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Putting Youth First

by James D. Wolfensohn, Eduardo Missoni and Giacomo Filibeck

All of the world's current crises - conflict, HIV/AIDS, unemployment - have one thing in common: they all involve young people who are burdened by the despair of these problems, but who are also a largely untapped source of change.

To many of us, the world may seem like an old place. Yet there are 2.8 billion people under the age of 25 out of a world population of six billion. Nine out of 10 of these young people live in developing countries. They are not just the future, but also the present.

That is why 170 youth leaders from 82 countries are gathering this week in Sarajevo, at the invitation of the World Bank, the European Youth Forum, and the Scout Movement. This is not just another meeting, it is a gathering of a group that is most at risk, and one that is key to meeting the world's development challenges.

Consider HIV/AIDS: of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS, more than a quarter are in their youth. There are 121 million children of primary school age who are not in school, and more than half of these are girls - most of whom will never learn to read or write.

Similarly, youth are becoming involved in conflict around the world with alarming frequency, either as victims or, just as tragically, as soldiers. More than half of those who are of working age are jobless, according to a new International Labor Organization report. Lack of jobs can lead to increased frustration and hopelessness on such a scale that ensuing social and political ferment could make tomorrow's world far less stable and secure than that of today.

One thing is certain: old solutions to old problems won't work. Greater effort, in the form of research and resources, must be invested in better understanding the hopes and aspirations of young people. After all, they are living in deeply confusing times.

Young people today are more exposed to the rest of the world as a result of globalization. But most do not have access to it. They are part of a strange paradox, one that is ubiquitous in the developing world: in villages in Africa, young people can buy Coca-Cola, but they have no clean water. In small towns in Asia, youth enjoy Internet access and the world is at their fingertips. Yet visa regimes will not allow them to travel very far.

While we must address these imbalances of globalization, we must also take advantage of the opportunities it presents. There is a universal sensibility that more and more young people share, thanks to the Internet, music, and culture. We need to find ways to harness this in order to let young people be conduits for peace and harmony.

The Sarajevo conference is a step in the right direction. The conference deals with education, conflict prevention and resolution, risky behavior, and youth employment. The young representatives understand that these issues are manifestly interlinked. Greater awareness of their shared problems should bring greater activism toward developing programs that meet the needs of youth.

The concerns of today's young people are heartfelt and urgent. In the next 25 years, two billion more

people entering our planet will live in the developing world. We must set our priorities around their need for more opportunities, jobs, and social justice.

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