

# PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS

## Recommendations submitted by: Psychology NGOs Accredited at the United Nations<sup>1</sup>

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**We appreciate the opportunity to present these recommendations to the 2012 Commission on Population and Development. Our purpose is to advocate for governments, UN agencies, and civil society organizations to include psychosocial factors as significant dimensions associated with all aspects of adolescent development.**

Today's 721 million adolescents between ages 12 and 17 represent future citizens and leaders of their communities and nations. Therefore, governments need to provide them with education, training, and work experiences, according to their evolving capacities, that prepare them adequately for full social, economic and political participation. We offer recommendations concerning the importance of psychosocial empowerment, positive mental health, and psychosocial well-being to adolescents in order to achieve healthy development and functioning as social, economic and political participants in their communities and societies.

**We urge governments, UN agencies, and civil society organizations to prioritize and invest resources for adolescent development to:**

### 1. SUPPORT ADOLESCENT PSYCHOSOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

- 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.

### 2. PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AMONG ADOLESCENTS

- Social and economic disparities affecting adolescents, their families and communities, are violations of their human rights to survival, protection, development, and social participation, and are key factors negatively affecting sustainable development.
- a. Put human rights, including gender equality, at the center of the framework for national development, especially in rural areas. Discrimination against adolescents, especially girls, is psychologically damaging to their physical and mental health, lowers their self-efficacy, and keeps them in poverty.
  - b. Review and replace laws, policies, programmes and practices at all levels that discriminate against adolescents on the basis of their gender, age, race, ethnicity, color, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, rural/urban/suburban residence and other categories of social identity.
  - c. Eliminate educational, social, economic and health disparities, which have multigenerational and intergenerational psychosocial consequences resulting in the persistence of poverty in families and communities.
  - d. Provide ongoing human rights learning for all members of society, including adolescents living in poverty, to foster their physical and mental vitality, resilience and activism to alleviate poverty conditions as social injustices and to advocate for positive social and economic changes in their own lives and the lives of others.

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychological Association, Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention, International Association of Applied Psychology, International Council of Psychologists, International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, International Union of Psychological Science, Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues and the World Council of Psychotherapy

- e. Ensure that all services and interventions for adolescents are implemented according to ethical principles and with respect for their human rights.

### **3. PROVIDE ADOLESCENTS ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND SOCIAL PROTECTION**

- a. Reduce poor mental health as a cause and a consequence of poverty among adolescents and their families. Provide accessible multidisciplinary social service centers and mobile vans to provide one-stop services, including access to mental health care in rural areas. Include literacy, continuing education, and entrepreneurial training in these centers, especially in rural areas.
- b. Provide specialized interventions and adequate and appropriate services for adolescents who have been trafficked and involved in armed conflict, hazardous labour, or sexual exploitation, in order to address their physical, psychological, social, and educational needs, including reintegration into their families, schools and communities.
- c. Provide trained psychologists and mental health counselors, well versed in culturally-specific methodology and techniques, to train and work with local community peer coaches, especially in rural areas, to recognize mental health problems of adolescents and to provide services and referrals in an informed, nondiscriminatory manner.
- d. Use a rights-based approach to implement the Social Protection Floor Initiative, including access to mental health care within primary health care, to take care of basic needs of adolescents, which can result in multigenerational and intergeneration poverty.

### **4. PROMOTE THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING OF ADOLESCENTS**

We offer psychosocial well-being as an important indicator of adolescent development and functioning. There is a considerable body of psychological research, including 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. At a recent high level meeting in New York, the Royal Government of Bhutan at the United Nations in New York highlighted the usefulness of well-being in its “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) Index (<http://www.un.int/wcm/content/site/bhutan/pid/4106>) among other indexes such as the Happy Planet Index. Nobel Laureate economists, international experts, and UN member states like France, Great Britain, and Japan have initiated efforts to complement the GDP as the measure of national wealth with a measure that quantifies well-being alongside economic strength. 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. On the WHO website as of October 2011, mental health is defined 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.”

**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 in terms of well-being in addition to economic growth, as well as support Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index or a related index as measures of development and support efforts to include indexes of psychosocial well-being in the UNDP Human Development Report**

### **5. EVALUATE PROGRAMS TO DETERMINE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS**

Strategies and programs that are implemented to promote adolescent development need to be evaluated, including measures of psychosocial empowerment, mental health care and social protection, gender equality and human rights, 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 in achieving sustainable development.

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