

"The Past, Present, and Future of Youth Involvement"
Present Perspective
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CHRISTINE NORTON: But I'm happy to be here and I want to welcome all the young people, first of all that I see out here, and also I want to thank my colleagues from YouthNet and other friends for having UNICEF attend this important meeting. So, we just had an interesting little presentation there on the past and basically giving us some direction on where we think we need to go forward. So, let me try and see if I can tell you in a little bit more detail what I think is happening presently with participation, youth participation and particularly in the area you are interested in here, which is reproductive health and development. In the staff talks, mostly when we talk about participation, for this moment and that is changing rapidly in UNICEF and when we talk about participation, it tends to focus around adolescent participation and that's mostly because Christine is involved. My work is in adolescent participation. Having said that, the organization is very much moving to deal with participation more broadly in its [Unintelligible]. We will probably change that language and I think you will learn about that a little later this month, so with respect to participation, first of all, who are these young people that we talk about and how many of them are there and we know that today we see the, perhaps the largest population ever of young people. We talk about 15-24 year olds as being the youth, but that doesn't include those who, in terms of adolescents, are between 10-15. So we talk

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about a huge population actually, and really when we consider whether they should be involved or not, we really have to hit ourselves. We talk about 1.2 billion people. Why shouldn't they be involved? The issue also is that we know from our past experience that the more participation we have, that the greater the development. Development from the point-of-view of the individual, but also development generally, so these are the numbers that we are playing with. I just want to start from the perspective of rights, because you know very well that UNICEF is very much rights based in it's work and the need to recognize that young people are individuals and entitled to rights, I think is really one of the basic elements, in terms of trying to figure out how we deal with the involvement in adolescent reproductive health. As such, they have a role to play in their own development and when we fail to do that, this is what my colleague just mentioned here, we start thinking about whether they need to be protected versus whether they need to be prepared. And so [Unintelligible] adolescent in reproductive health area, we need to consider that and that's an important shift. More and more we start seeing that people are shifting away in this society from protection to preparation. Having said that though, we work in many countries in UNICEF and it is clear that that's not the case everywhere. We still have quite a bit of work to do in some countries where that is concerned. Just let me take an example of HIV/AIDS,

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which we know best and where we have recent updates of some of the figures. October 42 million people who are currently infected, as of December, this year, 29 million plus in Sub-Saharan Africa and another 6 million in Southeast Asia. To deal with a problem like this, you have to question all the resources available, human and financial resources, and should the 1.2 billion people be involved. I should think so, but so this is one of the things that we are looking very closely at UNICEF and one of the reasons why we are propelled to look more closely in youth participation, adolescent participation, why the entire organization is moving in that direction as well. Just to give an example, HIV infection among young people themselves in Asia is 2.1 million young people who are infected as of December, 10 million young people infected in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the states in the Central European Area, 80% of new infections are among young people under 29 years old, so you are really talking about infections among the youth, should the youth be working with the youth to do something about that. When we look at the levels of knowledge, we also see that while young people have heard of HIV, if they don't have what it takes to deal to protect themselves against HIV. Then we have all these other contextual issues and challenges that affect what we do in reproductive health area. We have a high level of girls' vulnerability and we see that there are many infections among young women and yet we see that we still have questions

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around parents and others, teachers, Principals in schools wondering whether they should continue to control their lives to protect them. We have outdated and competing policies and so on, and of course, everything is fueled by what is happening in the mass media. Young people are influence by that and then some of these other factors like economic instability. These are the things that are actually raising the questions around youth participation and that's why I bring them here. When we talk about some sensitive areas around adolescents, around reproductive health so that's what's compelling UNICEF's work in this area. These are also some of the behavioral factors that affect young people and I guess the question really is who's best placed to deal with them, the early sexual debut and lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Can young people do anything about dealing, have any of us deal with it, have been dealing with it themselves. I do agree with my friend here that we have seen much more of a direction, in terms of young people getting involved in the work that we do and sit near the national level and countries, we see a growing trend in that respect and there is a movement was institutionalizing their involvement. It's not just as we started off, even in UNICEF with an events oriented approach. You know everyone wanted us to do an event and get involved, get young people there and can assure faith and at that time, you were talking a lot about tokenism. Now, I think in circumstances, a special session, which was very much,

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for us, and for others a turning point in, with respect to youth participation, a turning point mostly because young people themselves understood it's not just about the voice. It's much more than that, it's about decision-making, it's about empowerment. They want to do things, you know they were very clear about, so don't just invite us in and expect us to smile and look nice, you know. And so, it was definitely an important turning point, so now we see this drive towards institutionalization. The countries that we work in and where we have seen important changes, these are the things that are happening. They are interpreting and upholding the Article 12, and I would say sometimes even interpreting Article 12 more broadly than it actually is, which is not a bad thing when we talk about participation. Article 12 of the convention, on the rights of the children really says that the child should be involved in all decisions, all matters affecting them and one could say, well okay if we give them some decisions, then maybe it will be okay, but in fact, they also want to do things about those decisions and so on. So in countries this is being interpreted widely and I would say, when I visited countries, I see that everybody's writing a paper on participation and what it means, so you may have slightly different interpretations in different places, but it is actually from a national perspective and to the extent that we could help standardize that, we are trying to do that, so incorporate in a youth

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perspective as well in the work that they are doing, not just in this field, but in other fields and again trying to apply the idea that where if all we can make a difference in young people's lives and young people can make a difference in their lives, they should participate. So, we are going, I would say towards the higher rung of the so-called ladder and I think that now we start seeing inclusive spaces. Structures being put in place in countries, for example, in the Philippines, it not only elected two national young people to sit at a high policy meeting level, but they also have them involved from the village level all the way up and they have structures in place to do that. They're learning building capacity. Young people are building other young people's capacities and they are really being seen as partners, not just as a voice, partners in development. Some examples of that in developing a situation in analysis, this is something we do know quite regularly in countries that we support. The situation analysis, even in UNICEF's current program of work is being done with young people, by young people, for young people. From within, positive behavior change likewise because they've been pre-educated for some time and I would say that's pretty much something that started some time ago, but now we also see some interest in growing trends. I don't know it's still a challenge to deal with the education programs, but now we realize they continue to expand. We are educators here, again as child

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rights volunteers, there was a call just recently in Chaw Mai [Misspelled?]. This young boy is [Unintelligible] he was in a special session and he is in action trying to convey. He was actually talking about reproductive health and HIV/AIDS and trying to tell these kids in the north why they should not go south to Bangkok, you know, it's not a good idea. Stay home and let's get involved and do things. It's very interesting what they are doing there as journalist, so they also influence. You know the media is not always working in their favor and they have taken the mike, taken the programs, and this is the trash [Misspelled?] program in Albania supported by UNICEF as well, but it done by young people, for young people and they really try to take on some challenging issues, very challenging issues, but they are making a big difference in [Unintelligible] so, basically the [Unintelligible] people are taking, in fact are contributing to be a change and if we look at the HIV/AIDS, they use the ABC approach, like some countries like Yukon and San Angal [Misspelled?], we see that they A&B are key messages that they are using because these are pretty Catholic countries or Muslim countries sometimes where you have limitations in what you can and can't talk about, but never-the-less, it is appropriate for their society, the messages that they give and we are seeing a reduction in HIV cases in these countries. We also have boys getting much more involved in talking to their peers about abstaining which is an

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interesting one, and girls being able to say no. And this is young people getting young people to this point, so I think that's something that we need to note and I really need to exploit, so we have a lot more work to do in this area. This last piece is what we are trying to work with now and that we will be doing a lot more next year. That is trying to take a popular culture, the youth culture. We have to live with the youth culture and boys pants are falling off all around the world and we have to try to figure out what to do about that, but anyway, we have to understand and we have to work with it. Here's an example, music as a vehicle for reproductive health, to encourage young people to protect themselves. There is an Afro-Reggae group in Brazil; these are a group of boys and girls who live in Felfela in Brazil. High violence, but also very much high risk behavior, they really don't have much of a structure there, no institutions there but also broken families and so on, but whatever gets done is brought together, take the music and it calls young people together using music and then when they're there, they do things. They tell them about HIV and so on. This is there audience. You just have to beat the drums and everyone comes. You don't have to set up a youth friendly health service and hope and keep funding it and try to make the ladies there friendly or the men friendly and begging children to come. They are coming just because you play music and once they are there, they understand that they are too risk

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and not just the violence and the fact that they don't need to get involved in anything, just here about the called HIV, and so they have used that. You will see on the [Unintelligible]. Here it is, they are [Unintelligible]. This is what they do, they interrupt the drums and here's this guy with the model, condom in hand and saying there's this other risk, you know, be careful. There's HIV and then they start to talk about HIV, but by this time, everybody's attention has been captured. And this is young people coming up with these ideas to reach other young people. And it works, it works, everybody wants to join Afro-Reggae, so it's interesting. Sports is another area that you are going to push through feverishly and it is also addressing their right to play, but as well their right to health and an education as an end-point again just like music. So, I would say that education is definitely part of the solution, but a solution that we need in many of the areas that we are trying to cope with. Prevention counts as our bearing fruit, particularly where young people are involved. I think they are still an underused resource and 1.2 billion, 29 million cases of AIDS in Sub-Sahara in Africa. I think we need to work with young people. I'm not even questioning that and, but we do need to move forward and we do need to build their capacity and I'm meeting people all around the world who say, I wish I could dig deeper. I don't have the skills, I don't know how to write a project proposal, I don't know how to beg for funds and you

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know, they want to do more all the time and I think they are doing a good job now and we really need to continue supporting that. This idea of tests, innovations, out of the box approaches, not thinking always of setting up a youth friendly service, but maybe calling them by some other means and then when they are there, do the service. You know, preparing an adult who passes suspicion is still a challenge in many countries, and again this is an area that we are always looking for partnership to work in some of these areas, and of course, it is tricky and of course, we always need money to do it up, to scale it up, to bring it down further and I think that's it, so and we thank you.

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