Overview: Adolescents – young people aged 10-19 years – constitute an unprecedented 1.2 billion individuals, with the clear majority living in the global South (UNFPA, 2011). Adolescence is increasingly recognised by scientists and development actors alike as a key window of opportunity, given the rapid physical, psycho-emotional, cognitive and social changes that occur during the second decade of life (Patton et al., 2017). However, while the second decade of life has the potential to be an age ‘of opportunity’ there are considerable inequalities within this cohort – both across and within countries – and if the international community does not invest more equitably we risk exacerbating these both for young people currently and in the future with potential inter-generational effects. Intersectional disadvantage: Adolescent girls, for example, face heightened risks of gender- and sexual based violence compared to their male peers, but it is estimated that adolescent girls with disabilities face risks that are three to four-fold (Jones et al., 2018). In terms of schooling, while there have been major advances towards achieving universal primary education, transitions to secondary school see many adolescents drop out, and for ethnic minority and refugee adolescents the likelihood of not transitioning to secondary and post-secondary education is disproportionately higher (UNHCR, 2016).

Methodology: To further explore the patterning of these challenges and the extent to which current programme interventions are addressing these, this paper draws on the baseline findings of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme which is following 18,000 adolescent girls and their care-givers from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan and Nepal longitudinally over a nine year period (2015-2014), together with indepth qualitative research with a subset. The adolescents are divided into two age cohorts - young adolescents 10-12 years and older adolescents 15-17 years in order to understand the factors that shape transitions across adolescence and then into early adulthood. Within this cohort the research sample also includes 5% of adolescents with disabilities (in line with global prevalence estimates) and a subset of especially vulnerable adolescents including adolescent girls who are married and adolescents from refugee contexts (Palestine and Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh).

Findings: The paper highlights critical differences in terms of developmental outcomes between adolescents in general and their peers from remote rural areas, refugee settings, and with disabilities. In terms of gender, the paper highlights that the situation is complex, with gender differences in favour of girls in some settings especially vis-à-vis education completion, but more often in favour of boys with regard to health and employment opportunities.

Relevance to conference theme: By focusing on adolescents – a cohort which too often falls between the cracks of research focusing on adults or on children – but which due to both rapid physical, cognitive as well as social changes during the second decade of life have unique needs and vulnerabilities – this paper can make a valuable contribution to debates on equality, equity and sustainable development. It is vital that these discussions do not remain siloed within adolescent and youth studies fields, but instead are mainstreamed into broader discussion on sustainable development.