

ORAL statement by Dr Judy Kuriansky, Main Representative to the United Nations of the International Association of Applied Psychology, at the 45th Session of The United Nations Commission on Population and Development, 23-27 April 2012:

On: PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS

I'm Dr. Judy Kuriansky, Main Representative to the United Nations of the International Association of Applied Psychology. We are an NGO consisting of several thousand psychologists around the world engaged in the science and practice of psychology, including projects to advance the MDGs and projects related to youth. It is an honor for me to be present these recommendations to you, on behalf of my NGO and a coalition of psychology NGOs accredited at the United Nations at ECOSOC (the Economic and Social Council). My statement highlights the contributions of psychological research and practice to the discussions of this United Nations Commission on Population and Development, on this year's priority theme: **The Development of Adolescents**. My purpose today is to advocate that governments, UN agencies, and civil society organizations include psychosocial factors, as empowerment and psychosocial well-being, as significant dimensions associated with all aspects of adolescent development.

There is a considerable body of literature about the stages of development of adolescents that affect their personal, interpersonal and social growth, and their ability to contribute to their community and society. And there are innumerable psychosocial interventions, programs, workshops, and educational projects that address psychosocial issues like raising young people's self-esteem, confidence, HIV/AIDS prevention, and skills in all areas like communication and leadership, in order to be responsible citizens. We would like the delegates of this commission, and their governments, include these principles in their policies and programmes. I address here two specific areas: empowerment and well-being.

How important is empowerment and well-being of youth? Very! Consider that young people under the age of 21 comprise the majority of the population of many countries. Psychological research also tells us that young people suffer from extreme social and psychological problems, inhibiting their healthy development. Some of these problems include high rates of depression, anxiety, developmental problems, and social adjustment problems. We all here at the UN are aware of the negative impact of one example of a social problem for youth, bullying, which has had such deleterious impact on youth development that has led to cases of tragic suicides. One UN special session on this topic showed the picture of a tragic young man who killed himself after being bullied on the internet. Young people also suffer psychologically from widespread global problems of poverty. The lack of services for these young people is appalling and only contributes to the exacerbation of their condition. Since young people, as we know, hold the key to development for the future of the globalized world, it is essential that their situation be improved in all countries.

1. Our first recommendation: SUPPORT ADOLESCENT PSYCHOSOCIAL EMPOWERMENT. Empowerment is a buzz word, but it means investing in youth, believing in them and giving them support to take initiative to be in control of their own future and actualization. To do this, we must:

- a. Provide and strengthen access to quality primary, secondary and higher education as important pathways to psychosocial empowerment, decent work, and the alleviation of poverty. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that education and vocational information and guidance are human rights.
- b. Increase and strengthen opportunities for training adolescents about vocational, entrepreneurship and income generating activities, as well as development of life skills including a psychological sense of confidence and control over conditions of their lives.
- c. Provide access to productive employment and decent work, which promotes psychosocial empowerment by developing their sense of ownership, optimism, and efficacy/confidence in their ability to be effective. High rates of unemployment and low rates of decent jobs expose youth to poverty and vulnerability to the worst forms of labor including trafficking, engagement in armed conflict, socio-political unrest, and drug trafficking which lower their sense of psychosocial empowerment and lessen their long-term productive earning capacity

- d. **Support the participation rights of adolescents by engaging them as active partners in decision-making, according to their evolving capacities.**
- e. **Encourage and provide opportunities for expanding and strengthening capacity-building adolescent development networks within schools and communities through which they can share and use information about developmental and social opportunities and together build their collective psychosocial empowerment.**

I offer a powerful example of the value of empowerment, the Girls Empowerment Programme that my NGO, the International Association of Applied Psychology, co-developed with the NPO Global Camps Africa, and the Office of the First Lady of Lesotho, as well as government ministries, UN agencies like UNICEF on the ground, and other local NGOs. In this program, 40 girls from villages came to a residential camp for a week, where they got training in life skills and entrepreneurship (income generating activities). I have some copies of the description written in a publication Centerpoint Now. The Programme was a huge success in helping the young girls develop ideas about what they can do to make money (sell phone cards, weave hair, sell vegetables or payers), among other positive outcomes to be able to resist transactions sex, or trading sex for money for essentials like food or school fees – so they can achieve their bigger life goals – to be a teacher or nurse. The activities also helped them feel better about themselves and more confident, so they can achieve those goals and contribute to their community. This type program can be implemented in other countries in Africa and all over the world – the girls have lectures, but also do activities like theatre arts (about indigenous problems like alcoholism or abuse at home), and play sports and games – all with a life lesson – for example, where they work in a team to build a hut to protect a stick figure placed inside, as a way to learn to use their indigenous materials for security. I offer this Girls Empowerment Programme to you, as an example of a program that can help youth development.

Another of my NGO's projects that promotes youth development is the Global Kids Connect Project, which connects kids in trauma zones around the world, for example, kids in Haiti after the earthquake and in Japan after the earthquake/tsunami. I just got back from Japan implementing this Project, in a multi-stakeholder model. My NGO partnered with an NPO in Miyagi and our team went to schools in the trauma zone, where I led workshops of stress reduction – simple healing techniques the kids loved doing – and Japanese musicians I brought (a pop star and opera star) performed uplifting music. The Japanese youth decorated cranes, the Japanese symbol of peace, which we will bring to Haiti shortly, to kids who are suffering there, who will then decorate toys that will go to the children of Japan. Therefore, we create a circle of caring. This is the type of programming that we recommend governments support to help the healthy development of youth.

2. Our second recommendation is: PROMOTE THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING OF ADOLESCENTS

Well-being, like empowerment, is another currently popular word, but one that has substance. We offer psychosocial well-being as an important indicator of adolescent development and functioning. There is a considerable body of research in the fields of Social Psychology and Positive Psychology, which demonstrates empirical relationships among psychological well-being, social well-being, optimal functioning, positive human growth, and development. WHO, on its website, defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.” Well-being is related to other concepts in positive psychology such as hardiness, resilience and quality of life, in terms of overall life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and emotional reactions to life events, like feeling happy or depressed, feeling healthy or prosperous. But well-being is not just fluff about being happy; governments here at the UN are recognizing its value as a measure of development in place of solely measuring GDP, or wealth. Yes, well-being not just

wealth, was the topic at a high-level meeting convened by the Royal Government of Bhutan here at the UN April 2nd. This meeting, titled "Happiness: Towards a holistic approach to development," was a result of UN Resolution 65/309 co-sponsored by 68 member states and passed by consensus. The impact of this meeting is revealed in the (1) presence of speakers at this high-level meeting, including top UN officials like the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the President of the General Assembly and the President of ECOSOC; (2) speakers on behalf of governments like France, Great Britain, Japan, India, Thailand, Israel and Finland; (3) top economists like John Helliwell and Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, and (4) noted psychologist Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology. Experts and officials alike agreed that the measurement of well-being is not only POSSIBLE, but also USEFUL in determining a society's growth and CRUCIAL for government policies for development. Many comments were made that youth should not only be the beneficiaries of such policies but also participants. An index of well-being for youth and all ages is needed, and can be measured. The Bhutan Government has its "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) Index (<http://www.un.int/wcm/content/site/bhutan/pid/4106>); the Republic of Costa Rica, whose President spoke at the Bhutan conference, won the Happy Planet Index – that measures well-being and how GREEN a country is (relevant to the Commission on Sustainable Development). The recently released World Happiness Report, co-edited by leading economists John F. Helliwell and Richard Layard and the Earth Institute's Jeffrey Sachs, provides further support for the viability of including such measures. The UNDP 2010 Human Development Report had many measures of well-being, which were sadly left off the latest report.

Therefore, we urge governments to call for indicators of "psychosocial well-being" in the Outcome Document of the 2012 Commission on Population and Development. We also recommend that governments support the initiative of the Royal Government of Bhutan, and governments of France, Great Britain, Japan and others to measure development for youth and all ages, in terms of well-being in addition to economic growth. In addition, that the delegates of this Commission support indexes for development regarding youth, such as Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index or related indexes of psychosocial well-being, as were in a previous UNDP Human Development Report, or ones that can be developed with the assistance of psychological organizations accredited here at the UN.

In conclusion, all strategies, programs and policies to promote adolescent development must be evaluated TO DETERMINE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS. The dimensions of measurement should include indexes of psychosocial empowerment and psychosocial well-being, to ensure their effectiveness and to determine the degree to which the policies they are intended to address have had the desired effects. I have personally been involved in such an evaluation of an HIV/AIDS prevention programs for at-risk youth in the tri-state areas that showed the positive impact of workshops encouraging self-esteem and empowerment that lead to youth being more cautious about their sexual behavior. In Africa, we have done an extensive outcome evaluation before and after the Girls Empowerment Camp in Lesotho, with the results indicating significant improvement in the girls' self-esteem, confidence, willingness to be tested for HIV/AIDS, and interest in being leaders in their community. For all the above points, we encourage governments and all stakeholders at this Commission to consider psychosocial; empowerment and well-being in the final resolution. Thank you.

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A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CAMP MODEL IN AFRICA ADDRESSING
THE UNITED NATIONS MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

THE GIRLS EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

BY JUDY KURIANSKY, PHD AND MARY O'NEILL BERRY, PHD

STANDING IN A CIRCLE OF 40 YOUNG GIRLS from remote villages in Lesotho, Africa gathered at a special Psychosocial Camp in the nation's mountains, the First Lady of Lesotho, Mathoto Mosisili, waved her arms, telling them, "Apart from the good time you have here, I do hope when you go back home, your bags should be packed with knowledge and you're going to let your life shine."

"Shine", the girls chorused in unison. The girls were lucky youth chosen by their village chiefs as potential leaders to participate in a special five-day camp offered by the Office of the First Lady (OFL) to learn about HIV/AIDS prevention and entrepreneurship. As OVCs (orphans and vulnerable children), they were considered *at risk*, given abject poverty and being orphans due to having lost one or both parents (from HIV/AIDS or other reasons), resulting in their having to drop out of school, since secondary school is fee-based in Lesotho.

While the camp had previously been run for five years by the OFL, this year's venture had a different direction and new partners, as a result of a fortuitous meeting between Dr. Judy Kuriansky and Lesotho's First Lady at the Summit of First Ladies of Africa organized by US Doctors for Africa (for which Dr. Judy serves on the Board and as Director of Psychosocial Programs). At the First Lady's invitation, Dr. Judy and her colleagues from the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP), an NGO accredited at the United Nations, developed an extensive evaluation protocol to measure the camp's outcome (one of the first such tools) and designed a new camp model, based on the multi-stakeholder approach encouraged by the UN and bringing together partners from local and international sectors.

The camp program was designed to advance the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the areas of poverty reduction, women's empowerment and combating HIV/

AIDS. The latter is particularly important in Lesotho, where about one in four people are infected with the virus, ranking among the African countries with the highest infection rates.

The girls were brought to an "Outward Bound" site in the mountains, which while rustic, provided many with a bed and electricity for the first time. Their excitement was palpable, as they expressed expectations of the five-day experience, "to be independent," "to be a strong woman," and "to learn how to make money to go back to school."

The camp model was comprised of four modules consisting of group lectures and discussions on Life Skills, like assertiveness, self-esteem and communication techniques; HIV/AIDS education and myths (e.g., that having sex with a virgin will cure the infection, or that a girl should have sex to "keep" her boyfriend); Theatre and Dance sessions in which the girls composed song and dance routines based on indigenous African culture and developed psychodramas on prevalent life experiences (e.g. alcoholism, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS infection); and Adventure and Sports games with metaphoric lessons about teamwork and insuring a safe and healthy life (for example, building a "house" from available indigenous materials – sticks, grass, mud – strong enough that a paper figure placed inside would not get wet when water was poured on top of the construction, thereby constituting a lesson about using existing resources to protect oneself).

Other exercises that the girls especially enjoyed were adapted from Dr. Judy's toolbox of interventions used worldwide which foster empowerment, e.g., pulling on ties while saying "yes" or "no", and experiencing oneself as malleable as a leaf contrasted to feeling as powerfully rooted as a tree.

Other components included a day of entrepreneurship skills, lectures about nutrition and about a law (The Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act) that represents important steps towards



Camp participants and Judy Kuriansky photographed during an "Adventure" house building exercise

women's rights and gender equality by assuring that married women are no longer categorized as "children" and no longer need their husbands' permission to apply for a loan, get medical insurance or own property. In another session, three young unwed mothers from a residential school for unwed mothers supported by the OFL shared their personal challenges in raising young children on their own, and their advice about staying in school and avoiding their mistakes of giving in to sex with uncommitted male partners.

The results offered hope for advancing the targeted MDGs on several levels. Empowerment was reflected in the girls' comments about lessons learned, including about HIV prevention and sex, "When a boy wants sex, I don't have to do it;" about financial independence, "I can sew traditional dresses to make money to go back to school;" and about confidence, "If you want something in life, you can get it." Many spontaneously said they want to teach their peers what they learned (peer education has been shown to be one of the most effective techniques in these situations); to become camp coaches; and to go back to school. A particularly encouraging outcome was that a majority of girls elected to be tested for HIV/AIDS.

Equally impressive are the results of the evaluation measurements. Ratings by the girls before and after the camp revealed significant increases in self esteem, trust, comfort communicating (especially saying "no" to sex), knowledge about HIV/AIDS and protection against unwanted pregnancy, and

about income-generating activities; corrections in myths about HIV/AIDS; and a decrease in depression.

At the camp's end, the First Lady, a former teacher, congratulated the girls on their achievements and noted the camp's success in providing education that is both informative and engaging. As follow-up and given the importance of financial independence (e.g., to resist prevalent "transactional sex" – having sex in exchange for food, clothes or school money), the girls were offered a further two-weeks training in entrepreneurship by the Ministry, with the goal of forming cooperatives to start businesses and earn money to go back to school and pursue their dream careers in nursing or education.

Given the success of the Girls Empowerment Programme, the organizers' goals are to raise funding for further camps and to launch the model in other African countries, with LAAP, Global Camps Africa and other partners. Plans are underway to adapt the model in Ghana, in collaboration with the NGO Voices of African Mothers. One camper's words provide constant inspiration, echoing the dream of her young peers, "to have a bright future."

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