

# GIVE YOUTH THE TOOLS, AND THEY'LL CHANGE



PHOTO: HELENE CAUX

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# THE WORLD

My son is 7 years old, and when he asks, "Mommy, why are you going away again," I'd better have a good answer. I could tell him it's my job to cover breaking stories around the world. But when I look at him playing across the room, I know a much more powerful reason drives me to do what I do.

Like all parents, I want my child to grow up in a peaceful world, filled with dreams and possibilities. In my case, I believe that by reporting the news—both the good and the bad—and by never shying away from the reality of what I see, I can make a small difference.

The fact is, none of us who care about our children's future can afford to sit on the sidelines. There's too much at stake. We are witnessing the largest youth "bulge" in the history of our planet. Nearly half of the world's population is under the age of 24. That means 1.5 billion young people, ages 12 to 24, are making that ever-challenging transition to adulthood. The choices they make today and the opportunities they have will deeply affect the direction of our world and our collective future.

Here's the good news: While their numbers are growing, so are their contributions to the greater good. More young people than ever are realizing it's cool to be an active citizen of the world, not just an inhabitant. They're developing into a powerful force for social change, whether educating their peers to help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, rallying their communities to protect the environment or devising creative strategies to combat voter apathy.

This global youth movement is being fueled, in large part, by the proliferation of mass media. When I became a CNN correspondent in 1987, there were no such things as podcasts or blogs. And who ever heard of MySpace or YouTube? This generation is far more prepared than most adults to embrace new technologies as a way of making connections and making its mark. Today's youth aren't just playing



games and sharing music—they're finding innovative ways to mobilize others around urgent social and political issues.

Of course, young people first need access to technology and the skills to use it. That's why organizations like the International Youth Foundation are so vital. IYF empowers young social entrepreneurs worldwide with opportunities to access and use technology in dynamic new ways.

Consider one program in Mexico that teaches young people how to shoot videos of their communities—and identify issues that affect their lives in the process. These young filmmakers are exposing the harsh realities of their neighborhoods, like poverty, crime, drugs and pollution.

Similar programs in the Netherlands, Vietnam, China and elsewhere are producing the next generation of journalists. Young people are learning to conduct radio and TV interviews, write a newspaper story and design a website. More important, they're learning to tell their own stories, find their voices and make that critical leap to citizenship. Instead of merely seeing a problem, they're realizing they can do something about it.

Youth are also applying emerging technologies to larger social action campaigns. One youth-led organization in Albania, called MJAFIT!, sends short text messages via cell phones to a membership base of 8,000 citizens. The group gets credit for increasing voter turnout and raising the country's national education budget.

I hope all of you who are concerned about our youth take these examples to heart. Young people can and will do amazing things given the right tools and the right guidance. For young readers, my message is simple: You are half of the world. You have an unprecedented opportunity to shape the direction of your own lives and our shared future. With that comes the responsibility to use technology wisely and stay engaged for positive social change.

After all, robust democracies can only survive with strong, independent voices. Whether you're covering the news or making it, we desperately need to hear yours. **Y**

**Center:** Young adults work with children to produce short films as part of Cámara! Ahí Nos Vemos—an IYF and Nokia program in Mexico that has benefited more than 7,400 young people.

PHOTO: TUOMAS HARJUMAASKOLA