



2nd Annual Conference: Global Perspectives on Economic Strengthening and Adolescent Health and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Sharing Research Findings and Defining a Path Forward

Researchers and NGO leaders will convene on May 12th, 2016 to share research findings that highlight the impact and potential of economic strengthening interventions to affect adolescent health and education outcomes, including those related to HIV/AIDS, in the global arena. The conference will be co-hosted by Columbia University's International Center for Child Health and Asset Development (ICHAD), the Heilbrunn Department of Population & Family Health at Mailman School of Public Health, the Columbia Population Research Center (CPRC) and the Columbia School of Social Work (CSSW). This will be a unique forum to build on existing research collaborations, foster new partnerships and discuss the future of the economic strengthening field.

Background:

There are 1.2 billion adolescents, age 10-19, in the world, with 90% residing in developing countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa 23% of the population is between 10 and 19, and this age group continues to grow. The UNFPA predicts that by 2025 adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa will number 436 million, and by 2050, 605 million. Because of this tremendous growth and their particular developmental vulnerability, adolescents are a key population in addressing economic and health disparities in the developing world. Developmental growth and successful transition to adulthood is complicated for adolescents living in poverty. At an individual level adolescents in poverty, like youth in other contexts, are experiencing rapid physical, social and emotional changes and beginning to experiment with risk (sexual activity and drug use), but without sufficient supportive resources. At the family level, there is more pressure on poor adolescents to contribute to family earnings, which may lead to risk of missing school days or dropping out of school completely in order to work. Additionally for adolescents living in Sub-Saharan Africa, over 15 million have lost one or more parents to AIDS, further compromising available support and the psychosocial well-being of youth. At the community level, low-resources and poor infrastructure, further compromises the support and opportunities available to adolescents. The cumulative effect of poverty and developmental vulnerability makes youth more susceptible to a host of problems that can alter their life course, including risk of communicable diseases, like HIV/AIDS. In fact, though deaths in Sub-Saharan Africa due to AIDS have declined for all other age groups, estimates show that adolescent deaths are on the rise. Interventions targeted at improving adolescent health outcomes, must not only provide treatment and psychosocial support, but also address the structural barriers unique to adolescents living in this context.

The potential of economic strengthening interventions to positively impact child and adolescent health (and educational) outcomes has been well-researched. Studies have shown that financial inclusion through children and family savings accounts, and conditional cash transfer programs, may allow families and their children to experience benefits beyond financial gains. This conference will provide a forum for academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners to share findings, discuss progress, and identify gaps in the economic strengthening field, as it pertains to adolescent health, education and well-being. Capitalizing on the potential of this growing demographic by supporting youth as they navigate adolescence, can have important long-term economic, social and health impacts for the entire Sub-Saharan African region.

Conference Hosts:

The conference will be co-hosted by Columbia University's International Center for Child Health and Asset Development, the Heilbrunn Department of Population & Family Health at Mailman School of Public Health, the Columbia Population Research Center and the Columbia School of Social Work. The International Center for Child Health and Asset Development was formally launched at Columbia University School of Social Work in 2013. The Center currently houses two R01 studies examining the long-term effects and cost-effectiveness of economic empowerment for AIDS-affected youth in Uganda. The Heilbrunn Department of Population & Family Health addresses the health needs and the rights of diverse populations in communities across the globe, with a strategic focus on underserved populations, child, adolescent, reproductive and sexual health in both established communities and those affected by emergencies. The Columbia Population Research Center conducts research in four key areas, including a strategic focus on Children, Youth and Families, and brings together academics conducting domestic and global research from the Columbia Mailman School of Health, the School of Social Work and School of Arts and Sciences. The mission of the Columbia School of Social Work is to develop leaders in social work practice and research whose work advances the professional values, knowledge and skills through program and policies that enhance wellbeing and promote human rights and social justice at the local, national, and global level. CSSW and ICHAD were among those who sponsored the first Global Perspectives Conference in 2014 at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration.

Conference Objectives:

1. Follow-up on plans, collaborations and partnerships resulting from the 2014 Economic Strengthening Conference at the School of Social Service Administration in Chicago.
2. Look at poverty and other social determinants of health in developing countries.
3. Share new findings with the academic, research and NGO communities focused on improving health and development outcomes for children and adolescents in developing countries, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa.
4. Identify and discuss specific at-risk populations, including adolescent girls and young women, and sex workers, and interventions targeted at hard-to-reach communities.
5. Explore key areas of economic strengthening including: asset building, conditional and unconditional cash transfers, financial education, public/ private partnerships and financial inclusion.
6. Emphasize the importance of utilizing observation, intervention and implementation research to determine the efficacy and feasibility of economic strengthening interventions.
7. Identify innovations that may increase the rigor of economic strengthening research, including using biomarker data to measure health outcomes, and determining the cost-effectiveness of economic interventions.
8. Build on existing interdisciplinary partnerships to address research and service gaps for vulnerable children and families