COVID-19 AND THE YOUTH POLICY

Prepared by
The Youth Café

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented global health crisis we are facing is affecting all parts of society and changing lives and livelihoods. In all types of crises and times of need, from climate change to armed conflict or political unrest, young people and youth-led organizations have been quick to take action and respond to the needs of others. The same is happening now during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While attention is currently focused on those most immediately affected by the virus, there are many indications the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting social, cultural, economic, political and multidimensional impacts on the whole of societies, including on young people, as highlighted by the Secretary General's Report "Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity" (March 2020).

CALL TO ACTION

The Youth Café is committed to goals enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the World Programme of Action for Youth, and the UN Youth Strategy. Respect for all human rights - including economic, social, and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights - is fundamental to the success of public health responses and recovery from the pandemic.

This is why members of The Youth Cafe call for:
1) Partnering, safely and effectively, with young people during and after the COVID-19 crisis,
2) Recognition of young people's own actions and their potential to advance the fight against the pandemic,
3) Understanding the specific impacts the pandemic has and will have on young people while ensuring that COVID-19 related responses uphold young people's human rights and are inclusive of young people's

YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACTIONS

In increasing numbers, young people are proactively combating the spread of the virus and working to mitigate and address the pandemic's impacts. For example, young people are already:

Raising awareness and enhancing connections: Young people are at the forefront of risk communication initiatives - spreading the word about combating misinformation, discrimination and stigma related to the crisis, physical distancing and proper measures to stop the spread of the virus. For instance, Indigenous youth are disseminating information about the virus in local Indigenous languages; and networks of young people such as those living with HIV, are reaching out to their peers to assess their needs, monitor disruption of services and ensure dissemination of information on how to access antiretrovirals, or using various platforms to spread adapted and fact-based information. Young people are also connecting communities together at a time of separation through innovative ideas and social media platforms to raise community spirit.

Supporting others: Young people are helping promote WHO guidelines and addressing the COVID-19-related needs of the most vulnerable in their communities, including persons with disabilities, older persons, migrants, refugees and those living in slums and informal settlements. Across the world, young people are volunteering to safely help seniors and other at-risk groups to access supplies, such as food and medication. Young people are also assisting schools with limited resources by transferring and translating school curricula for broader online use, or by providing tools for physical activity and sport during confinement. Young people are further providing guidance on thorough handwashing practices so as to reduce the spread of the virus. Additionally, young people are contributing to data collection and monitoring, including in relation to marginalized communities, to assess the COVID-19 response. Through social media, young people are also finding ways to check in on, and support, others' mental health.

Safeguarding human rights: Young people are finding new ways to mitigate the risks that physical distancing poses on social justice and inclusion, as well as safeguarding the human rights of groups who are at-risk. Young people are also seeking accountability for decisions made in COVID-19 responses, in order to strengthen institutions and the rule of law through transparency and anti-corruption measures.

Saving lives: Even in the light of shortages of protective equipment, young health professionals and students are risking their lives on the front lines of the pandemic. Young women and men researchers and specialists are also helping to combat this disease by contributing to the development of life-saving measures, supporting medical interventions that can be implemented and replicated quickly (such as low-cost, low-tech ventilators), contributing to knowledge generation and promoting the diffusion of scientific and fact-based information online. Young researchers are also working to further understand animal to human disease transmission (zoonosis) to help prevent similar outbreaks in the future.

Addressing the economic and food security impact of the crisis: Young workers, including young farmers and rural entrepreneurs, are innovating and using various technologies and communication tools to develop local solutions. Such work is critical to maintain supply chains and build alternate, more resilient and inclusive economies, which are vital to ensure access to an adequate food supply for the population.

Young women and men are part of the solution, actively contributing to efforts to reduce the spread of the virus and mitigate the pandemic's impact. Young people, as torchbearers of our sustainable development, are advocating environmental action to drive transformative change, at scale, to leave no one behind.
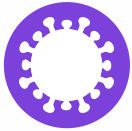
ENGAGING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

When developing initiatives to support young people's efforts to safely and effectively act as agents of change in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of important elements need to be taken into consideration, including:

- **Inclusion and Participation**: Efforts to mitigate the short and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic require an unprecedented level of collaboration. Young people should be able to actively participate in shaping responses and need to be meaningfully included in all aspects and phases of the response.
- **Duty of care:** When collaborating to fight COVID-19, adequate caution and prudence is required to ensure that young people, particularly young women and girls, are not exposed to unnecessary dangers related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Trust:** As for other global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and sustaining peace, the most efficient solutions are always those leveraging everyone's collective strengths and contributions. Young people are already developing and implementing solutions on multiple fronts; they are trustworthy partners. These actions by young people need to be invested in, recognized and amplified. This also offers opportunities for institutions and governments to enhance trust among young people and strengthen social cohesion among groups and between generations.
- **Long-term commitment:** While a large portion of the world's resources will need to be redirected toward the fight against the virus and the post-pandemic recovery, youth development should remain a top priority. For the world to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in a sustainable and equitable manner, young people need to be supported to reach their full potential and thrive.
- **No young person left behind:** Interventions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery need to be mindful of young people who are marginalized or vulnerable, including rural young people, young migrants and refugees, adolescent girls and young women, indigenous and afro-descendent youth, young persons with disabilities, young people living with HIV, young members of LGBT communities, and others who are potentially marginalized and in vulnerable situations. A strong and sustainable recovery is possible only if young people are reached and included in this process and related interventions.
- Efforts to stop the spread of the virus and to rebuild in a sustainable and equitable manner must meaningfully include young people and support their unique contribution. However, this cannot be done at the cost of young people's own development or without including the most vulnerable.

IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

While young people are already taking action to stop the spread of the disease and mitigate the repercussions of the pandemic, it is critical to recognize the multiple and diverse impacts the COVID-19 pandemic already has and will have on young people and their human rights. These include, among many others:

- **Right to health**: Limited access to health insurance coverage, especially in low- and middle-income countries without Universal Health Coverage, reduces young people's opportunities to access appropriate and timely health care and services should they become sick. Furthermore, with the observed disruption of health services, young people who need essential, time-sensitive and life-saving medication and services may risk not being able to access them, thereby increasing the likelihood of developing complications when infected. These challenges may be further exacerbated for young people with disabilities. In addition, the crisis – and particularly the confinement and distancing measures – poses a series of mental health challenges to young people and may aggravate the state of youth with pre-existing mental health conditions.

- **Right to safety:** Confinement measures increase the likelihood of violence towards young people - particularly physical and sexual violence against girls, boys, adolescent girls, and young women - and may also hinder their ability to seek supportive services, including mental health services. Also, disproportionate restrictions by governments can leave young peacebuilders, human rights, and environmental defenders less protected against attacks and threats.

- **Right to employment:** Around one in five of the world's youth are not in employment, education or training (with young women in this group outnumbering young men two to one) and youth unemployment rates are about 3 times as high as those of adults. Young people, and especially young women, are highly vulnerable since most of them are likely employed in the informal economy and often have low-paid, less secure, and less protected jobs than their male counterparts and are more likely to live in working poverty. Youth under 18 years are at risk of increased poverty and of being exposed to child labor, sexual exploitation, and child marriage. With these benchmarks, in times of crisis, young people are highly susceptible to unemployment and greater labor market vulnerabilities.

In addition, some economic policy responses – such as fiscal and monetary policies, bailouts and tax reliefs, mortgage freezes, interests on student and business loans – are not taking into account young people's needs and will not reach them directly or in the short term. Social protection mechanisms that are being implemented in the context of the COVID-19 crisis to safeguard incomes, for example, monetary transfers and extended unemployment benefits, should take into account the specific vulnerabilities facing youth.

- **Right to a healthy environment:** While COVID 19 has temporarily led to reduced greenhouse gas emissions and improved air quality at the expense of economic activities, many have overturned environmental efforts previously made, resulting in an increase in the amount of medical and hazardous waste generated. In the post-crisis setting, as governments approve stimulus packages to support job creation, poverty reduction, development and economic growth, there is the opportunity to "build back better". This entails leapfrogging to green investments, such as renewable energy, smart housing, green public procurement, public transport — all guided by the principles and standards of sustainable production and consumption. Such advancements can contribute towards sustainable and resilient economies for present and future generations that young people have been demanding.

- **Right to education:** An increasing number of countries have closed schools and other educational and training institutions. This has caused an unprecedented number of young people to face significant disruption to their education and may delay their graduation or impact their ability to graduate at all. Underprivileged youth often lack access to remote learning tools and the internet, if they are provided with affordable access to education at all; leading to a decrease in the likelihood that they will be able to continue their education during such school closures. In addition, as schools are often a source of free meals and other social services (e.g. mental health, sexual and reproductive health education, etc.) a high number of young people may face additional nutrition and health challenges. Young women and girls are less likely to go back to school than their male counterparts, as they are the ones to take up domestic care roles at home. Child marriages are also likely to increase, as families look for means to sustain themselves.

- **Right to food security and good nutrition:** It is expected that the COVID-19 crisis will widely hit developing countries with less diversified and resilient economies, leading to a high risk of regional food shortages. In fact, the massive job losses and income constraints to which young people are particularly exposed may impact their ability to access food; farm labor constraints could affect the production and the availability of fresh food in the markets.

Vulnerable and low-income groups like smallholder farmers, food vendors, slum dwellers, and especially women and youth, will be disproportionately affected.

- **Right to participation and inclusion:** Containment and physical distancing measures may limit the capacity of youth to exercise their rights, leading to discrimination and the exclusion of young people from decision-making processes, as well as limiting their right to peaceful assembly and association. While online solutions and digital spaces exist, inequalities in access to the internet limits youth participation, while increasing cybercrime. In addition, the barriers faced by young migrants and refugees to integrate into labour markets, education and health systems, may be further exacerbated by the pandemic.

- **Right to peace and security:** The risks of instability, radicalization and violence fueled by the pandemic – especially in countries already affected by conflict, organized crime and terrorism – are unprecedented challenges for the international community. It is also a generational call for young people around the world to advocate for a stronger multilateral cooperation, principled public safety and security based on human rights and the rule of law, and decisive action to respond to the United Nations Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire. Furthermore, protecting fundamental rights such as freedom of association and expression are critical for young people to continue their human rights and peacebuilding work, even in the midst of COVID-19.

Efforts to mitigate and address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic must include provisions that are responsive to young people's needs and uphold their rights, or youth-specific provisions when needed. More decent jobs are part of the solutions to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in order to reduce poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition simultaneously.
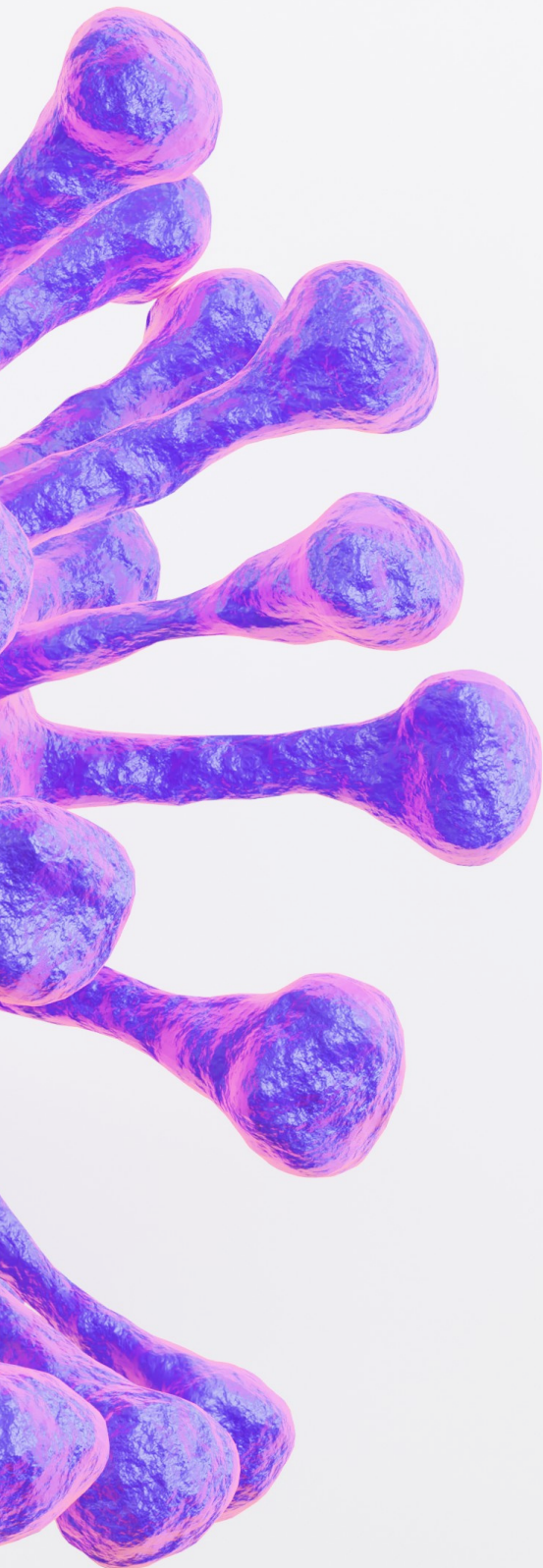
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