

# Subject updates

## The era of youth

We are living in an era where young people are defining our world and its future. It's evidenced in numbers – the world is experiencing its biggest generation of young people – often defined as a demographic dividend. There are also stories of youth-led change. Protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd have been youth-led; as have climate strikes and mass school walkouts.

There are pockets of smaller-scale activism being organised and led by young people everywhere: students making sure sanitary products are available in UK schools; young volunteers in Madagascar fixing broken development programmes; youth people in Cameroon making sure the poorest have access to sanitisers to prevent COVID-19.

At Restless Development, we exist to support young people in this endeavour. We do this by supporting young people as leaders of change. If they need skills, we train them. If they need access, we help open doors. If they need connections to like-minded people, we join the dots.

Crucially, our work starts with one simple rule: we listen. We listen to young people, and the action we take to help resolve problems is guided by young people and delivered in partnership with them.

## An era of action defined by young people

This simple act of listening to young people has to be applied to every crisis and problem we face. Power and decision making are still concentrated in the hands of the few. It means too often the solutions are not informed, shaped and led by those at the sharp end of the problems we face.

The coronavirus pandemic is leaving a trail of parallel problems, many of which already existed



*The Gotikhel group of volunteers work in the local school to teach computer technology to the students*

and have now been exacerbated by periods of lockdown, such as youth unemployment. It is estimated one billion young people will enter the labour market between 2015 and 2025, but only 40% are likely to find jobs if the current conditions do not change. However, there is nuance at play here – headlines citing the 'youth employment crisis' do not do justice to the complexity of this issue.

Our research is youth-led, which effectively means we ask better questions and get better insights. And in doing so we can unravel these complexities by listening to young people and working side by side on the solutions. Young people led research that dug into these complexities in their working lives, as outlined in May in a *Geography* article by Anna Barford, Rachel Coombe and Rachel Proefke (2020). We've learnt from listening to young people that the youth unemployment problem is not only about *not* having a job, it's about what it means to make a meaningful living.

Many young people in this crisis are in fact underemployed – they have work but it is often poorly paid, dangerous, or in short supply. 70% of young people in developing countries are in working poverty (ILO, 2017) and over 50% of youth in low-income countries are underemployed.

But what young people are telling us they want is not currently addressed by a response that is heavily focused on 'supply-side interventions', which aim to increase employability among young people, but do little to create jobs and demand for their skills, or to address the structural barriers to finding work, such as nepotism and in-work poverty.

Our youth-led research not only gives us crucial insight into the lived experience of young people today and is empowering in itself. We ensure that our young researchers are supported and develop transferable skills for their future careers.



*Tannu, one of the Skills Sakhis from the DISHA project*

## Structural change

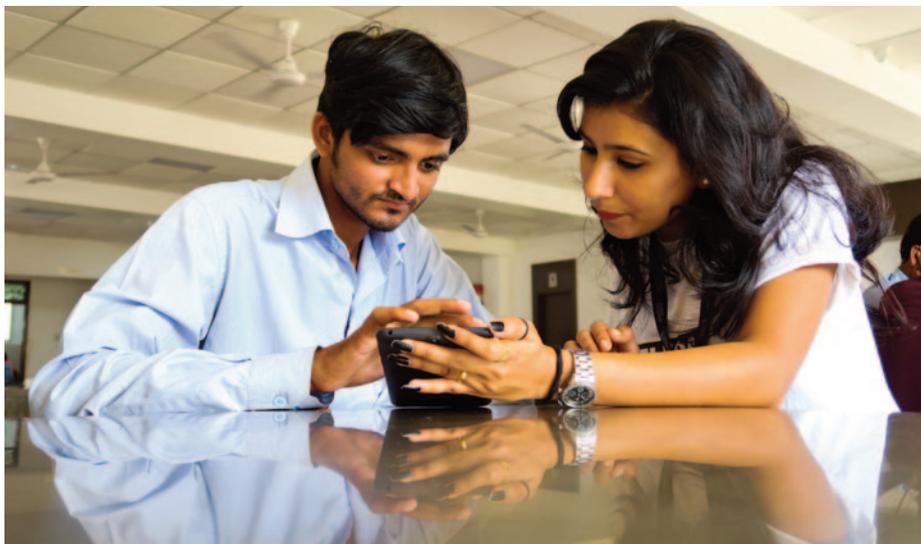
What this research tells us is that governments, academics, NGOs and companies need to work closely with young people to develop youth-led interventions and policies if we are to have the necessary structural change. At Restless Development, as well as supporting young people with soft and hard skills, we support them to advocate for long-lasting change that gets to the root cause of problems like unemployment and underemployment.

Youth-led research and advocacy can help reverse the widening gulf between the voices of young people and policymakers on livelihoods as well other emerging issues, whether at a local or global level. What is clear is that we will never solve a crisis, or achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, if we don't work with and listen to young people. Young people are at the heart of the issue, they must also be at the heart of the solutions.

## Reference

Barford, A., Coombe, R., and Proefke, R. 2020. 'Youth experiences of the decent work deficit' *Geography*, Vol 105, 2, pp. 60-68

We have regular opportunities to get involved in our work, from joining our campaigns, to being part of research projects, to writing for our blog, to volunteering. Visit our website to find the latest opportunities at: [www.restlessdevelopment.org/use-your-youth-power](http://www.restlessdevelopment.org/use-your-youth-power).



*Rajshree, a Youth Accountability Advocate from Jharkand, India, collects data from young people on family planning*