Girls can drive economic growth and social stability:
New Chicago Council report calls for increased investment in rural adolescent girls

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MEDIA CONTACTS:
Christiane Berthiaume
+33.6.17.60.74.28
christianeberthiaume@gmail.com

London – Adolescent girls living in rural areas of the developing world have untapped potential to drive economic development and help meet the world’s future food supply needs, says a new report released by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs. *Girls Grow: A Vital Force in Rural Economies* identifies opportunities to empower rural girls to spur economic and social change in their families and communities. Catherine Bertini, 2003 World Food Prize Laureate, serves as the publication’s lead author and chair of the project that produced the report.

Adolescent girls must be a key part of successful agricultural and rural economic development strategies, as they are many of the world’s future farmers, rural leaders, decision makers, and mothers. Rural adolescent girls face a triple challenge due to their location, gender, and age. The report calls on national governments and bilateral donors to provide services and opportunities that both improve girls’ lives and equip them to be successful economic contributors. Recommended actions include ensuring girls complete secondary school, increasing access to vocational training, eliminating barriers girls face in the work place, building girls’ capacity as decision makers, enhancing health services information and delivery to girls in rural areas, and keeping girls safe.

Special attention is paid to how girls uniquely contribute to agriculture. Women in the developing world make up 43 percent of the agricultural labor force. Girls help with these responsibilities and handle, with their mothers, virtually all domestic chores, including fetching water and carrying firewood. The report recommends that adolescent girls be incorporated into country-wide agricultural development plans, have more opportunities to receive agricultural skill building and participate in rural peer groups, and have greater access to agricultural inputs and credit. Donors are also encouraged to dedicate climate change adaptation and mitigation monies targeting natural resource management to programs including girls.

If the world is to meet the challenge of feeding 9 billion people by 2050, we must invest in the human capital of those with the potential to transform agricultural economies – adolescent girls,” said Bertini. “Already, they carry much of families’ burdens; with opportunity, they can be major change agents for rural communities and nations. As nations are rediscovering the importance of agricultural development, we want to ensure that the new definition of rural economies’ strengths includes the critical role of adolescent girls.”

The report’s conclusions and recommendations were developed through consultations with an advisory group of noted leaders and experts in agriculture, gender, demography, business, and development from government, academia, the private sector, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.

The developing world’s 283 million rural adolescent girls face unique challenges. Many live in poverty, are involved in agriculture, carry heavy work burdens, have limited access to health
services, don’t complete school, and marry early. However, it is proven that strengthening women brings benefits to families, economies, and societies. If women in agriculture were given the same access to productive assets as men, national agricultural output would increase by 2.5-4 percent and poverty would be reduced by 12-17 percent. Interventions during adolescence can often change the trajectory of a girl’s life. In spite of this, less than two cents of every development dollar goes to adolescent girls.

“Now is the time invest in rural adolescent girls,” says Marshall M. Bouton, president, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs. “The international community is renewing its commitments to agricultural development, and increasingly women, who make up almost half of the world’s farmers, are benefiting. This study finds, however, that progress will only be sustainable if investments are also made in the world’s future farmers, entrepreneurs, and managers – rural adolescent girls.”

The publication serves as the next volume of “Girls Count,” a report series jointly led by the Nike Foundation and the United Nations Foundation to provide research specifically focused on issues affecting adolescent girls in the developing world.

The report is the culmination of the Girls in Rural Economies project, which draws upon The Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ previous work on agriculture and development, including the 2009 report, Renewing American Leadership in the Fight Against Global Hunger and Poverty, and the recently released publication, Bringing Agriculture to the Table: How Agriculture and Food Can Play a Role in the Prevention of Chronic Disease.

Support for the Girls in Rural Economies project has been generously provided by the Nike Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the United Nations Foundation.

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The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, founded in 1922, is a prominent, independent and nonpartisan organization committed to influencing the discourse on global issues through contributions to opinion and policy formation, leadership dialogue, and public learning. Long known for its studies of American public opinion on foreign policy matters, the Council is expanding its contributions to discussions of critical global issues through studies, task force reports, and leadership dialogue. Recent Chicago Council reports include task forces focused on rethinking U.S. agriculture policies to better align them with market opportunities and international obligations, examining the future of Chicago as a global city, and increasing the engagement of Muslim Americans in U.S. civic and political life.