

**Expert Group Meeting on Development Challenges for Young People  
Bangkok, 28-30 March 2006**

Opening Message  
by Mr Johan Schölvinnck  
Director, Division for Social Policy and Development  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
United Nations

---

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you here at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok to the Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development Challenges for Young People, hosted by our colleagues of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. First and foremost, I wish to thank you for taking out the time of your busy schedules to share your knowledge with us and our colleagues. I would also like to thank our colleagues at ESCAP for generously hosting this meeting.

During the next three days, you - international experts from various universities, research institutes, governments, as well as youth organizations and United Nations agencies and programmes - will be discussing major youth development challenges in Asia in preparation for the World Youth Report 2007.

There is an urgent need to invest in young people; the statistics clearly emphasize the challenges we face. Currently, 1.2 billion people in the world are between the ages of 15 and 24. According to the ILO, of the 88 million young people worldwide who are formally unemployed, some 37 per cent live in Asia. And from our own research, we estimate that well over 100 million young people live on less than one dollar a day in this region.

But fortunately, young people do not just represent a social and demographic group at risk with an uncertain future. They are also key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation, who contribute every day to the creation of not only more competitive societies - an aspect often emphasized in the discourse on youth development in Asia - but also more just, open and democratic societies. In order to take advantage of the benefits that young people's participation in decision-making can bring, Governments should create conditions that encourage young people's imagination, ideals, energy and vision.

Dear participants,

In the past years, the World Youth Report has become a quite well-known publication of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, describing global youth development trends on the basis of priorities set by UN member states. You will hear more about this report in the next few presentations. As for the 2007 Report, the

plan is to again provide a global overview summarizing the major youth development trends in the fifteen priority areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth. However, apart from presenting this global overview we have decided to take a regional approach.

Thus, for each region, four different topics that are highly affecting the lives of young people are identified for an in-depth discussion. While there are a whole range of other pertinent issues that affect young people in the Asia-Pacific region, the four inter-related topics that have been identified for the section on Asia in the book are globalization, urbanization, education, and information and communication technologies.

Why is it so important to discuss these topics for the Asian region?

With regard to “**globalization**”, it can be observed that the largest proportion of the world’s poor youth live in Asia. Five of the ten countries with the largest concentrations of young people living on less than US\$ 1 a day are located in Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Viet Nam. At the same time, in the last decennium, various Asian countries have made major developmental achievements. Compared to other regions, globalization has arguably had the most impact on the rapidly growing Asian economies. While certainly many young people have benefited from the enormous growth in new industries that have moved to Asia since the early 1990s, still many others have not been able to find decent employment, or are being short-changed by these same industries in the absence or insufficient reach of protective labor regulations.

**Urbanization**, understood as the emergence of mega-cities being home to millions of people, is another direct consequence of the economic growth and of the shift from agricultural to industrial based economies. Today, one in three Asian people lives in a city, and this number will have increased to one in two by 2020. Coincidentally, most of this urban growth will be in the largest countries of the region China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

It has been argued that young people are more likely to move to cities in order to gain economic opportunity, lowering the average age in cities in comparison to rural areas. Two types of urbanization seem to have occurred in Asia: Firstly, many young people migrate to large cities, in the hope of finding a better life there. They search for jobs in the informal sector, which do not exist in the rural environment they grow up in. Secondly, a more dynamic form of rural to urban migration, is spurred by large-scale industrial investment that takes place in rapidly growing manufacturing-centres. It will be of interest to further explore these two patterns during the meeting.

This brings me to third topic under discussion in this meeting: **education**. Economic development also places new demands on the education system. Curricula need to be adapted to prepare students for new jobs in the labor market, a fit that is not always established yet. As the global economy is increasingly based on technological innovation and information, young people need to receive excellent education, in order to

achieve the qualification required for a good job. With large numbers of youth who cannot afford to go to or stay in school, the chances for the poor to climb up the social ladder become very small.

Finally, **information and communication technology (ICT)** is an important issue, which you will address during this meeting. ICT has greatly contributed to the speed in which the globalization process is taking place. Besides the economic impact of the digital revolution, the influence is found in the increasingly globalizing youth culture. New technology contributing to this new youth culture can be characterized by three terms: information, pleasure and autonomy. The Internet, instant messaging, cell phones, online gaming, chatting and - still very relevant - globalization of the content of TV programming, all carry these three elements. According to some observers, they seem to radically alter young people's modes of self-expression and identity formation, and on their relations with the older generations, including their parents and educators. For others, new technologies, while certainly of economic impact, only have a limited bearing on the existing social fabric of their societies. I look forward to hearing your views on this debate.

Having touched upon these main topics, let me summarize the main objective of the meeting, which is to increase knowledge on the social-economic situation of young people in Asia by identifying and discussing some of the major challenges facing young Asians and possible policy and programme interventions. In order to draft a relevant and appropriate chapter depicting the situation of young people in Asia, we are very pleased to be drawing on your expertise on these matters.

Dear participants,

During the next three days, you will try to unravel some of the youth development challenges Asian young people are facing. This is an important but also difficult task. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you in advance for your efforts to be part of this process and again for your motivation to share your expertise with us. I wish you all a successful meeting.

Thank you very much.

Johan Schölvinck