

**B**EFORE, I HAD NO FUTURE; now I have a good job and a much better perspective on life.” So says Celia Hernandez Vega, a single mother from Tehuacan, Mexico, who now works at a local computer company and can support her family for the first time. For the 1.5 billion young people in the world who are between the ages of 12 to 24 – the most ever in the history of our planet – getting a decent job is perhaps the most significant step in that often perilous transition to adulthood. In fact, unlike Celia, some 85 to 90 million young people are unemployed, and thus face a far more arduous path to success.

There is no question that young people without hope for a job, a decent education or a voice in their society are at risk of falling prey to a host of social ills, from substance abuse to criminal violence and even political terrorism. Yet today’s historic “youth bulge” also offers us a rare opportunity to make meaningful headway in such critical areas as economic growth, political stability and global citizenship. But only if we act more aggressively to engage young people in addressing these global challenges.

Over the past decade or so, truly measurable progress has been made in this field of youth employment, and you will read about some impressive successes – as well as ongoing challenges – in this issue of *Monday Developments*. Just two years ago, for example, the World Bank’s *Development and the Next Generation* – the first ever Development Report to focus on youth – helped develop a global framework for these discussions by highlighting the critical transitions young people make to adulthood, including the transition to work. In addition to offering innovative strategies and learning, this report reflects a growing recognition that when young people finish school, are prepared to join the workforce and get a decent job, they will likely lead successful lives for the next 40 to 50 years. As a result, their children are also far more likely to thrive. The benefits of enhanced education and job training opportunities thus stretch over generations and can have a positive impact on society as a whole.

Preparing young people to join the global economy is also increasingly viewed as a vital element in the fight to combat poverty, particularly in developing countries. As Juan Somavia, the Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), has said, “It is an undeniable tenet – and now one that is recognized within the UN as well as other international organizations and governments – that only through decent employment opportunities can young people get the chance to work themselves out of poverty.” “Youth employment strategies,” he adds, “are a key contribution to meeting the Millennium Development Goals.”

Steadily rising youth unemployment figures have also sparked greater attention to effective school-to-work transition initiatives and second chance programs that target out-of-school youth. One such program supported by the International Youth Foundation has demonstrated the effectiveness of combining employability, life skills and technical

# Global Youth Employment:

## Crisis or Opportunity?



Photo: John Ham

**Improving a young person’s chance of finding a job also improves their chance of working themselves out of poverty.**

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Photo: IYF



*The International Youth Foundation and USAID have joined forces in Indonesia to help young people get back into the job market and help rebuild homes—and the economy—in impoverished communities.*

job training with internships and job placement assistance. Other key elements of the initiative are the partnerships created with private sector employers who identify the job skills they need, advise on curriculum, provide internship opportunities, and ultimately hire the trained youth.

These and other similarly successful programs not only reflect the value of an integrated, holistic and long-term approach to youth development. They point as well to the power of multi-sector alliances. Real headway is being made, for example, to expand job training and enhanced educational opportunities for at-risk youth in areas such as the Middle East, South Asian, and Africa as a result of these joint efforts.

Encouraging this multi-stakeholder approach is the ongoing focus of USAID's Global Development Alliance, which is a real champion of collaborative strategies and public-private partnerships aimed at boosting human and economic development. The private sector, in particular, is stepping up to become a significant partner with NGOs and local governments to raise youth employment opportunities. The GE Foundation, for example, has joined us to develop a life skills and employability

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curriculum that offers skills training in effective communication, decision making, financial planning and health – benefiting at-risk youth in Hungary, India, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan and Poland. Another corporate leader, Microsoft, is supporting employability programs among disadvantaged youth in Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania, with a focus on demand-driven training in information technology, life skills, entrepreneurship and employment services. In South Asia's tsunami-devastated



Photo: IVF

*A young man creates a classroom video for an education and employment initiative in India that is being supported by the International Youth Foundation, USAID, global companies, and local NGOs.*

communities, companies like Laureate, Nokia and Unocal are working with local NGOs to help young people get back into the job market and regenerate the local economy.

Some young people have the drive and entrepreneurial spirit to create and grow their own businesses. But they need appropriate skills and guidance to be successful. Responding to this growing demand, Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan made an impassioned plea at the January 2008 World Economic Forum for the private sector to get more engaged in supporting aspiring entrepreneurs through mentoring, volunteering and internships. "Now is the time," she said, for "more private sector experts to share their time and talent."

Youth entrepreneurship is gaining traction in other regions of the world as well. Consider Latin America, where the informal economy represents up to 50 percent of the gross domestic product and generates the largest share of employment. In response, the Inter-American Development Bank, under the leadership of President Luis Alberto Moreno, has made a significant com-

mitment to ensuring that more citizens at the bottom of the economic ladder, including young people, have the skills and opportunities to develop their own small enterprises and gain access to loans. "Preparing young people across Latin America as they grow up and seek to enter the workplace or begin their own businesses," says Moreno, "is part of our effort to reach out to the majority at the base of the pyramid." While support for youth entrepreneurship is growing, this area demands far greater attention given the vast potential for economic gains, particularly in developing countries.

In other words, the current generation of young people offers governments, businesses and NGOs an historic opportunity to move the sustainable development agenda forward. Countries gain a social and economic bonus when greater numbers of young people are engaged in the local economy, make healthy decisions in their lives, and possess the skills and confidence to give back to their communities. Promoting effective job training and work placement programs and supporting young people as they generate their own economic opportunities helps open the door to this next generation of wage earners, taxpayers, and citizens. It is our collective task to ensure more of the world's youth can benefit from these same life-changing opportunities. **MD**