

A pocket guide for  
policymakers

BY RITU SHARMA  
& ERIC SIMMS

# WHAT YOUTH WANT

CSIS

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Dear Leader,

Young people from around the world—from vastly different backgrounds, languages, and geographies—are remarkably *clear and consistent* about what they want from their leaders.

In this review of 25 statements from youth summits and consultations globally, as well as 11 national and regional youth polls, we hear some priorities we expect: youth want jobs, the chance to start their own businesses, and high-quality relevant education.

But we also see that young people everywhere are increasingly concerned about issues of governance, corruption, and both regional and national security.

In a world where prosperity and opportunity are routinely swept away in a torrent of civil strife or regional conflict, millions of young people ardently want to be part of the solution, rather than the source of the problem. And indeed many young people already are bringing forward the kinds of nontraditional and innovative solutions that help create a safer and more prosperous world for all of us.

This guide builds upon the groundbreaking Global Youth Wellbeing Index, published jointly by our organizations in 2014. The insights from the Index, combined with this lucid articulation of what young people themselves are saying, give us unambiguous direction for our investments.

We hope that this pocket guide will assist policymakers, donors, employers, program leaders, and investors in channeling resources and action to the areas that are top priorities for the world's youth. If we do not heed this call from our next generation, we do so at our own peril.

Sincerely,



William Reese  
President,  
*International Youth Foundation*



John Hamre  
President,  
*Center for Strategic and International Studies*

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PLEASE NOTE

The order of thematic sections here reflects the level of priority placed on these areas as revealed by the analysis of youth declarations and polls. All of these topics are "top of mind" for young people worldwide.

# KEY FINDINGS

**Young people everywhere want the same thing: the chance to be prosperous, safe, and active participants in shaping their societies and our world.**

This should come as no surprise. What is startling, however, is the strong global consensus among youth on what matters most to reaching these goals. Given that people under 30 years old are half of the world's population, we would be wise to heed this consensus.

Young people realize that jobs are unlikely to be found in the formal or government sectors since the vast majority of commercial activity occurs in the informal economy.

They want two things so they can contribute to economic growth: access to training and capital to start their own businesses and create new jobs, and employment-relevant skills training to get the jobs that are available.

And they do not want to wait until their formal schooling is completed; young people unanimously want to see entrepreneurship, technical training, and life skills baked into their national education systems.

Youth are highly attuned to the impact that domestic and regional conflicts, poor governance, and corruption are having on their economic and life prospects. Regardless of religion or geography, young people feel that their leaders need to prioritize stabilization and peacebuilding. They are ready and willing to engage in and even invent those solutions.

More than anything, young adults would like to be an integral part of the decision making processes that affect their lives and their futures. They appreciate being convened and consulted, but only if their input is represented in the outcomes.

# TOP 10 PRIORITIES

for Youth Worldwide

This list represents the top 5 thematic areas for young people, in order of priority, which our analysis revealed. For each theme, the top 2 priorities for action are presented.

## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES & LIVELIHOODS

- 1 Greatly expand entrepreneurship among young people.
- 2 Invest heavily in school-to-work, vocational education, and career-placement programs.

## EDUCATION & LEARNING

- 3 Make educational curricula relevant and holistic to develop citizenship, economic, and life skills.
- 4 Guarantee access for all to free and high-quality primary and secondary education.

## ANTICORRUPTION, GOOD GOVERNANCE, & CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

- 5 Eliminate corruption that has become endemic throughout society.
- 6 Make decision-making transparent and genuinely responsive to youth input.

## SAFETY & SECURITY

- 7 Eliminate conflict within and among countries, which severely limits young people's potential. Support the role of youth in creating and maintaining stability.
- 8 Reduce road-related injuries and deaths—the leading cause of mortality for 15 to 25-year-olds.

## INCLUSIVENESS & EQUALITY

- 9 Enact and enforce nondiscrimination and equal access laws.
- 10 Realize gender equality, particularly in education, healthcare, and work. End gender-based violence.

## Who is the *best* expert on you? Is the answer obvious?

When we consider the needs, beliefs, and behaviors of others—such as young people—we sometimes forget to ask the very people we seek to help.

Young people themselves are the best experts on youth needs. They understand what interventions will work for them and what will likely fail. What addresses their core needs and what misses the target.

In a time of reduced funding for development programs of all kinds, understanding young people’s expressed priorities can yield better decisionmaking and more successful programming. Given that people under 30 are one-half of the world’s population, ensuring that investments pay off is critical.

Our shared global prosperity and security depend on the choices that young people are making today. We must engage with youth—more than we ever have before—to encourage them to make the healthiest and safest choices they can.

In 2014, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the International Youth Foundation (IYF) released the **Global Youth Wellbeing Index**. The first of its kind, we learned from the Index that:

- A large majority of the world’s youth—85 percent—are experiencing lower levels of overall wellbeing
- A look across the 30 countries in the Index reveals that youth are faring best in the area of health and worst in the area of economic opportunity
- The Index uniquely incorporated perception data among youth on their general outlook and life satisfaction. Generally, youth feel some level of dissatisfaction with their lives and potential futures.

This guide is intended to help policymakers, donors, and others interested in investing in youth see more clearly what young people prioritize for themselves and their world.

## METHODOLOGY

The Youth, Prosperity and Security Initiative reviewed declarations from youth summits and forums; the majority are from the last 3 years. We identified the specific actionable statements from these various calls to action.

We collated specific recommendations and requests by topic, then counted the most frequent items to identify major youth priorities.

In addition, we reviewed polling data from a wide youth demographic across the world to corroborate the analysis of priorities.

### YOUTH PLATFORMS REVIEWED

1. Aotearoa Youth Declaration (South Pacific), 2015
2. Doha Youth Forum, 2015
3. European Youth Work Convention, 2015
4. The Girl Declaration, 2015
5. United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, 2015
6. IV Young Americas Forum, 2015
7. Asker Conference on Youth and Governance, 2014
8. G20 Youth Summit, 2014
9. G(irls)20 Summit, 2014
10. First Global Forum on Youth Policies, 2014
11. The Global Youth Call, UN Envoy on Youth, 2014
12. World Conference on Youth, Colombo Declaration on Youth, 2014
13. Youth Call for Action on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, 2014
14. BYND Global Youth Summit, 2013
15. Ninth Commonwealth Youth Forum, 2013
16. North-East Asian Youth Conference, 2013
17. African Youth Voices, 2012
18. Bali Global Youth Forum, 2012
19. Global Youth Biodiversity Network, 2012
20. GoB ioDiv International Youth Forum Declaration, 2012
21. Youth 21 (UNDP and UN HABITAT), 2012
22. Youth Forum of the UN: 4th Least Developed Countries Conference, 2011
23. International Red Cross and Red Crescent Youth Movement, 2009
24. Youth Declaration at the 5th Asia Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights, 2009
25. World Youth Assembly for Road Safety, 2007

**NOTE:** After each priority, the declarations that contained that action item are listed. Those numbers correspond to the list above.

### POLLS REVIEWED

- Arab Youth Survey, 2015
- MyWorld Data Survey, 2015
- Flash Eurobarometer of the European Parliament: European Youth in 2014 Analytical Synthesis
- International Youth Foundation Africa YouthMap, 2014
- Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and South-East Asia, 2014
- Ibero-American Youth Survey, 2013
- Adolescents and Young People in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2012
- European Union Youth Report, 2012
- Gallup Poll on African Youth Entrepreneurship, 2011
- Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change. Pew Research Center, 2010
- Youth in Russia, 2009

Across the world, young people universally want the same thing: to *earn a living with dignity*.

According to the Global Youth Wellbeing Index, countries score lower on youth employment than any other domain. Youth have an unemployment rate 3–4 times higher than older age groups.

Youth want their education systems—whether formal or informal—to provide the technical, cognitive, and life skills necessary to succeed in their careers.

They want their governments to provide hiring incentives and a positive business environment so youth can apply the job skills they have developed.

In much of the developing world, economic opportunity generally will not come in the form of a job. It will be generated by young people using their talents to start their own businesses and create their own futures.

However, young entrepreneurs face many barriers such as lack of capital funding, legal and administrative obstacles, and corruption. Youth leaders call on governments to remove these barriers and foster a new era of vibrant youth entrepreneurship.

Youth leaders are keenly aware of inequalities across all areas of life. In this field, young people call for greater economic opportunity for those who are most vulnerable: women, marginalized groups, rural populations, youth in high-crime areas, and youth in poverty.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1

Promote youth entrepreneurship through training, financial services, and removal of barriers to business start-ups.

1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22

2

Greatly expand support for school-to-work programs, internships, apprenticeships, and career counseling.

1, 3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 17, 18, 21

3

Focus economic opportunity programs on vulnerable populations: women, marginalized groups, rural populations, and youth in impoverished or high-crime areas.

1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18

4

Provide job-relevant technical, vocational, and professional training.

3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 17, 18, 21

5

Ensure social protection and respect for labor rights in accordance with International Labour Organization (ILO) standards.

8, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 21

“  
We want the opportunity to create our own enterprises, grow our own businesses and generate our own new jobs in struggling economies.  
”

**Young people universally want to succeed in the modern world and they know that success depends on an education that provides critical skills.**

These competencies include life skills as well as financial literacy, computer proficiency, entrepreneurship, and knowledge of legal rights.

Young people also want to be good global citizens. They want to receive education on human rights, antidiscrimination, democracy, and the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship.

All of this requires adequate funding for high-quality curricula, suitable facilities, innovative e-learning options, and well-trained educators.

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index shows that developing countries have much poorer outcomes in education when compared to wealthy countries.

Moreover, in developing countries youth in low-income households are more likely to drop out of school due to marriage, pregnancy, or to pursue employment due to poverty.

Free and universal access to primary and secondary education is a high-priority among youth, especially for disadvantaged groups such as girls, ethnic and religious minorities, and rural children.

Education should lead to positive economic outcomes, but youth find this isn't always the case. In Russia, educational attainment is high but youth are unable to translate education into greater salaries and opportunity. In the Middle East and Africa, youth are calling for stronger ties between education and entrepreneurship, vocational training, and work programs.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1

Include citizenship, economic, and life skills, in addition to basic cognitive skills, in educational curricula.

1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24

2

Guarantee access for all to free, high-quality primary and secondary education.

1, 4, 6, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 24

3

Support formal and nonformal vocational training through school-business partnerships.

1, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21

4

Develop youth entrepreneurship skills through the formal education system, not just outside of it.

3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 17, 18, 21

5

Increase access to tertiary education through financial support.

8, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 21



# ANTICORRUPTION, GOOD GOVERNANCE, & CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Young people are clear that endemic corruption, failed governance, and insecurity in their societies are *killing economic opportunity*, fueling unrest, and in some cases turning youth toward violent extremism.

Youth certainly look to their governments to address corruption, but they are ready to use their creativity and technology savvy to eliminate corruption in both public and private structures.

Young people have shown a willingness to become involved, even despite undemocratic or corrupt governments. The Global Youth Wellbeing Index found that African and some Asian countries score well on youth volunteering, youth policy, and having a positive outlook among youth.

Eighteen of the 26 declarations reviewed had a strong emphasis on meaningfully engaging youth in decisionmaking, particularly in choices about resource allocation. Young people expressed the need for their input to actually be represented in outcomes, rather than simply celebrated as fresh and interesting ideas.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1 Crack down on corruption in all spheres of life and enforce strict anti-bribery laws. Ensure transparency for all government transactions, particularly those between political leaders and the private sector. 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21 and the Arab and Asian Youth Surveys

2 Systematically involve youth in policy formulation and decision-making. Reflect youth input in outcomes. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23

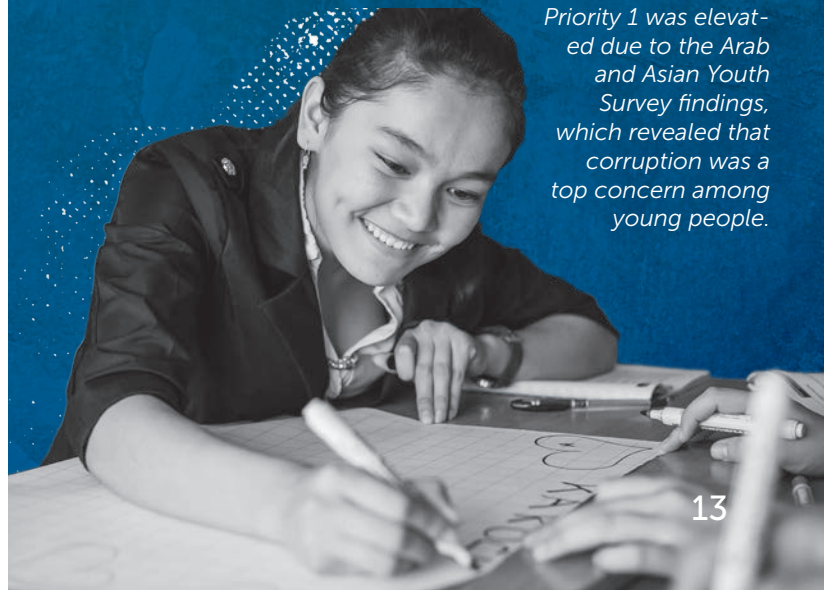
3 Create fair and open democratically representative governance that protects freedom of speech and association. 1, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 21

4 Protect the rights of young people. Ensure that all youth, especially girls, have national identification, births are registered, and young people can obtain citizenship as well as the rights and services that come with it. 4, 11, 12, 13, 18, 21

5 Invest in the ability of young people to organize, participate in, and lead vibrant civil society organizations and serve in government. 11, 17, 18, 23

Note from the authors:

Priority 1 was elevated due to the Arab and Asian Youth Survey findings, which revealed that corruption was a top concern among young people.



# SAFETY & SECURITY

**Without security, almost nothing is possible. It is a prerequisite for economic growth and prosperity. Young people's physical safety and wellbeing are equally important in allowing them to *fulfill their potential and contribute their best to our world.***

Youth are disproportionately affected by violence, crime, and lack of safety standards and are more likely to become victims or be taken advantage of by criminal and extremist organizations.

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index shows that even relatively wealthy countries can have safety and security issues that hinder youth development.

Regional conflict tears countries apart and destroys the future for affected youth. Young people want countries to end support for unlawful armed groups, promote peace efforts, and recognize the role youth can play in ensuring lasting peace.

In many countries, youth who are incarcerated lose the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for a successful career. Youth desire justice systems that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration instead of punishment and incarceration.

Migration, for employment or to flee conflict, is a growing issue that puts millions of youth at risk of harm and exploitation. There must be increased international cooperation to stop human trafficking and ensure the safety of migrants.

Violence against children and young women, inside and outside the family, causes lasting damage. Youth demand that countries enforce laws against gender-based violence, including anti-LGBT violence, and put an end to harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

## TOP PRIORITIES

- 1 Incorporate youth into efforts to end regional conflict and facilitate long-term peace. 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 23
- 2 Significantly improve road safety and reduce deaths from traffic accidents by integrating first aid and road safety in educational curricula, among other interventions. 11, 12, 23, 25
- 3 Reform justice and prison systems to focus on rehabilitation and reintegration. 1, 2, 6, 12, 17, 23
- 4 End gender-based violence and violence against children. Eliminate harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage. 1, 4, 11, 23
- 5 Support multinational efforts to end human trafficking and provide security and support to migrants. 2, 4, 6, 11





# INCLUSIVENESS AND EQUALITY

Today's youth are highly sensitized to discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, income, or any other grouping, and place a high value on equal treatment for all.

Governments must enact and enforce nondiscrimination and equal-access laws, particularly for migrant workers and other vulnerable groups, in order to ensure equal access to services, equal opportunity, and freedom from violence.

There must also be action against sexual and gender-based discrimination with an emphasis on gender equality and LGBT rights. All people, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, should have equal legal protection and civil rights.

Youth want to close the gender pay-gap through appropriate laws and greatly expand the number of female entrepreneurs and corporate leaders.

Youth also want to ensure that women and minorities are sufficiently involved in decisionmaking and represented in government.

In order to further promote equality, youth want to see human rights and the acceptance of diversity included in education curricula, so that future generations are raised to accept others and reject discrimination and violence.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1

Enforce nondiscrimination and equal-access laws for all.

4, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 24

2

Enact policies to end sexual and gender-based discrimination.

1, 4, 9, 11, 12, 18

3

Include women and other marginalized groups in decisionmaking.

4, 9, 12, 15, 17, 18, 23

4

Promote gender equality in pay, political rights, and economic opportunity.

4, 8, 9, 11, 12, 16, 18

5

Teach human rights and acceptance to students so future generations will support equality.

1, 4, 9, 11, 15, 16, 18



# HEALTH AND WELLNESS

**For young people, health is not just about cures for diseases, but about *holistic and vibrant wellness*.**

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index found that countries overall performed better on health than any other area, possibly reflecting the investments governments and donors have made in health over the last 50 years.

However, particular health issues, such as maternal and reproductive health, noncommunicable diseases, drug abuse, and mental wellness, lag behind progress made on infectious diseases.

While only 4 youth declarations raised the issue of road safety, traffic-related accidents are the leading cause of death among 15- to 25-year-olds and deserve much greater attention.

Of particular importance for adolescents and young adults is access to youth-friendly comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care. Across regions, young men and women want more and better services in this critical area.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1 Increase investments to greatly expand access to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Emphasize multisectoral partnerships, integration into formal education, well-regulated private-sector engagement, and the removal of policies that limit access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. 1, 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 24

2 Pursue universal access to safe, affordable, high-quality, and adolescent-friendly general healthcare for all young people. 1, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18

3 Elevate the focus on and investment in mental healthcare. Ensure early detection, treatment, and support for mental health issues among youth. 1, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18

4 Address drug and alcohol abuse as a humanitarian issue, not a criminal one, and promote youth-to-youth education. 1, 11, 12, 17, 23

5 Address non-communicable diseases such as tobacco use, obesity and diabetes. 1, 11, 12, 17



# ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

**For young people, environmental stewardship and protection form the basis for everything—economic growth, long-term stability, and thriving societies. It is their generation that will live the effects of catastrophic environmental changes.**

Young people are deeply concerned about climate change and in particular its impact on vulnerable populations. They would like to see governments prioritize mitigation and adaptation strategies, including the use of renewable energy sources, reduced fossil fuel use, and lower carbon emissions.

Youth would like to promote ecologically sound development and business practices through private-sector incentives, corporate social responsibility, and private-sector accountability.

Biodiversity in marine and coastal regions is under threat from pollution, illegal fishing, and overfishing. These regions are vital for maritime and tourism industries, and youth want greater protections for them.

In some regions and developing countries, water resources are increasingly stretched thin. Youth want to guarantee future water security through pollution reduction and sustainable water use policies.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1

Promote sustainable resource use and development practices, particularly focusing on agriculture, energy efficiency, and pollution reduction. 1, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 17, 19

2

Protect marine and coastal biodiversity against threats. 6, 8, 16, 19, 20

3

Engage in climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, such as meeting emissions targets, incentivizing climate smart agriculture, and reducing fossil fuel use. 6, 12, 19, 23

4

Ensure water security in vulnerable regions. 6, 8, 17, 23

5

Promote environmental education in schools, to business, and among the public. 1, 6, 14, 20

“  
**We are the world's biggest untapped energy source, it's time to be utilized.**  
”

**If it cannot be seen, it cannot be fixed. The *poor state of data collection and analysis* to inform youth investments and programming needs urgent attention.**

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index provides an excellent overview on young people's status, and also reveals major gaps in the body of data on youth.

Regional and country-specific indicators and data collection are not comprehensive. Disaggregating data by age, sex, and rural/urban population at a minimum would provide vital information on strengths and shortcomings in addressing youth needs at the national level.

In economic wellbeing, data is required on labor needs such as the skills required by employers, professions in demand, and populations with high youth unemployment. This data should feed back into education policies and focus educational resources on in-demand skills.

Youth view data on youth civic engagement as crucial for evaluating how connected youth are to their governments and whether youth believe they are represented or have a say in how society is run.

Young people want pragmatic, data-driven policies with measurable, achievable milestones, rather than broad platitudes on youth participation and wellbeing.

## TOP PRIORITIES

1

Have every country set specific youth policy goals with measurable milestones. 4, 5, 7, 12, 15, 18, 19, 21

2

Disaggregate data in order to make youth and specific groups more visible, particularly girls and youth in poverty. 4, 5, 10, 12, 17, 18

3

Use the data collected to evaluate data-based youth policies. 4, 5, 10, 12, 17, 18

4

Collect, monitor, and report more detailed data on the education system in order to address shortcomings. 1, 6, 15, 18

5

Collect, monitor, and report data on health services and resources, particularly for sexual and reproductive health. 10, 15, 18

**Modern technology is transforming the way people learn, communicate, organize, work, and shop. Young people are on the *cutting edge of using technology for good*, especially to address complex challenges in the developing world.**

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is last among the 10 themes, not because it is unimportant. It is because young people did not view technology as a separate category in itself. Instead, youth see technology as ubiquitous and part of every facet of life.

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index shows a major urban-rural divide in ICT use. This exacerbates the economic opportunity gap between the countryside and the city in these countries. There is also an ICT gulf between industrialized and nonindustrialized countries, greater than any other sector covered in the Index. South Korea's ICT Index score was 94 (out of a possible 100), while Uganda's was 18.

Youth view ICT as an excellent tool for improving education quality and access, especially in rural areas, and strongly support expanding broadband access to reach all people.

The rise of cybercrime has young people worried, and they want more action to improve digital security. Protection against identity theft is crucial, especially for sensitive data such as birth registrations, citizenship documents, and passports.

With the growing importance of technology in modern life, digital literacy has become a critically important skill. Youth want ICT training to be robust and mandatory in their education systems.

## TOP PRIORITIES

- 1 Integrate ICT into the education system to improve learning outcomes and access. 8, 9, 12, 22
- 2 Improve digital security, particularly for identify theft, birth registration data, cybercrime, and cyber bullying. 1, 2, 13
- 3 Promote digital literacy for all. 2, 14
- 4 Ensure digital access for all. 2, 8
- 5 Ensure a right to privacy by restricting the ability of companies to use and sell private information. 2, 14

“  
**We're ready to bring our talent and tech saviness to create transparency and accountability.**  
”

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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For more information on the CSIS/IYF Youth, Prosperity and Security Initiative please contact:

**Ritu Sharma**  
Senior Visiting Fellow  
CSIS/IYF  
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Email: [rsharma@csis.org](mailto:rsharma@csis.org)  
Phone: (202) 302-0592

For more information on the Global Youth Wellbeing Index, please go to [www.youthindex.org](http://www.youthindex.org).

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CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

(202) 887-0220

[www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org)

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international  
**youth**  
foundation®



32 South Street  
Baltimore, MD 21202

(410) 951-1500

[www.iyfnet.org](http://www.iyfnet.org)

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