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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

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**Message from Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of World AIDS Day**

1 December 2010

World AIDS Day is a moment to recall the devastating losses caused to individuals, households and communities across the world by the impact of HIV and AIDS. It is also a chance to review where we stand today in tackling the epidemic. The disease remains a major global challenge, but I am pleased this year to bring a message of progress.

Rates of new HIV infections are falling or stabilizing in most regions of the world. Earlier this year, a report by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS indicated a decline in new cases of HIV among young people of more than 25 per cent between 2001 and 2008 in 15 key countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Overall, declines in HIV prevalence have been most notable among young people aged 15–24. This has reflected safer behaviours and practices, including delayed sexual debut, partner reduction and increased condom use. These trends place young people at the heart of measures for HIV prevention -- as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and its cosponsors, including UNESCO, have been advocating.

However, decline in prevalence among young people is not universal. Nor is it equal. Worldwide, more than 60 per cent of all young people living with HIV are female. Young women still shoulder a greater burden of infection. In many countries, women face their greatest risk of infection before the age of 25.

Education is the key to success. In school, girls gain the knowledge, skills and confidence necessary to delay marriage and sexual activity. HIV infection rates are halved among people who finish primary school. It has been estimated that universal primary completion could result in preventing 700,000 additional cases of HIV each year.

School attendance is enormously beneficial in itself, but targeted prevention education is vital. Evidence shows that quality prevention education can shape knowledge and attitudes among young people about HIV and AIDS. It can build the new skills that are required and lay the foundation for the behaviour changes that are necessary in so many societies.

We are working in these directions. In December 2009, UNESCO published the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, in collaboration with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund and the World Health Organization. This is a major contribution to support efforts that strengthen HIV prevention with young people. Published in two volumes, the Technical Guidance offers evidence-informed and age-specific objectives for learners, so that they can make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV.

UNESCO will draw on all of its strengths in moving forward. This starts with a multidisciplinary mandate and a broad capacity to promote rights-based approaches. Our Intersectoral Platform on HIV and AIDS joins the resources of all UNESCO's sectors, institutes and field offices. Our objective is to promote inclusive responses to the epidemic that are scientifically accurate and culturally appropriate, taking in also the gender dimension.

We cannot let progress slip. Especially at a time of economic austerity, we must remain engaged to sustain and deepen hard-won gains against the epidemic. UNESCO and its partners must find more effective ways of tackling the social and structural factors that enable the epidemic to remain a global challenge. These include gender inequality and widespread stigma and discrimination.

The evidence is clear. Empowering young people through education to make informed decisions must lie at the heart of prevention. UNESCO's efforts to secure quality education for all, our actions in support of the Millennium Development Goals, fall in line with this objective. This World Aids Day inspires us all to continue working in these directions.

Irina Bokova