	41.2
Cape Verde			No	36.0
Madagascar			No	34.9
Nigeria			No	34.6
Pakistan			No	34.4
Nepal			No	33.5
Bhutan			No	31.7
Armenia			No	26.1
Bosnia and Herzegovina			No	17.2

Source: Population data derived from International Database, US Census Bureau

## **Focus of the youth-directed action plans**

The post September 2003 PRSPs with the most comprehensive policies in their action plans are those of Burkina Faso, Lesotho, Moldova, Serbia, and Sierra Leone. The following discussion identifies the underlying principles used to shape those policies. It also outlines the main objectives of the policies such as access to employment opportunities, and more youth friendly services in relation to reproductive health.

Several PRSPs specify the key principles they use to develop youth-focused policies. In the case of Moldova's PRSP, policies for young people follow four key guidelines: guaranteeing non-discrimination; ensuring equal opportunities; respecting young people as citizens and encouraging youth participation.

The Serbian PRSP proposes that the implementation of a youth poverty reduction strategy be treated as a long-term and developmental process, based on a children's and human rights perspective. While a uniform approach to youth policy at the national level is advocated, also proposed are regional and locally grounded modifications of the national strategy. The participation of young people in decision-making at both local and national level is also to be a key principle of the youth poverty reduction strategy.

### ***Objectives of youth-focused PRSPs***

A major concern of youth-focused PRSPs is how to provide more employment opportunities for young people. An employment focus is prominent in the PRSPs of Sierra Leone, Moldova and Burkina Faso.

Often linked to improving employment prospects is provision of skills-based training opportunities. The Government of Burkina Faso, for example, intends to increase vocational training places and apprenticeships, and strengthen the operational capacities of the bodies responsible for promoting employment and vocational training. A performance measure nominated by the PRSP is: the number of recipients of vocational training and apprenticeships, including technical education.

Sierra Leone's PRSP plans to invest more in technical and vocational skills in specialised disciplines for young people. Lesotho's PRSP plans to expand non-formal education 'to ensure vocational and literacy skills are provided throughout the country'.

Bangladesh's PRSP says it will expand Technical and Vocational Education and Training for 'the poor, particularly for adolescents, young adults, adults, males and females'. A number of valuable principles in relation to the reform of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Bangladesh are proposed.

The Bangladesh PRSP also highlights the problem of health of adolescents, defined as 13 to 18 year olds. The PRSP points that adolescent mothers account for a fifth of total births and that the rates of maternal and infant deaths are comparatively high among these mothers. So the key goals set for adolescent health are to reduce adolescence pregnancy, provide reproductive health awareness and service to all adolescents, prevent transmission of STD including HIV/AIDS and reduce the negative health consequences of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Two key outcomes sought by the United Republic of Tanzania's National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty are: improved quality of life and social well-being, with particular focus on the poorest and most vulnerable groups; and reduced inequalities (e.g. education, survival, health) across geographic, income, age, gender and other groups.

Better services for young people are a key focus of several PRSPs. Moldova's PRSP, among other objectives, aims to ensure that young people have better access to education, health and related services and seeks to improve the capacities of those working with youth. Also important is giving young people better access to information and services related to quality leisure time.

Lesotho's PRSP aims to provide 'quality and affordable child and youth-friendly health and social welfare services throughout the country'; and to 'prevent the marginalisation of children and youth through restorative justice'.

A number of PRSPs with a strong youth focus highlight the importance of ensuring that young people have the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them.

## **Conclusion**

The needs of young people get a mention in a majority of PRSPs and are an important focus in a significant minority of them. Few PRSPs, however, regard youth-related issues as requiring a comprehensive approach in policy terms. This means that most PRSPs fail to address the needs of young people in an integrated or holistic way. Policies towards young people are not viewed as a cross cutting issue, nor is there acknowledgement that new institutional or better coordination arrangements are needed to focus on the needs of individuals.

A piecemeal, program focus is the more common approach. This approach means that the needs of young people are defined in a partial way, often based on a simplified, undifferentiated view of young people. PRSPs tend to view young people as a homogeneous group, ranging from 'vulnerable adolescents', to the marginalised, as threats to the social order or, less commonly, as assets for the economy and society.

Three reasons were suggested for the lack of a more differentiated view of young people in poverty reduction strategies. The first factor is the inadequate recognition in the broader research literature of the dynamic nature of poverty and how many young people, in particular due to their stage in the lifecycle, are more susceptible to this form of poverty. The second factor is the lack of longitudinal survey data to track what happens to subgroups of young people in weak, low-income economies. Thirdly, little or no use is made in PRSPs of available evidence, in the form of cross sectional survey data, on the incidence of poverty among young people.

Recent demographic and health surveys, available for over 50 countries, provide the vehicle for assessing to what extent young people differ on a range of health and other outcomes, in terms of their socio economic asset base. Quintile analysis offers great potential for providing a more complex understanding of the situations young people in poor countries face. Rather than viewing them as an aggregated group based on age, a more differentiated understanding by gender and socio economic status as well would enable scarce resources to be better targeted to meet the specific needs of young people

in poverty.

### **Recommended Reading**

Bruce, Judith & Chong, Erica, nd, 'The diverse universe of adolescents, and the girls and boys left behind: a note on research', Background paper to the report Public Choices, Private Decisions: Sexual and Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals. [www.unmillenniumproject.org](http://www.unmillenniumproject.org)

Chong, E; Hallman, K; and Brady, M; 2006, Investing Where it Counts: generating the evidence base for policies and programmes for very young adolescents: guide and toolkit. Population Council, New York. [www.UNFPA.org](http://www.UNFPA.org)

Curtain, R; 2004, The case for Investing in Young People as Part of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy. UNFPA, New York. [www.UNFPA.org](http://www.UNFPA.org)

Government of Sierra Leone, 2005, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper: A National Programme for Food Security, Job Creation and Good Governance (2005 – 2007), February. [www.IMF.org](http://www.IMF.org)

Poverty Reduction Strategy of the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, 18 December, 2002, Cross-Cutting Issues in The Poverty Reduction Strategy, Annex 3 Poverty Reduction Among Youth. [www.IMF.org](http://www.IMF.org)