

EDITORIAL

Realizing the promise of youth: Advancing the goals of World Population Day 2026

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World Population Day 2026, under the United Nations theme “Realizing the Hopes and Aspirations of Young People—Today and for the Future” (United Nations, 2026a), arrives at a pivotal demographic moment. More than 1.3 billion people globally are between the ages of 15 and 24, with the majority living in low- and lower-middle-income countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations, 2026b). The 2026 World Population Day theme emphasizes the transformative role of youth and the urgent need to invest in their health, education, rights, and participation in decision-making processes. Achieving this goal requires governments and international institutions to move beyond rhetoric and implement evidence-based policies that empower young people socially, economically, and politically.

The demographic realities highlighted in the UN’s *World Population Highlights 2026: Youth* demonstrate that countries with rapidly growing youth populations face both enormous opportunities and substantial challenges (United Nations, 2026b). If young people are equipped with education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and civic inclusion, they can generate a “demographic dividend” that accelerates economic growth and social stability (United Nations, 2026c). However, if investments are insufficient, countries may experience rising unemployment, inequality, social unrest, and migration pressures. The challenge is therefore not merely demographic; it is fundamentally political and developmental.

Education remains one of the most powerful tools for realizing the goals of World Population Day 2026. Empirical evidence consistently shows that expanding access to quality education improves economic productivity, health outcomes, gender equality, and fertility decision-making. A landmark study by Lutz and Samir (2011) demonstrated that educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of sustainable development and demographic transition. Similarly, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) found that investments in education yield substantial long-term economic returns for individuals and societies alike. Yet millions of young people, especially girls, still lack access to quality secondary and tertiary education, especially in most developing countries (United Nations, 2022).

Closing educational gaps requires targeted public investment, particularly in countries experiencing rapid population growth. Governments must prioritize universal secondary education, digital literacy, vocational training, and equitable access for marginalized populations. Importantly, education systems must prepare young people not only for employment but also for participation in democratic governance and climate adaptation. In a rapidly changing global economy shaped by automation and environmental change, traditional educational models are no longer sufficient.

Equally important is the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The

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International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) established that reproductive autonomy is central to human development and gender equality (UNFPA, 2014). Decades of research confirm that access to reproductive healthcare, including family planning and maternal health services, improves educational attainment, reduces poverty, and enhances women's participation in the labor market (Bloom, et al., 2009). The United Nations report emphasizes that youth-centered population policies must include comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare if countries are to achieve sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2026b).

Gender equality is indispensable to this agenda. Young women continue to face structural barriers including child marriage, gender-based violence, labor market discrimination, and unequal educational opportunities. Research published in *The Lancet* demonstrates that societies investing in gender equality achieve better health, economic, and governance outcomes (Heise et al., 2019). Empowering girls and young women is therefore not a peripheral concern but a central strategy for achieving demographic resilience and inclusive growth.

Employment opportunities for youth also demand urgent attention. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has repeatedly warned about persistently high youth unemployment and underemployment, particularly in developing economies. Empirical studies show that prolonged youth unemployment produces long-term economic and psychological consequences, including reduced lifetime earnings and diminished civic trust (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; ILO, 2024). The transition from education to decent work has become increasingly fragile due to economic inequality, technological disruption, and climate-related shocks.

To address these challenges, governments should expand labor-intensive green industries, support entrepreneurship, and strengthen social protection systems for young workers. Investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and digital infrastructure can simultaneously address climate goals and youth employment needs. The evidence suggests that integrating youth into green economic transitions creates both economic and environmental benefits (ILO, 2022).

Another essential component of realizing the 2026 World Population Day goals is ensuring meaningful youth participation in policymaking. Young people are often discussed as beneficiaries of policy rather than as active political actors. Yet research demonstrates that inclusive governance improves policy legitimacy and long-term social cohesion (Checkoway, 2011; OECD, 2024). The UN's Youth 2030 strategy similarly emphasizes that

youth participation is necessary for sustainable peace and democratic resilience (United Nations, 2018).

Young people today are already leading climate movements, technological innovation, and social justice campaigns around the world. However, institutional barriers frequently prevent their voices from shaping national and global policy agendas (UNDP, 2024; OECD, 2024). Governments should therefore establish formal youth advisory councils, lower barriers to political participation, and incorporate youth representation into development planning processes. Participation must be substantive rather than symbolic.

Finally, realizing the goals of World Population Day 2026 requires international cooperation and long-term investment. Many low-income countries with expanding youth populations face severe fiscal constraints, debt burdens, and climate vulnerabilities (UNDP, 2025; World Bank, 2023). Without global solidarity, the inequalities between countries with aging populations and those with youthful populations may widen further. International financial institutions, donor governments, and multilateral organizations must support sustainable investments in education, healthcare, and employment generation.

The central message of World Population Day 2026 is clear: demographic change alone does not determine the future. Policy choices do. Youth populations can become a powerful engine for sustainable development, innovation, and peace if governments invest in human capabilities and rights. The evidence from decades of demographic and development research overwhelmingly supports this conclusion. The world's young people do not merely represent the future; they are shaping the present. The responsibility of governments and global institutions is to ensure that they are given the resources, opportunities, and political voice necessary to realize their full potential.

Conflict of interest

Danan Gu serves as the Editor-in-Chief of this journal, but was not in any way involved in the editorial and peer-review process conducted for this paper, directly or indirectly. The views expressed in the article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

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