

Realising transformative change in adolescent health and wellbeing: a second Lancet Commission

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The Lancet 2016 Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing¹ brought global attention to the transformational potential of the world's 10 to 24 year olds to reap a triple dividend of benefits for adolescents now, as they matured into adulthood, and later still for their children. In an accompanying commentary, the UN Secretary General identified adolescents as 'the world's greatest untapped resource'.²

Important progress has been made. United Nations (UN) agencies, major donors, networks and governments have included young people in initiatives such as the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health and its associated funding mechanisms.³ The global community has embraced a broader view of the determinants of adolescent health and wellbeing, one that recognises that effective policies lie across multiple sectors and government ministries, extending well beyond health.⁴ There has been investment in better data systems for adolescent health and wellbeing, most notably in neglected areas such as mental health.⁵ There has also been growing recognition of young people as essential partners in advocacy and policy development.⁶

Yet, in 2022, the health and wellbeing of adolescents is poised at a tipping point. Global megatrends with profound implications for health and wellbeing are outpacing responses from governments and the international community. These challenges extend from degradation of planetary ecosystems and rapid development of digital technologies through to globalised commercial interests and urbanisation, propelled by profound demographic shifts. War, political oppression, economic insecurity, and climate catastrophe have further distorted the policy landscape bringing record levels of forced migration and compromising the future for the most disadvantaged of this generation.⁷ In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused greater social and economic disruption to young people than any other age group, with unprecedented interruptions in education, and profound effects on mental health.⁸ The consequences in many countries will likely be reversals in hard-fought gains in adolescent sexual and reproductive health, food security and nutrition, education and employment.

These challenges continue to emphasise the importance of investing in adolescent health and wellbeing but also underscore barriers to commensurate political and policy action. Despite many governments adopting a broad concept of adolescent health, political and policy decision-making has remained myopic and unresponsive to economic, environmental, and technological changes. Indicators of progress need to be transformed to take into account the perspectives and contributions of young people. In addition efforts need to be made to ensure young people are equitably represented in global data systems. And while the voices of adolescents are now

louder around agendas central to health and wellbeing, including human rights, gender equality, and planetary change, their direct influence has been insufficient.

A new Lancet Commission will address these barriers and propose solutions for the challenges that threaten the health and wellbeing of today's adolescents and those of future generations. This Second Commission will extend earlier analyses of the social, cultural and ecologic determinants of adolescent development, proposing innovative and scalable multisectoral actions for adolescent health and wellbeing. It will pay particular attention to the barriers to investment, whether these derive from a lack of data, evidence, resources for implementation or simply priority being given to other agendas.⁹ It will propose a new framing of adolescence within political and economic discourses, one which challenges entrenched problem-based narratives around young people. It will also highlight the importance of an intergenerational perspective and advocate for better balancing the demands of a burgeoning population of older adults with the needs of younger people.

This Second Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing brings together a diverse group of Commissioners from across disciplines, sectors, and geographies. Given demographic shifts and the likelihood that half of the world's young people will be growing up in sub-Saharan Africa by the end of the century,¹⁰ we have emphasised the participation of Commissioners living or working in Africa. We have also adopted an innovative intergenerational partnership approach to Commission membership with workstreams co-led by senior academics, emerging and early-career research leaders, and youth advocates. Moving beyond the simple inclusion of young people, the Commission is committed to meaningful and continuous youth engagement and working towards the establishment of complementary and equal partnerships. It also recognizes the importance of engaging young people as empowered actors and leaders in finding solutions to challenges facing their generation.

The current UN Secretary-General has called on the world "to think for the long term, to deliver more for young people and succeeding generations and to be better prepared for the challenges ahead."¹¹ This Second Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing seeks to ensure that today's adolescents have the means to address the unique challenges of their generation.

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