

**RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT**
POWERED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

A GLOBAL PLATFORM ON EDUCATION

rewired 

BY US,

FOR US:

**REWIRING
EDUCATION
FOR A NEW
GENERATION**

RESEARCH REPORT

OCTOBER 2021



Dear Reader

When I was young, my dream was to be a pilot. I spent most of my childhood reading about planes and I wanted to fly to as many countries as possible and get to meet different people. I was also very interested in visiting the natural wonders of the world. However, life seemed to have other plans for me as I went to high school and later into higher education. My dream to be a pilot faded and I developed a keen interest in studying engineering. This came from my work experience with an engineering firm prior to getting into university. My story is a common one in many parts of my country; many young people have transitioned from their earliest dreams and aspirations into something new.

Globally, we have all had different experiences in the way we learn, earn, and engage in our communities. I had an amazing opportunity alongside 11 other young researchers to take the lead on researching some of the most pressing issues young people are facing across the globe: their education, community participation, and livelihoods. Through this research, I had compelling discussions with young people from my country and I was glad to hear them fully express themselves about how they would like to see their educational opportunities rewired.

We believe that education is a basic right for every human being. Unfortunately, that might not always be so for young people living in rural areas, those who are differently abled and others who are marginalised by the societies they live in. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered our way of life, affecting how we learn, work, and live. Advancements in technology and other global trends have shifted how we learn, live, and relate within our communities and our education systems and the workforce must shift alongside that.

This report aims to capture young voices and highlight the challenges that young people are facing to pursue their aspirations.

Young people want to be at the centre of world development: creating and innovating sustainable solutions to our current global problems because *we are the ones inheriting the future*. However, this can only happen if governments, international organisations, and decision makers give us a safe space to contribute and participate.

I hope this report inspires you as much as it did me.

Yours sincerely,

Purity Musatila, Zambia

On behalf of the research team



BY US, FOR US

This research uniquely captures the global perspective on education reform, the impact of the pandemic and youth inclusion directly by young people, from young people through an innovative youth-led methodology. Within this study, young people are clear: rewiring the system is needed to meet their needs and transform education to set young people up for future success.

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ACADEMIA.

*Once upon a time, a long long time ago, there was an old man called Academia.
With high standards, morals and principles, always dressed in the same coats
year after year, not once would he change to a 'different' attire.
He thrived in the industrial age, his memory was intact, with facts
Numbers, names, years, all of those ologies, you can name it.
Receiving accolades for how much he can cram and memorise.*

*Sitting in classes arranged in rows, with him, as the teacher,
he was a superhuman and everyone revered him, a saviour and hero.
He cloned to perfection whoever took his lessons,
Dressing them up in the same uniform, he wears every single day.
They took on working jobs of little to no unique talent,
At the time, it was a dream come true. It was a new day, and a new dawn.
Academia paved his own way, in human civilisation...*

*Until one day,
Young minds started questioning the ways of Academia.
Proving him outdated and rather seemingly broken,
Shedding light to his inconsistencies with the present times,
How he stayed focused on doing it his way or nothing else.
That he neglected four of the most important know-hows:
Curiosity, Individuality, Interactivity, and Creativity.*

*In their absence, Academia as a whole was, is and will always be no success.
But since he is still limited for most to access,
Most nations are holding so tight onto his rigid correctness,
Ripping the society off of any possibility to do anything 'different'.
After all, it is much easier to be dressed in something familiar!
Forever irreplaceable standardised tests!
Unfair, inconsiderate and blind to one's special and unique abilities,
in the name of the grading system and IQ.*

*In this day and age, with policies driven by change seekers and makers,
Academia must 'make room' for:*

*Teamwork, Work ethic, Creativity, Complex problem solving, Emotional intelligence,
Interpersonal skills, Personal finance and more... where the world is heading to.*

*The good news is, the old coats are slipping off his back, the world is demanding
for bigger than them.
Slowly but surely, Academia is going to have to be open to the idea of being rewired.
And he will.*

Author: Sharon Urusaro Kalimba, age 24, Rwanda

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO WHY EDUCATION MUST BE REWIRED.

Within the context of revolutionising technologies, changing climates, and a world-altering pandemic, young people must learn to navigate not only the world of today, but also that of an uncertain tomorrow. The importance of a holistic, agile, and resilient approach to education was enshrined in the targets of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.¹ It stresses addressing the many forms of exclusion and inequality that determine educational access, participation, process, quality, and outcomes. SDG 4 sets a precedent for an integrated, multifaceted approach to education's purpose and nature, including targets oriented toward skills for decent work alongside those needed to promote sustainable development, human rights, and global citizenship.

The global youth conversation on education, skills, the future of work, and youth voice could not come at a more crucial time; our world is in transition globally due to a pandemic, technological advancements, shifts in educational systems, climate change, and much more. In order to reimagine education, it is essential to hear the voices of young people. Young people are most invested in such changes and they are the ones who have the most relevant lived experiences today. Their unique insights, perspectives, and experiences directly link to their recommendations on how they need to be better equipped with the skills and knowledge for their work and personal lives. They understand that education

should be rewired in order to address the challenges of today and prepare for tomorrow.

To *rewire education for a prosperous and sustainable future*, Dubai Cares has launched the **RewirEd** platform.² A collaboration between Dubai Cares and Expo 2020 Dubai, in close coordination with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC), RewirEd aims to be a catalyst in redefining education to ensure a future that is prosperous, sustainable, innovative, and accessible to all. The RewirEd Summit will be held in December 2021 to catalyse meaningful and urgent shifts in education globally.

In order to ensure that youth voices are at the forefront of the Summit, this youth-led research was launched to examine the following research questions:

1. **Pathways to Learning and Livelihoods**

How can education, in all its forms, best equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need across their communities, work, and personal lives?

2. **Young People's Aspirations**

How can we rewire education systems to ensure that they are reflective and supportive of young people's aspirations, values, and motivations?

3. **Active Youth Citizenship**

How can young people's capacity for active citizenship be strengthened and elevated in political and economic systems?

¹ United Nations. (2021). Goal 4. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

² For more information: <https://www.rewired2021.com>.

We are shaping the future of research.

This research complements existing research on education reform, the impact of the pandemic on education and livelihoods, and youth inclusion.

However, this research uniquely captures the global perspective directly by young people, from young people through an innovative youth-led methodology. With young people leading the research design, data collection, data analysis, and report writing, much existing knowledge on education is validated while also raising some new points for consideration. Throughout the study, links with existing research are highlighted.

While much of the existing literature emphasises the profoundly different experiences that young people have across contexts, this research highlights the deep similarities that unify young people's experience. Regardless of where young people come from, they share many of the same aspirations and barriers. While this research confirms many of the conclusions drawn by existing literature that young people in rural settings, young women, and other young people that face exclusions (e.g. ethnic, socio-economic, etc.) have a harder time accessing education and work opportunities,³ it uniquely captures the reality that this is an experience that is happening worldwide. Regardless of country or context, these young people face the same barriers in each of their communities. Furthermore, nearly all young people experience similar barriers in the workplace; they are not being taken seriously nor their ideas listened to, they are not given sufficient opportunities to strengthen their skills, and those with power are unwilling to share that power with young people.

This study also complements existing literature on the profound impact of technology and the digital economy, which is compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing literature finds that the digital and physical realms are becoming increasingly linked, and more opportunities for education and work are available virtually.⁴ This research elaborates further by showcasing how young people are experiencing this transition and how it is shifting and shaping their aspirations.

A myriad of resources and conceptual frameworks have emerged, attempting to flesh out skills-based curriculums reflective of the 21st century's needs. Questions that challenge the fundamentals of how learning is organised, such as the role of the teacher, digital technologies, and assessments, have already been widely considered.⁵ Existing research shows a disconnect between the stated priorities and the systemwide implementation of 21st century skills development in practice. One of the factors influencing this misalignment is a gap in consensus, knowledge, and experience on how to approach, implement, and evaluate these skills.⁶ However, these perspectives tend to focus on a gradual rethinking of elements of current education systems, rather than advocating for a fundamental restructure. Within this study, young people are clear: rewiring the system is needed to meet their needs and transform education to set young people up for future success.

³ Trivelli, C. and Morel, J. (2019). *Rural youth inclusion, empowerment and participation*. Rome: IFAD.

FAO (2020). *Rural youth and the COVID-19 pandemic*. Rome: FAO.

⁴ Ndung'u, N. and Signé, L. (2020). *The Fourth Industrial Revolution and digitalisation will transform Africa into a global powerhouse*. Brookings.

Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-and-digitization-will-transform-africa-into-a-global-powerhouse/>.

International Labour Organization. (2020). *Global employment trends for youth 2020: technology and the future of jobs*. Geneva: ILO.

Available at: https://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/working-papers/WCMS_755248/lang--en/index.htm.

⁵ Johnston, K., Conneely, C., Murchan, D., and Tangney, B. (2015). *Enacting key skills-based curricula in secondary education: lessons from a technology-mediated, group-based learning initiative*. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 24(4), pp. 423–442.

⁶ Global Partnership for Education. (2020). *21st century skills: what potential role for the Global Partnership for Education? A landscape review*. Washington DC: GPE. Available at: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/21st-century-skills-what-potential-role-global-partnership-education>.

CHAPTER 2: STUDY METHODOLOGY.

This research was led by a team of 12 young researchers from 12 different countries (selected out of 1,081 applicants). The team of young researchers investigated the lived experiences and perspectives of 3,294 young people across 70 countries. See Table 1 for further detail on the sampling.

Table 1: Data collected by method, region, and gender.

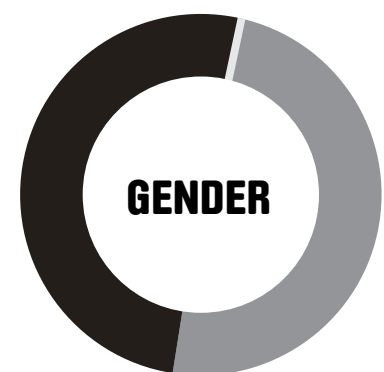
Method	Region					Gender			Total
	Europe	Asia	Africa	N. & S. America	Not specified/ other	Male	Female	Non-binary/ Did not disclose	
Survey	159 (9%)	533 (31%)	886 (51%)	150 (8%)	15 (1%)	842 (48%)	882 (51%)	19 (1%)	1,743 (53%)
Focus group discussion, audio clips, youth talks	167 (11%)	535 (34%)	430 (28%)	419 (27%)	0 (0%)	845 (54%)	706 (46%)	0 (0%)	1,551 (47%)
TOTAL	326 (10%)	1,068 (32%)	1,316 (40%)	569 (17%)	15 (1%)	1,687 (51%)	1,588 (48%)	19 (1%)	3,294



- Survey
- Focus group discussion, audio clips, youth talks



- Africa
- Asia
- N. & S. America
- Europe
- Other



- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/did not disclose

How did we do it?

Restless Development’s participatory youth-led research approach empowers young people to drive the inquiry process, and they were uniquely able to capture the perspectives of young people like themselves. The approach begins with the recruitment of young researchers. Recruitment was open to young people aged 18–30, representing Asia, Africa, Caribbean, North America, South America, Europe, and Australia, who have been active in a community group, social movement, or civil society organisation. A group of 12 young researchers from 12 different countries were selected out of 1,081 applicants based on their connections to civil society, experience with education and livelihoods, and interest in the research process. Of these young researchers, 58% were female and they had an average age of 24 years old.

Six-step youth-led research process.



The six-step youth-led research model maximised youth leadership at every stage of the research process: from the first step when young researchers provided input into the study design, to their collection and analysis of all the data, and finally the writing of this report.

1. SETTING THE FRAMEWORK

Restless Development and Dubai Cares collaboratively determined research focus: according to young people globally, how should education be rewired for a prosperous and sustainable future? Then, a desk-based review of research on youth, education, skills, pathways into employment, and the future of work, including relevant research on the impact of COVID-19, was conducted. The review covered a broad range of topics including skills-based curriculums, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and 21st century skills, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), connectivity for opportunity, school to work transition, decent rural livelihoods, and entrepreneurship in schools, as well as young migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees. Guided by the literature review, a research framework was designed.

It was at this point that the young researchers joined the study. They provided direct feedback on the research framework to ensure that the study would reflect their priorities.

2. DESIGNING THE QUESTIONS

The young researchers participated in a week-long online training session and workshop. During this training, they were trained on skills such as the fundamentals of qualitative and quantitative research, research ethics,

data safeguarding, best practices in conducting focus group discussions and key informant interviews, note taking, and transcription.

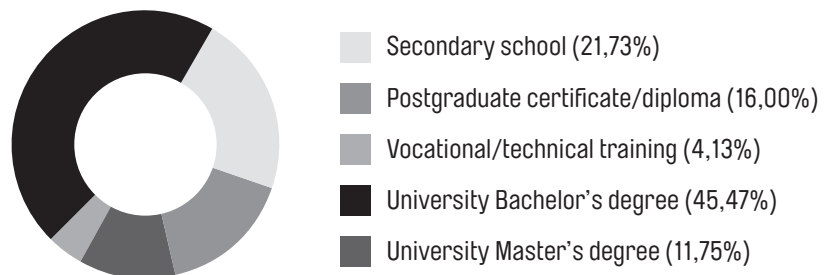
A key component of the training was a session on defining the data collection tools. The researchers prioritised the key questions to be asked of young people in the focus groups and interviews. Restless Development staff provided technical oversight and finalised the data collection tools.

3. COLLECTING THE DATA

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected by the researchers. In total, 3,294 young people from 70 countries are represented by the data. See Table 1 for more detail on who was reached and by which method.

Survey. The data collection began with the survey to identify preliminary findings and shape the qualitative data collection tools. During the five-week data collection period, we heard from 1,744 young people (average age of 24 years) across the globe. Our youth researchers shared the survey with their social networks and supported their offline peers to fill in the survey by phone. The survey was also shared extensively by Restless Development and RewirEd. Several channels, including website links and social media pages, were used to reach out to 40 partner organisations and youth networks around the globe.

Figure 1: Survey respondents' highest level of education
(n=1,731; 12 respondents omitted due to 0% significance in rounding)



Focus group discussions. After the completion of the survey, a team of 12 researchers started the qualitative data collection in order to dig deeper into the survey responses. Independently, the young researchers identified respondents in accordance with the sampling framework (young people aged 18–30 in a range of geographic regions). They identified the respondents primarily through convenience sampling of their existing networks, including via social media channels, coordinating with national and local youth networks to share the opportunity widely, through universities and schools, and via groups with which they are involved, as well as snowball sampling through other study participants and their friends. They also made efforts to reach those outside of their networks by connecting with administrators in different municipalities and other local groups.

The discussions brought an average of six young people into conversation per session via online platforms. We conducted 154 focus groups of 1–1.5 hours each, and we heard from 921 young people globally.

When possible, the researchers' audio recorded the conversations. From the recordings, the researchers wrote detailed notes to summarise the key points raised by the respondents.

Audio/video clips. The opportunity to answer question prompts via sharing audio/video recordings was offered to participants as an alternative to the focus group discussions (through the same sampling approach). This was also an element of our data collection research design that aimed to reduce some barriers to participation for young people who were not able to take part in focus group discussions due to technological or time restrictions. Again, the young researchers identified respondents in accordance with the sampling framework who had limited internet connectivity. They identified the respondents through the same approaches as the focus group discussions; respondents were asked if they would like to participate in the focus group discussion or submit audio or video clips.

The opportunity to contribute video/audio responses to questions allowed them to record their insights and share them back to us. Through these clips, we were able to capture a broader, more diverse sample of young people's voices. In a period of three months, we heard from 563 young people across the globe. From the recordings, the researchers wrote detailed notes to summarise the key points raised by the respondents.

Youth talks. In order to reach more young people in the regions that were less well represented in the survey results, three virtual (Zoom) youth talks for three regions (MENA, Latin America, Europe & South Asia) were held. Participants in the youth talks were identified through the networks (and partners) of the researchers, Restless Development, and Dubai Cares. We heard from 67 young people through these conversations. Detailed minutes were captured during the talks.

4. ANALYSING THE FINDINGS

The data analysis occurred in two phases, beginning with the survey data and followed by the remainder of the qualitative data. The survey analysis was conducted by young Restless Development staff members. A preliminary analysis resulted in key descriptive data points. This preliminary analysis, in addition to the research framework itself, guided the creation of the qualitative data codebook.

During a virtual week-long analysis workshop, the team of 12 young researchers used a deductive coding process via Google Sheets to analyse the qualitative data. The researchers coded their own detailed summary notes from the focus group discussions and audio/video clips and divided up the analysis of the youth talk notes.

The analysis workshop created an enabling environment for the young researchers to collaborate and coordinate their coding process, which harmonised the findings. When analysing the data, the team also applied a gender lens and explored the different ways that young people of different genders had differing experiences. In addition, the researchers compiled the list of limitations based on their experiences with the data collection. Finally, the analysis workshop culminated in a collection of themes and recommendations per topic area (learning and livelihoods, aspirations, active citizenship). These themes and recommendations laid the foundation for the content of the report.

5. CONDUCTING VALIDATION EXERCISES

Following the qualitative analysis, a deeper quantitative analysis was conducted on the survey data in order to assess any statistically significant correlations. The investigation of the correlations was guided by the qualitative thematic analysis of the young researchers.

Three of the young researchers continued their engagement in the study as report writers. They began by validating the coding done by their peers; each re-coded four other researchers' summary notes to ensure no key elements were missing in the thematic analysis. A finalised list of themes was generated by the coded data. Next, each young researcher led on writing sections of the report alongside Restless Development staff.

Finally, after the smaller team completed the report writing, the full research team reviewed the final study. A validation workshop was held with the research team to dig deeper into the final report and assess its validity across contexts. As a result, the report presents a comprehensive and highly collaborative study led by young people. This report was written through the voices of young people who were part of the study – both as participants and as researchers – rather than the interpretations of research writers.

6. CONVENING CONVERSATIONS FOR ACTION

Following the publication of this research, Restless Development, Dubai Cares, and young people across the globe begin the biggest task: inspiring action. First and foremost, the research recommendations inform the RewirEd Summit in December 2021. Furthermore, through the RewirEd campaign and a series of conversations both online and offline about the content of the research, young people will facilitate calls to action to truly rewire education.



Study limitations.

Virtual methods. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this research project was conducted almost entirely online, from researcher recruitment and training to primary data collection, to analysis and writing. It is likely that this skewed the sample toward urban, better educated, more strongly digitally connected, and better exposed/networked young people. Less connected young people, such as those in rural areas, were left out of focus group discussions due to limited connectivity in their areas. Also, virtual platforms (e.g. Zoom) were difficult for some researchers and participants to access easily, resulting in calls needing to be rescheduled many times and limited time availability for the discussion after technical issues and adjustments.

Sample bias. The sample is *most* representative of African or Asian, educated, and urban young people. Furthermore, the researchers identified respondents *primarily* through their networks, so the respondents are likely to be more similar to the researchers than young people on average. The lived experiences of the respondents are likely to be similar to those of the researcher. As a result, voices of young people outside these networks are underrepresented, including: those not in education or employment, rural young people, young people with disabilities, those in informal employment, refugees/migrants, and those in the Americas, Europe, and Oceania.

Language barriers. Young people who did not speak the same language as the researcher were often not included in data collection. In some cases, researchers relied on English to conduct data collection with people who spoke different languages than them, so many young people who could not speak English were left out of focus groups. Also, the online survey was only in English – only when a researcher could translate the survey over the phone to respondents could non-English speakers participate in the survey. Therefore, those who speak lesser known languages, including deaf populations, were omitted from the study.

Researcher positionality. In many cases, the young researchers were well-educated and sometimes well-known in their communities. Some respondents were familiar with the researchers and the researchers' viewpoints, and it is likely that they gave responses they knew would please the researcher. Some researchers found that the respondents viewed their study participation as an opportunity to network with the researcher.

Contextual challenges. In limited contexts, particularly in MENA, contextual challenges caused barriers to data collections. For example, one researcher was perceived as being associated with a certain government/political party. As a result, respondents were scared and did not trust him, so many asked the researcher to leave them alone in order to avoid government attention. The researcher was threatened by authorities in Yemen who were suspicious of the purpose of data collection, and had to suspend focus group discussions there. Also, the majority of countries in the data collection are conservative. Many young people in focus group discussions in Asia emphasised that, culturally, they do not openly express their views and perspectives. This is likely to have skewed findings toward more socially acceptable and less controversial responses. This cultural pressure is even stronger for women, so the views shared in focus groups were often mostly the perspectives of men.

CHAPTER 3: LEARNING AND LIVELIHOODS.

KEY FINDINGS:

- There is a mismatch between education and available work opportunities.
- The cost of accessing high-quality education is a concern for many young people.
- Educators are not well enough prepared to address learning needs.
- The skills that young people need in life and for the workforce are not featured prominently enough in their educational journey.
- The transition from school to work remains difficult for young people.
- The pandemic has impacted nearly all aspects of young people's learning and livelihoods, leaving underprivileged young people further behind.

50%

of young people feel only somewhat prepared by their education for available work opportunities.

31%

of young people feel soft skills are the most important toward achieving their aspirations, followed by entrepreneurial skills (23%).

28%

of young people say financial literacy is what was most missing from their education, followed by entrepreneurial skills (18%).

74%

of young people's education has been impacted by COVID-19.

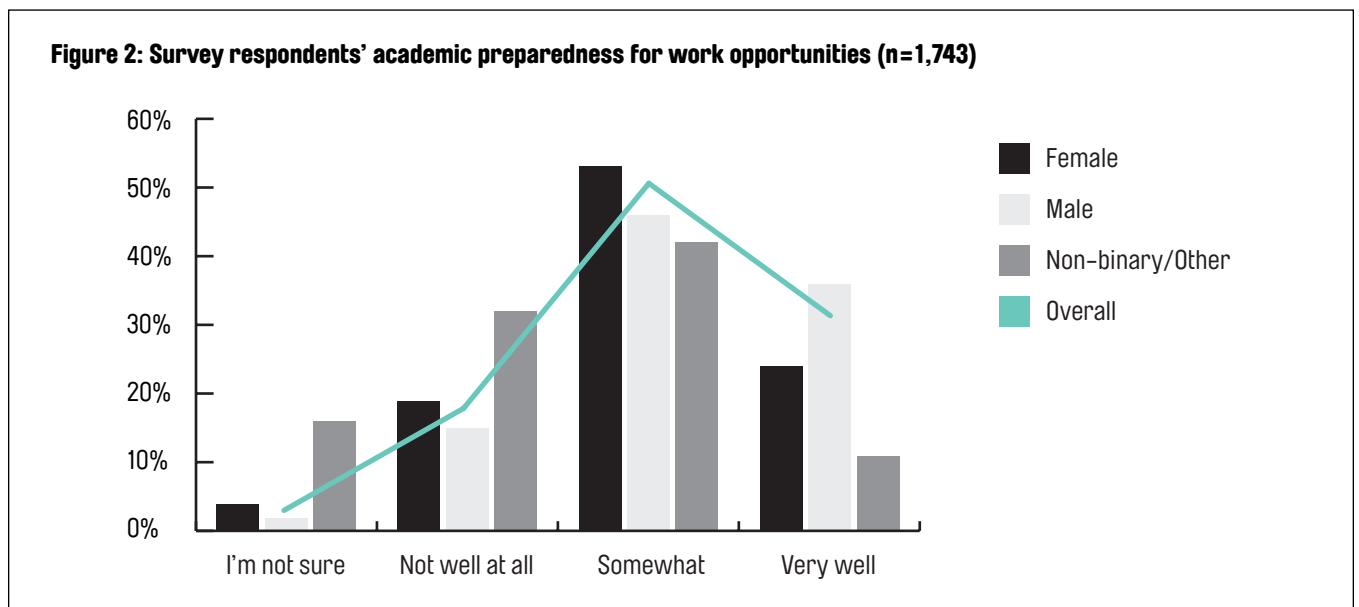


Young people’s learning continues to be a global concern among young people. Young people who took part in this research claim that education and school systems are unable to meet the work challenges of both the present and the future, emphasising the continued need to firmly link together learning and livelihoods.

“When one is educated, that person becomes like a light bulb that shines and illuminates other people. Education enlightens your mind and it makes you see opportunities even in the worst-case scenarios.” – female focus group discussion participant from Zambia

There is a mismatch between education and available work opportunities.

Formal education has not provided young people with the relevant skills required to find work opportunities. Young people across all the regions recognised the ‘skills mismatch’ between what they learned in secondary and tertiary education, and the skills needed to find a job. In the survey, the majority of respondents did not feel well-prepared for work opportunities: 17% said that education did not prepare them at *all* and 50% felt only somewhat prepared for available work opportunities. Of the survey respondents, men were more likely than women to feel very well prepared (36% men, 24% women).



“First of all, I spent almost three years trying to get a job after my graduation, then it took me another two years to cope with my job even though I used to be an excellent student, yet I realised that what I was studying was useless because it lacked the most important aspect, which is the practical side. Those years did not really prepare me for the labour market.”
– 23-year-old female respondent from Algeria

The **lack of competency-based and transferable skills** is an integral factor hindering students from acquiring employment after graduation. To the respondents, competencies and transferable skills should have been taught through practical experiences, but very few said they gained practical experiences through their education. Instead, their learning relied too much on textbooks, note memorisation, and passing of exams. Many wished that their education had been more focused on discovery and exploration instead, which would have strengthened the core competencies needed in the workplace. Young people explained that there are limited well-trained educators who can teach competencies and relevant courses that teach transferable skills to match workplace demand. Based on the respondents' lived experiences, curriculums have not empowered them with the entrepreneurial and modern skills of today that they need. Some expressed the opinion that the workplace needs problem solvers, but that the curriculum is designed in a way that limits young people's ability to use creativity and imagination.

Young people recognised that the workplace needs great communicators in both programming languages and business languages (typically English). However, the schools use grades and certifications as the only tools to test whether pupils are learning. Young people highlighted that the schools are still forcing students to be 'smart', which is determined primarily through the ability to memorise quickly. Yet young people believe that the world we live in today is not asking for 'smart pupils' to solve its problems. Rather than teaching students to compete with each other for higher grades in examinations and make learning a competition, instead students should be collaborative and think creatively. Students want to learn how to be productive in workplaces, which involves working with teams.

This mismatch is even more accentuated in rural contexts. In rural areas, young people are in need of different skills based on their aspirations and the opportunities available to what typical educational institutions are prepared to provide. Students in rural areas struggle to access the courses and skills they need in their locations. Few have consistently reliable internet connectivity (39% rural vs. 58% urban survey respondents), which also further limits their access to skill building and courses online. Many aspire to follow in the footsteps of their families and rely most heavily on the passing down of learning from their community members as opposed to what educational institutions can provide. However, this leaves a gap in many skills. Also, it limits their future opportunities if they did choose to move or pursue different careers.

Study respondents saw Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a potential sector to bridge the gap between learning skills and workplace demands. Young people noted that **they wish that technical and vocational skills had featured earlier in their educational journeys** because they equip young people with highly relevant and competitive skills needed for different work opportunities.

.....

"The world does not need millions of math geniuses to get better, it needs critical thinkers, innovators, and data analysers. It does not need flamboyant grammarians who speak crappy [i.e., impersonal], it needs effective communicators who make people feel human. The workplace rewards and promotes students not for how high they score grades in examinations, but how they use the classroom lessons to solve problems." – 22-year-old male respondent from Bolivia

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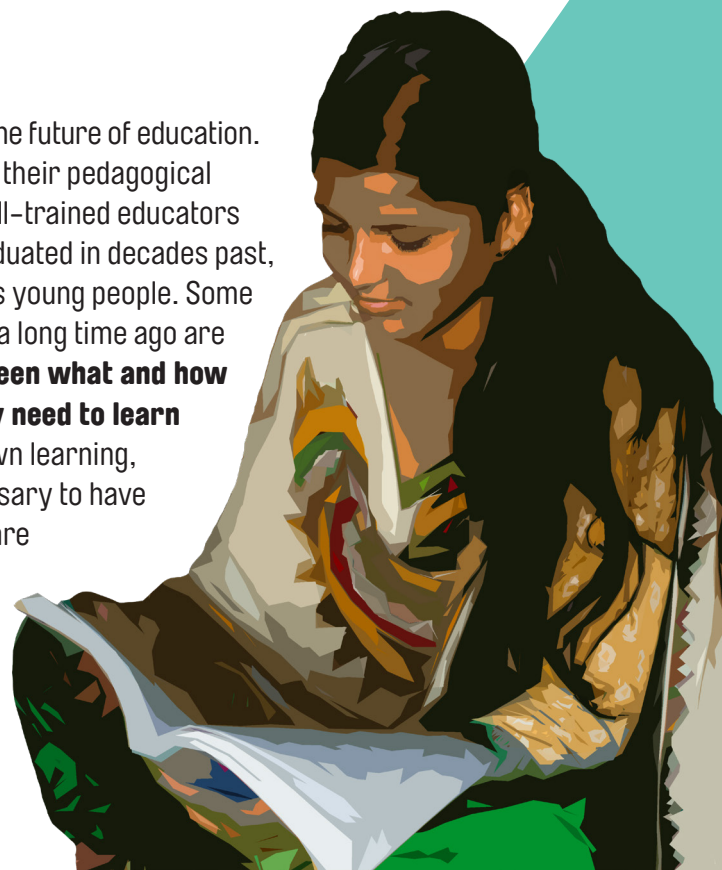
The cost of accessing high-quality education is a concern for many young people.

The cost of accessing education remains one of the main barriers hindering young people in pursuing higher education. From the survey, 24% of the respondents stated that education has become too expensive. Survey respondents who identified as persons with disabilities were more likely to cite financial shortcomings as a key barrier to accessing a meaningful education (34% of respondents with disabilities compared to 23% of respondents without a disability). They explained that education typically focuses on methods that are not suited to them and that it does not make sufficient accessibility adjustments. This forces them to pay increased costs out of their own pocket. Also, it does not offer the support needed for individual and social well-being.

Young people understand that **quality education is most accessible to the highly privileged class** who are able to afford good schools. *“There’s a big problem that good education is only affordable for rich people. Poor people study in poor schools and they can’t go to good universities and hence it affects their careers,”* explained a 24-year-old male respondent from Ghana. In many countries, free public education is the only available option for young people given the cost constraints of private schools. While public education may be higher quality in some contexts (e.g. Europe, Asia), respondents felt that there were other contexts (e.g. Latin America, Africa) that had poor quality public education. In these cases, the respondents said that young people felt obligated to find a way to attend private schools if they wanted a better education. A 26-year-old female respondent from Ecuador summarises what most other respondents noted: *“The gap between public and private education is still wide, perpetuating class differences, access to equal opportunities, and access to better job opportunities.”* Thus, as a private education is cost prohibitive for most young people, accessing higher-quality education opportunities remains a significant barrier for most.

Educators are not well enough prepared to address learning needs.

Young people know that educators play a vital role in rewiring the future of education. As such, it is important to rethink their areas of expertise and their pedagogical approaches. Young people explained that there are limited well-trained educators who understand workplace demands. As most educators graduated in decades past, they struggle to understand the needs and priorities of today’s young people. Some respondents felt that teachers believe the things they studied a long time ago are still relevant today. They highlighted that **there is a gap between what and how educators are teaching, and what young people know they need to learn and how best to learn it.** Educators are not updating their own learning, and so their teaching is less engaging and relevant. It is necessary to have refresher courses on new content, skills, and pedagogy that are responsive to the workplace needs of today.



On the other hand, many respondents recognised that educators can also be limited by the system in which they operate. Educators traditionally have degrees in their respective topic areas and/or in educational pedagogy. However, due to requirements imposed by policy or educational institutions, they are often required to teach topics in a specific way. A 22-year-old male respondent from the United Kingdom stated that: ***“They have the desire to impose a rigid syllabus that means teachers don’t get to teach their personal areas of knowledge and interest. And thus, we can miss out on some of the best teaching, which is when a teacher shares their passion with us.”*** Furthermore, some respondents mentioned that it is obvious that sometimes educators are simply tired because of their heavy workload. They recognise that **educators’ workloads are not proportional to the incentives they receive** from this career. As a result, educators are likely to have a harder time – and perhaps even feel disenchanted with – addressing the many needs of students while also addressing their own continuing education.

BOX 1: CRISTINA’S STORY

THE REALITY BEHIND A UNIVERSITY DEGREE

Cristina is 26 years old and lives in Ecuador. She believes that ***“education provides knowledge and develops skills young people need to live harmoniously in society, work, generate income, pay taxes, and become self-sufficient without depending on the state.”*** She believes that university studies are important, but regardless of technical and theoretical knowledge, she thinks that developing skills through practice is more important. She adds that: ***“regardless of the job to be developed, people should receive a comprehensive education, to which basic finance, entrepreneurship, survival, and civil education are intrinsic.”***

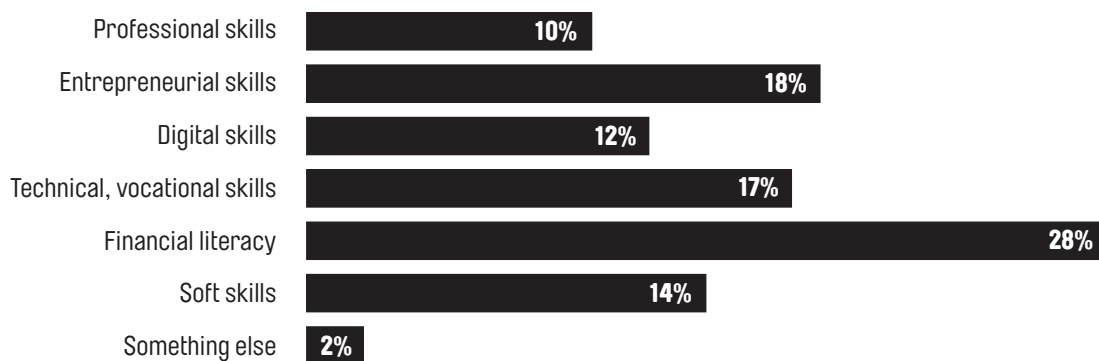
“In my case, I studied law at a public university, whose curriculum was really outdated. I felt that the curriculum needed, and still needs, changes to comprehensively prepare students for a more competitive job market, where memorising codes is no longer necessary. I believe it is important to ensure the development of digital skills, to ensure access to software specialised to our career, to include in the curriculum subjects related to business training, project management, basic finance, and to prepare professionals to have a broader understanding of the different career opportunities. There is a gap between professionals graduating from public and private universities, not only in terms of academic preparation, but also in terms of infrastructure and lack of university management. This means that we continue to depend on the State survive and, therefore, there are fewer job opportunities.”



The skills that young people need are not featured prominently enough in their educational journey.

While a diverse range of courses and educational opportunities are available to them, a significant number of **young people wished financial, entrepreneurial, professional, digital, and soft skills had featured earlier in their educational journeys.** They mentioned different skills that they wished they had learnt in school, with financial skills being the most desired (see Figure 3). These missing skill sets would have helped them to better navigate their financial needs and goals, supported them to pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations, prepared them for job applications and interviews, bridged the school-to-work transition, and helped them cope with the new digital reality of the world we live in today. Young people believe that it is important to rethink the curriculum in order to build up these skills.

Figure 3: Skills survey respondents wished they had learned in their education (n=1,743)



In this research, young people highlighted that **once they have graduated, they struggle to find jobs** because they lack the communication and social skills that can help them to network and to navigate better within society and the workplace. Respondents said that they highly value soft skills – such as communication and critical thinking – when thinking about the job market. Soft skills strongly emerged in the qualitative data as the most important skills young people believe they should be developing during education. Some expressed the opinion that these skills can be effectively taught in many courses (topics) simply through the delivery of the course itself.

The respondents in some countries (predominantly in Africa and South Asia) said that governments and/or educational institutions are opting to modify the classic curriculum, removing subjects such as philosophy, ethics, values, and art from the curriculums, considering them unnecessary. However, this change is not necessarily positive as respondents strongly felt that keeping such subjects is essential for society. **Young people feel that they require a comprehensive education in order to be well prepared for diverse work opportunities.** They want to have opportunities to pursue careers in fields such as humanities and art and not be bound to exclusively technology-driven workplaces. Changing the purpose of education depends on the situation of each country; but respondents explained that it should aim to achieve a balance between developing digital skills, fostering positive values in citizens, and defining new careers that prevent unemployment rates from rising, while also respecting young people's aspirations.

Other skills that young people described as being especially important, but not necessarily well taught, include: humanity, ethics, politics and government, healthy living, cooking, medicine, digital skills, writing, networking, languages, public speaking, emotional intelligence, performance, leadership, business development, community service, research, and entrepreneurial skills.

The transition from school to work remains difficult for young people.

The school-to-work transition refers to the process of moving from education to decent and productive work. While there is no universal definition, a holistic view encompasses both the preparation for the transition and the transition itself. This crucial transition for young people is multifaceted, but education plays a critical role through cultivating the skills that young people can offer to the labour market.⁷ **The school-to-work transition is shaped by skills availability, skills demand, and skills activation.** It is a non-linear process, which has profound impacts on young people into later life. Data on the school-to-work transition demonstrates that this transition is often protracted for young people in low-income countries and for women. A UNICEF study found that four out of 10 young people do not make the transition to stable work at all, even as adults, meaning that the ability to maintain a decent, dignified livelihood will remain elusive throughout their life course.⁸

In the survey, **21% of the young people stated that they did not know where to find work opportunities or they did not know the 'right' people to connect them to opportunities.** Young people believe that education is important, but you need to have a good network with relevant people if you want to get ahead in the working world. In many cases, the hope young people have is that their classmates can become their potential career network. A respondent from Nepal highlighted that if you attended a well-established private institution, you are more likely to be exposed to a larger network, career opportunities, and facilities that reduce the transition period. Whereas those who attend mediocre private institutes or government institutions rarely get what is needed for the transition from school to work and life opportunities.

“Usually organisations ask for years of experience from a young person. This makes the transition really difficult for young people! How is that even possible? Either you can study or work, but you cannot expect both. How can you expect seven to eight years of experience from a young person who is just 25 years old? Additionally, the pay scale is not equal.”

– Male Youth Talk participant from Ecuador

The pandemic has impacted nearly all aspects of young people’s learning and livelihoods, leaving underprivileged young people further behind.

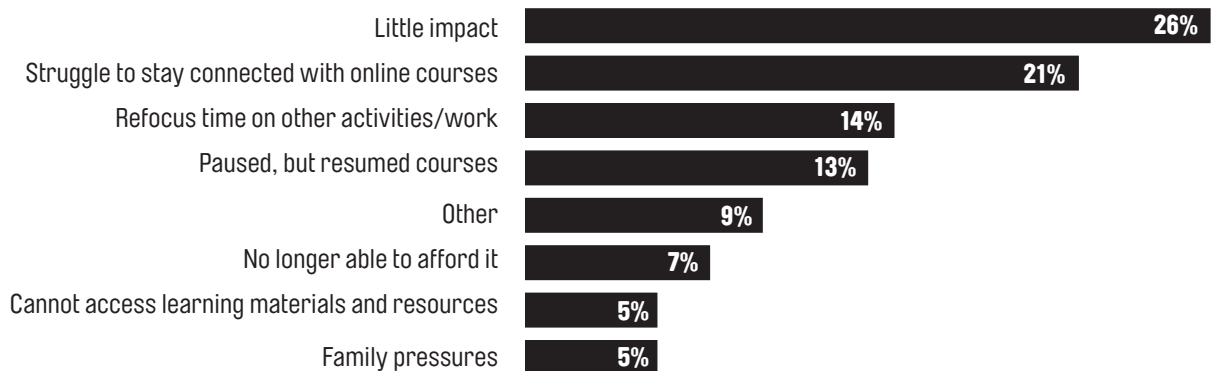
COVID-19 has affected young people’s learning and livelihoods across all countries; they have experienced disruption in learning, and many have lost their jobs. Experiences range from positive to negative, and some young people even expressed neutral positions. This demonstrates the **vast heterogeneity of the youth COVID-19 experience.**

⁷ Alam, A. (2019). *Unpacking school-to-work transition: data and evidence synthesis*. Office of Global Insight and Policy Scoping Paper No. 02. New York: UNICEF. International Labour Organization. (2020). *Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

⁸ Alam, A. (2019). *Unpacking school-to-work transition: data and evidence synthesis*. Office of Global Insight and Policy Scoping Paper No. 02. New York: UNICEF.

However, the majority of figures and youth testimonials are alarming, demonstrating how **young people have suffered a great impact on their learning and livelihoods**. While one-quarter of the survey respondents said their education has not been affected much, the remainder (74%) have felt more affected (see Figure 4). The effects of COVID-19 were most felt by survey respondents in Africa and Asia (78%) and least felt by those in Europe and MENA (62%). These findings echo ILO's foundational 2020 study, which found that 73% of young people globally experienced a disruption to their education.⁹

Figure 4: Most significant impact of COVID-19 on education of survey respondents (n=1,743)



The **digital divide was a key factor in whether students' education was disrupted**: 91% of survey respondents without internet access at home and 88% with unreliable connectivity experienced disruption as opposed to 66% of respondents with reliable internet access. The situation is especially acute for girls and young women who are disproportionately excluded from education. Some have gone into early marriages rather than continue their education post-pandemic; UNICEF estimates potentially 10 million girls worldwide could be affected.¹⁰ A portion of respondents highlighted that they are facing pressures to financially support the family, which has made it difficult to learn. The disruptions young people are facing in their education have uncertain duration, making planning even more difficult.

"The high internet charges and poor internet connectivity negatively affected the education and learning system. Young people from underprivileged communities are being forced out of school and work due to inability to cope with virtual working space."

– 21-year-old female respondent from Zambia

On the other hand, **some young people feel that the pandemic has made it easier to access refresher courses and language courses online**. They found that the costs are often lower for online courses and enable more access, especially since they do not need to move in order to study and complete their degree. Young people believe that in the places where students have online access, virtual classes make it easier to plan; they adjust to students' availability, without depending on all students being present all in the same time slot. Having access to pre-recorded classes and exams that evaluate the knowledge acquired in alternative ways has actually allowed these students to continue their studies more easily.

⁹ International Labour Organization. (2020). *Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

¹⁰ United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). *COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage*. New York: UNICEF. Available at: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>.

Unfortunately, though, young people feel the lack of a sense of community in online courses and they often have to deal with mental health challenges. This, as well as the digital divide, is leaving some young people behind. Not surprisingly, this was correlated ($p < .001$) with the young people who had stable and reliable internet access. Survey respondents without any internet access or very unreliable access said that their biggest educational barrier was that there are not enough courses in the subjects they want to learn. It's likely that this is due to most courses shifting online and leaving limited in-person courses available for them.

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“During the first year of COVID, I completed a Turkish course completely online. And although I advanced in my knowledge, I could not feel the same satisfaction that attending a face-to-face course produces, since the social contact does not exist. The digital interaction in platforms like Zoom isolates us more.” – 26-year-old female respondent from Ecuador

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In addition to educational impacts, COVID-19 has had tremendous impacts on young peoples' livelihoods. Many lost jobs and some had to take pay cuts, whereas others had to work in fields that may not have been their aspirational path, simply in order to keep some financial stability. Even prior to the onset of COVID-19, young people aged 15–24 were already three times more likely to be unemployed compared to adults, while 126 million young workers were in extreme and moderate poverty worldwide.¹¹ **Young people claim that there is not enough decent work available for them.** They face disadvantages in the labour market, being overrepresented in low quality and precarious forms of employment. This is complicated by the challenges facing young people in a rapidly shifting technological and economic context, as the opportunities available in, and skills needed for, the world of work are being reimagined.

Young people's livelihoods are also marked by profound inequalities that mean access to opportunity varies significantly along existing lines of marginalisation and disadvantage. Evidencing this, **COVID-19 has exacerbated disparities across income, locality, gender, and disability.** The implications emphasise the importance of ensuring that rewired education systems are fundamentally inclusive to underprivileged groups. Young people claimed that the cost of living is high compared to the wages young people receive. *“Without external help from families, funds from relatives overseas, young people will struggle immensely, and this is unacceptable,”* explained a 24-year-old male respondent from Guyana.

Technological innovations are changing how work is performed across the world, and this is especially true in relation to the emergent gig economy and remote working arrangements where work can be independently accessed via digital platforms. These platform technologies can offer expanded opportunities, opening new markets to young workers. **COVID-19 forced young people to look inward and explore other skills, and they were supported by technological innovations.** They highlighted that they created their own opportunities such as starting small online businesses, while others learned new skills that are appropriate for their future career. *“Old and new skills such as leadership, flexibility and accountability, critical thinking, digital skills, emotional intelligence, creativity, and innovation are some of the skills that would come in handy as a positive impact caused by COVID-19,”* said a young female respondent in India.

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“The company refused to pay me during the lockdown. This limited my opportunities to explore other job markets since I was not off from my contract, nor was I getting paid.” – 28-year-old male respondent from Nepal

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¹¹ International Labour Organization. (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture*. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Youth-led recommendations on improving learning and livelihoods.

In the focus group discussions, audio clips, and youth talks, young people shared their recommendations directly on how different stakeholders can create a pathway to learning and livelihoods. The following are the top recommendations that emerged as most important globally.

1

In this dynamic information age, workforce skills are increasingly evolving into digital forms. To harness this evolution, education institutions must build young people's digital skills and empower them with greater access to remote learning opportunities and digital resources. As such, access to the internet should be a right, and lowering the cost of internet connections in different countries should be considered.

2

Learning institutions and governments should revamp the curriculum and adjust it to be suitable to current market trends, challenges, and the global economy. Learning should focus more on value-based education, self-discovery, and training young people with 21st century skills such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, data analysis, financial literacy, communication, emotional intelligence, people management, and other relevant social skills.

3

Governments should create decent work policies that support young people. For example, governments should institute and/or increase the minimum living wage and regulate the informal sector so that young people are not exploited.

4

Learning institutions should have accessible, high quality educational infrastructure. Educational facilities should equip schools (and teachers) with modern tools and resources, upskill teachers with information about diverse types of student intelligence, and make facilities more accessible for persons with diverse disabilities.

5

Workplaces/employers should cultivate a positive work environment to accommodate the interests and aspirations of young people. This includes training supportive and understanding managers, respecting mental health needs, providing opportunities for voicing opinions by employees (especially relatively younger employees), facilitating opportunities for upskilling from time to time, assigning new and challenging tasks, and instilling a sense of purpose.

6

Learning institutions should create partnerships with the public, private, and civic sectors to have readily available jobs for newly graduated students to decrease unemployment and brain-drain.

CHAPTER 4: YOUNG PEOPLE'S SHORT- AND LONG-TERM ASPIRATIONS.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Young people have diverse aspirations grounded in the desire to have opportunities to learn and grow but also to secure financial stability and personal satisfaction.
- Family expectations, often dictated by gendered social norms, strongly compel young people to conform to the aspirations imposed on them.
- Career aspirations are shaped by the opportunities (perceived to be) available, which are dictated by economic status, educational opportunities, personal networks, stability, personal risks, and practical experiences.
 - Beyond personal aspirations, young people aspire to equitable, inclusive, and more prosperous communities.
 - COVID-19 has forced young people to dramatically rethink their aspirations.



28%

of young people's greatest aspiration in the next five years is to have opportunities to learn and grow; 23% aspire to start their own business.

30%

of young people feel that they need additional skill-building or learning opportunities, whereas 22% need access to financial resources to achieve their aspirations.

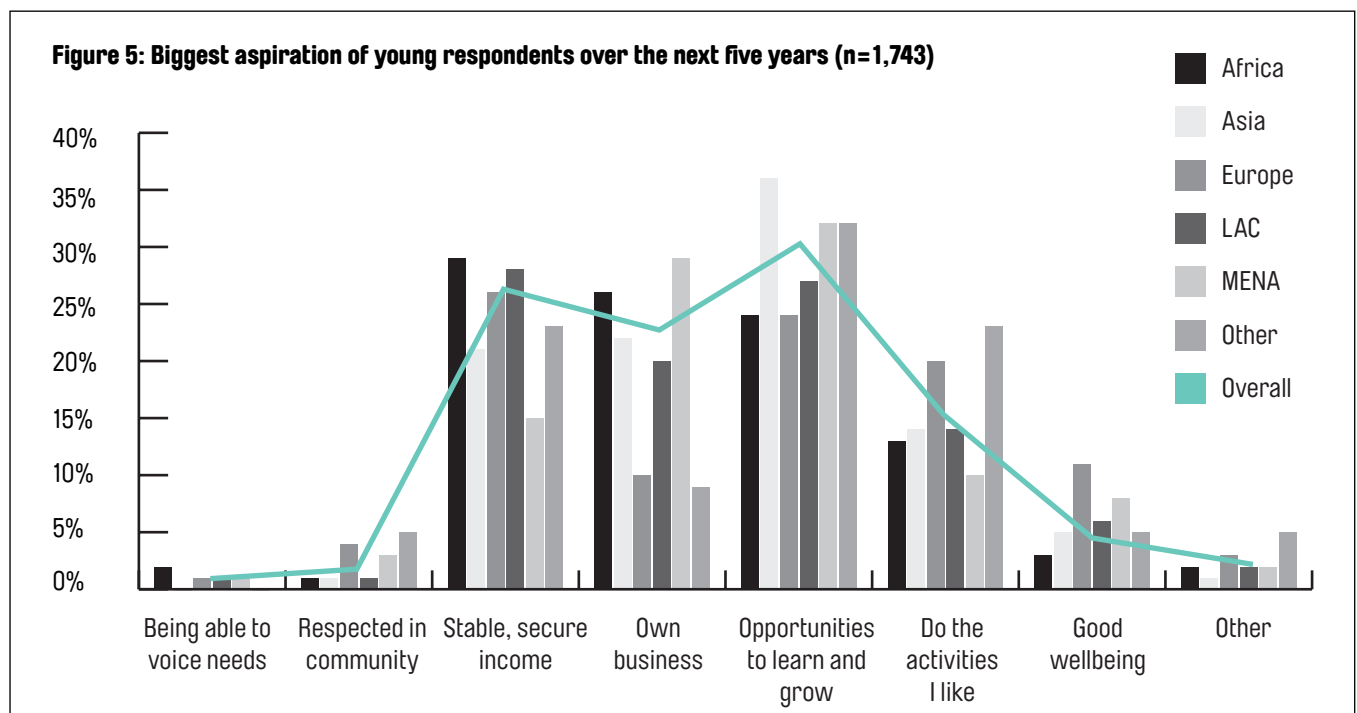
34%

of young people need greater access to leadership and personal development for future employment opportunities.

Aspirations form the basis of young people’s educational choices and labour market outcomes. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), the motivations of young people are highly diverse, incorporating factors such as sense of purpose and impact on society.¹² Aspirations are not only context-specific but are also adaptable based on opportunities available.¹³ This study confirmed these findings; all of the study respondents agreed that their different aspirations stem from the level of exposure they had to different opportunities as they were growing up.

Young people have diverse aspirations grounded in the desire to have opportunities to learn and grow but also to secure financial stability and personal satisfaction.

Although the survey showed that young people’s aspirations are diverse, the desire for **opportunities that add value to respondents’ personal and professional development** came up strongly across all countries. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of young people revealed that as they look forward to the next five years, their biggest aspiration is to have work and employment opportunities from which they can learn and grow. This sentiment was most prominent from Asian survey respondents (36%) and less common in Europe and Africa (both 24%). Approximately another quarter aspired to start their own business, especially in MENA (29%) and Africa (26%).



¹² Gardiner, D. and Goedhuys, M. (2020). *Youth aspirations and the future of work: a review of the literature and evidence*. ILO Working Paper 8. Geneva: ILO.

¹³ Lybbert, T. and Wydick, B. (2018). 'Poverty, aspirations, and the economics of hope.' *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 66(4), pp. 709–753.

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“My aspirations stem more from what I have seen, what I know, and what I have experienced.”

– 24-year-old male architecture student from Zambia

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In focus group discussions and audio clips, nearly all young people in every context were primarily driven by the **aspiration to be financially secure and to be able to lead a satisfying life**. This was also reflected by a quarter of survey respondents as their biggest five-year aspiration, especially in Africa (29%) and Latin America (28%), though least common in MENA (15%). A good education with a reputable degree was viewed as a gateway to a better paid, stable job. Overall, young people are driven by the desire to have a stable income that will allow them to be comfortable, to afford the basic costs of living, and to be independent (especially for respondents in Africa, and independence particularly for women). One young woman from India explained that she has her personal goals – she wants to reduce discrimination toward girls in sports through financial support, training, etc. – but she realises that this requires her to have a basic income for herself first. She says, *“That’s the basic requirement: if you want to do something for society, you need to stabilise yourself. Then you can collect team members to achieve goals. Then the goals will be more productive.”* This is echoed in other studies, which have found that young people prioritise income and stability over their own more creative passions and aspirations, often due to the job market.¹⁴

According to respondents across all regions, they want to work in companies or organisations that value work–life balance. They want to attain a personal work–life balance in order to **achieve happiness, mental stability, and to have enough time to spend with their families**. This is essential in Europe especially, with survey respondents being two to three times more likely than respondents from other regions to say that enjoyable and fulfilling work is the most important thing to them. They felt strongly that their work time had to match the time they could spend with their families. A 29-year-old female respondent in the UK explained, *“Everyone should be at the level [in their work] where fulfilment and enjoyment are what matters; we shouldn’t need to worry about a stable, adequate income.”*

Similarly, in Africa, respondents prioritised getting a **fulfilling job that aligned with their values** and supported them to live happily with their families. Interestingly, although having a good work–life balance and sufficient family time was valued highly by respondents, few young people stated that having their own family was one of their biggest aspirations. Those who did mention it viewed it as a long-term goal that was not relevant to their lives right now. Some also stated that they would like to have secondary incomes that could be used to bolster their lifestyles; incomes that would enable them to travel, to contribute to society, and to cover other ‘non-essential’ costs in life.

The **biggest barriers young people foresee for themselves is dependent on what aspirations they have** ($p = .005$). For example, young people whose aspirations are to have their own business are most likely to also indicate a lack of necessary resources and equipment as the main barrier hindering them from achieving their aspirations. Similarly, when young people’s greatest aspiration is to have opportunities to learn and grow, their biggest barrier is that they do not know where to find these opportunities or the people who can connect them to such opportunities.

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“I don’t want anything to hold me back right now, man. I want to get married and have a family, but before that, I want to complete my studies and get a good paying job. Everything else will fall into place after.” – 22-year-old male respondent from Guyana

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¹⁴ Restless Development. (2020). *It’s our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.

Restless Development. (2019). *What does success look like? Supporting young people to reach their living aspirations*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/07/living-innovation-research/>.

Family expectations strongly compel young people to conform to the aspirations imposed on them.

While participants explained that their aspirations are influenced by a variety of factors, their **family may be the strongest influence that shapes the choices young people make** regarding their aspirations. Families influence the fields of study that young people pursue, the types of jobs that they seek, and the families that young people eventually build. Respondents explained that they feel compelled to follow their parents' wishes due to the respect they have for their families and the social norms that they adhere to. Also, it is typically families – not the banks – that finance education, so there is an additional (financial) pressure to adhere to their wishes.

Family influence could be both positive and negative. On the positive side, many young people have been brought up and encouraged to pursue a sound education; they have been tutored by their parents and other family members and have been guided on becoming the best versions of themselves. However, many participants explained that while their families may have good intentions for them, their expectations may differ as to how they see their futures. Young people are influenced to pursue degrees and careers that are dictated by their families rather than their personal aspirations. Typically, families have expectations that young people should be responsible and ensure that the family's reputation will be upheld or made stronger, which is typically determined by financial success. The majority of respondents said that their parents wish for the most lucrative and stable careers possible for them; so, when young people deviate or wish to pursue careers that may be considered less stable or riskier, they are not well understood or respected by their parents. Some felt that their aspirations were better recognised by their friends, teachers, and acquaintances than by those in their household.

BOX 2: MAKING THE SWITCH FAMILY PRESSURE TO EARN OUTWEIGHS PASSIONS

Rita (pseudonym) is one of more than one billion people who call India home. She grew up in the capital of Rajasthan State, Jaipur, where she was raised by her parents. Her father works with the government and she considers him one of her role models. Being the eldest sibling, Rita – 25 years old – also feels a sense of responsibility toward her younger brother to become a role model for him. Since a very young age, Rita has always followed her father's advice and taken his guidance to heart. So, when her father suggested that she should reconsider her aspiration to become an activist and focus on higher income-generating opportunities, she instantly decided to act upon it. Rita recalls, ***"I used to participate in social campaigns like flash mobs. My parents clearly stated that working in campaigns will not pay my bills. They had expected that I would start earning or making a living for myself. This type of statement is quite common, especially in my ethnic community, where earning is given much priority. I realised that only giving back to the community is not enough, so I began searching for opportunities where I could also start earning myself."*** Currently, Rita is working as the Global Fellow at an organisation that she and her family believe is stable and reliable, and she aspires to be a researcher and policy maker in the future.

Continues on next page

Like Rita, Sam (pseudonym), a 25-year-old from Zambia, has also experienced pressure from his family to change his career aspirations. He described how he wanted to be a musician, but he changed his goal because of his family's decision: ***"They said it was not a well-paying job. I was advised to study architecture instead since it could guarantee a stable income. African families want their children to go into white-collar jobs for financial security so they could also support the families in return."*** Stories like Rita's and Sam's are not unique: families play a pivotal role in determining a young person's aspirations.

Social norms that shape gendered expectations influence career choices differently for young men and women.

While aspirations may be unique to each individual, the individual's **gender often influences their educational choices and career aspirations either consciously or subconsciously**.¹⁵ In general terms, male and female respondents had quite similar aspirations in terms of pursuing education, finding stable jobs and careers, and being able to lead happy lives. But gendered differences emerged in three ways: 1) the differences in expectation for men and women in terms of earning and providing for their families; 2) the types of degree and career that each gender should pursue; and 3) the confidence men and women had about achieving their aspirations.

Commonly across the different countries, young people felt that **men are expected to have lucrative and stable careers** because they are the 'breadwinners' for their families. The idea that men are supposed to make more money (than women) was especially prominent in Africa and Asia. Young men echoed that their aspirations were largely fuelled by wanting to have a comfortable lifestyle in which they can afford the necessities for themselves and their families, which limits their career options. Not all career expectations fell on men, though. Young people explained that **women's careers are often driven by the expectation that they must be more mindful of family responsibilities**. Women are expected to tend to their families' (non-financial) needs and to choose careers that enable them to put their family first. Furthermore, in countries where women in the workplace or higher education is not common (e.g. MENA, Africa), women who do want to pursue those things are limited to the opportunities that do not discriminate against them. Some of the male respondents felt that many young women aspire to lower roles because society expects that from them. However, many young people across countries said that this is changing as more and more women are challenging the status quo.

In most contexts, there are certain degrees and related careers that are considered more masculine and others more feminine. For example, respondents listed careers such as teaching, nursing, and social work as more feminine and business, engineering, and construction as more masculine. One of the young researchers for this study asked her focus group participants in Zambia to do a thought experiment: young men were asked to imagine themselves as female, then think about whether their aspirations would have been different.

¹⁵ Mastercard Foundation. (2021). *What makes young women successful in STEM careers?* Available at: <https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Youth-Think-Tank-What-Makes-Young-Women-Successful-in-STEM-Careers.pdf>.

They concluded that their aspirations would indeed have been very different: they would have aspired to more female-dominated roles like nursing. Some said they may never even have made it to university and would have been married off instead. A young man from Ghana who participated in the study shared that he is currently pursuing an engineering degree, but he is extremely interested in social work. Yet, because of the need to validate his work aspirations in front of his community, he was compelled to choose engineering instead. *“It’s [social work] perceived as charity work, which is why in the beginning I was questioned by my parents on how I will be able to sustain myself economically,”* he said.

The confidence that survey respondents had that they could achieve their aspirations correlated with the gender of the respondent ($p < .001$). Male respondents demonstrated a higher confidence to achieve their aspirations (70% very confident, 26% somewhat confident), while female respondents were more likely than men to feel only somewhat confident (52% very confident, 38% somewhat confident). This confidence divide demonstrates that young women are likely to need more encouragement to pursue their aspirations and more support in building up their personal agency to strengthen their confidence.

“I went to science stream because when I was in higher secondary level, I got a really good percentage. My parents and teachers automatically expected me to take up science stream for my further education. I did not know then, since I was very naive, but eventually I realised that I shouldn’t have taken this choice of stream. When I decided to change to humanities, I vividly remember being laughed at. Your society makes it uncomfortable for you to make an informed decision. This definitely affects your aspirations for life and work.”

– 23-year-old male respondent from Bangladesh

Young people’s economic status influences the opportunities available and both their short- and long-term aspirations.

The economic stability of the family is a major factor that influences the aspirations of young people. Many young people are already faced with pressure to support their households and others are dependent on their families for support. Respondents in Latin America and Africa were most likely to stress the need for additional financial resources in order to fulfil their aspirations. The respondents explained that **people’s aspirations in life depend on their available resources and their connections to actualise them**: good opportunities exist for those who can afford them. Often changes in the financial situation of families can also force young people to change their aspirations.

Financial factors not only shape the opportunities available, they often even dictate the opportunities that young people see for themselves. Young people’s understanding of what opportunities are out there for them – and most respondents felt their initial understanding of such opportunities was low and has expanded only with more education – drives their aspirations. Respondents emphasised that **young people need more exposure to different opportunities in order to dream bigger and bolder**.

.....

“If you look at students who belong to an economically stable family, their aspirations are usually maintaining their standard of living. They are told to study, earn a degree, get a job, and start earning. Even in my case, I am always told to sustain myself financially. I feel this constant reminder to earn rather than to follow your aspirations acts as a barrier. Likewise, your family income also acts as a barrier to reach your life and work goals.” – 25-year-old male respondent from India

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Career aspirations are shaped by the opportunities (perceived to be) available.

Young people’s aspirations are socially determined, with perceptions of available opportunities and expectations influenced by lived experiences and the actions of others around them.¹⁶ While many young people may dream of certain goals, the extent to which they pursue those dreams depends on:

- the educational opportunities available around them,
- their personal networks,
- the likelihood of their success and financial stability, and
- the risks that young people, especially women, face in pursuit of opportunities.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Young people explained that in many contexts, **educational opportunities to further their aspirations are limited**. Young people recognise that education is an important credential that typically opens up more opportunities for good jobs for them. Often, young people in urban areas are driven to go to the best schools and complete the highest education possible. Those in rural settings or conflict settings, however, face barriers such as poor-quality education institutions, lack of financial capacity to access good programmes, and illiteracy. A few respondents in Africa and MENA explained that rural girls face education gaps as a result of menstruation or forced early marriage.

In some countries (e.g. Nigeria¹⁷), respondents shared that there are more young people who want to study than there are available spots in universities. As a result, many felt that **those already possessing the highest status were best positioned for and by educational opportunities**; some young people felt that online education could have the potential to narrow that gap. Others felt obliged to move countries in pursuit of the best opportunities for themselves. In some countries, especially in Latin America and Africa, these young people are increasingly seeing **“migration as a way, or maybe the only one, to achieve their goals and aspirations”** (Bolivian female respondent). This complements an earlier Restless Development study that highlighted increasing numbers of young people migrating to capital cities and internationally to pursue work and education.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gardiner, D. and Goedhuys, M. (2020). *Youth aspirations and the future of work: a review of the literature and evidence*. ILO Working Paper 8. Geneva: ILO.

Ray, D. 2006. ‘Aspirations, poverty and economic change’, in A.V. Banerjee, R. Bénabou, and D. Mookherjee (eds) *Understanding poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Kanyip, B.P. (2013). ‘Admission crisis in Nigerian universities: the challenges youth and parents face in seeking admission.’ *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 1908. Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/1908>.

¹⁸ Restless Development. (2020). *It’s our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.

In other countries, respondents shared that there is **limited availability of educational opportunities related to specific fields** (e.g. humanities and social sciences in India, arts and literature in Zambia and Ghana). Therefore, some young people who may aspire to become writers or archaeologists, for example, must choose other paths due to the courses that are accessible to them. A 26-year-old female respondent in India said, *“Education has played a vital role [in determining her aspirations] because before joining my bachelor’s course in journalism, I wanted to become an archaeologist. However, things couldn’t work out because the degree programme wasn’t available in my area, so I had to change it to journalism and mass communication.”* Similarly, a young male respondent in Zambia who is passionate about literature and wants to be a writer said that his good stories are only stored in his diary: *“This is because universities do not embrace the arts as compared to other fields of study.”* Since there are limited resources to support their various aspirations, young people say they are forced to jump on work opportunities that present themselves.

Many of the respondents have taken up extracurricular roles in their education institutions and workplaces to prepare them for the future in community development. Some of the respondents mentioned that they have organised events like blood donation drives, volunteered in different organisations, and some have even co-founded their own organisations. Most respondents said that they do these activities for their values – such as inclusiveness and a sense of responsibility toward society – and not social status, but they see them as good opportunities to give them more experience as well.

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“There is a common fear of not being able to have opportunities. Given the economic crisis, we have our hands tied. This is why there is a wave of migration right now. Young people prefer to get out since they cannot achieve an optimal life for them and their families.” – 26-year-old male respondent from Ecuador

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PERSONAL NETWORKS

Having access to opportunity does not stop at education: it continues into the world of work. Young people shared many stories about how **they did not feel that they had the networks needed to be able to enter or grow in certain professions.** This could be due to the field of study that they chose or their personal and/or family background. Survey respondents in MENA and Africa, more than in other regions, stressed the necessity of more networking opportunities.

For instance, a public health student from Nepal felt that although there are job postings for people with his background, the reality is that medical doctors or nurses get the job instead, so his work prospects are limited. He said, *“When this happens, it makes me wonder, should I change my profession?”* Even when young people are able to access jobs, they feel that without strong connections/networks, their hard work is not as likely to be recognised with promotions or raises. In other cases, young people change their aspirations early into their careers when they determine that they do not have access to the professional networks of specific fields. This was especially prominent for young people who said they wanted to go into government. A young man in Ghana explained, *“I desired to be a Minister of Environment growing up. I realised I don’t have any person to connect me, so I changed my mind to become a businessman.”*

SUCCESS AND STABILITY

Young people across all countries shared stories of **aspirations that they chose not to pursue because they worried that they would not be lucrative**. These were primarily fields related to supporting social causes and in the arts and humanities. Many young people expressed interest in issues such as LGBTQIA+ rights, sexual health, music, literature, climate change, and more but they felt that if they were to go into careers related to those fields, they would not be able to make enough money. As a result, **they choose career paths influenced by their families and/or educators that are recommended as being more lucrative and stable**.

The exception, however, is entrepreneurship. This has also been confirmed by other studies.¹⁹ Many young people (especially men and respondents in MENA and Africa, though uncommon in Europe) view **entrepreneurship as one of their greatest aspirations and highest earning-potential opportunities**. Some see it as a way to access better opportunities, make more money, or as an avenue toward pursuing their own interests. Most of the young entrepreneurs said that they decided on this career path after realising that their interests did not align with the curriculum schools provide. Nearly a quarter (23%) of survey respondents said that entrepreneurial skills are what they most want to learn, and focus group participants elaborated that these skills are sorely missing from their curriculums. The Youth Think Tank (2021) findings were similar: young entrepreneurs are eager and have vision, but they lack the skills and business development experience needed to excel.²⁰ A few respondents shared that entrepreneurship is not something their parents encouraged because it is not as stable as other types of profession; parents typically preferred that their children should go to university instead.

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“The aspiration I have is to be happy with myself, secondly to make the people around me happy, thirdly to have my own business, to be an entrepreneur from where I can get sources of work and help the economy of my country.” – 28-year-old female respondent from Ecuador

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PERSONAL RISKS

A few young people, especially women, said that chasing opportunities can come at a cost. These **risks include sexual and gender-based violence and being coerced into corrupt environments**. Studies show the importance of keeping young people, especially girls, safe in education is vital to their success and well-being. However, there is no sector-wide guidance nor are there any standardised definitions of different forms of violence, making safeguarding across different institutions and contexts difficult to assess and address. Furthermore, few safeguarding standards specifically address the groups most at risk of violence and even fewer tackle root causes of violence such as underlying social norms and organisational practices.²¹

Young women explained that many face risks such as sexual assault and psychological trauma. A few female survey respondents (across different countries and regions) shared that safety is actually the most important thing to them when they think about their future education and work opportunities. A couple of young women in the focus groups shared traumatic personal experiences or experiences of their peers, including ‘sex-for-grade’ propositions by professors.

¹⁹ Restless Development. (2019). *What does success look like? Supporting young people to reach their living aspirations*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/07/living-innovation-research/>.

²⁰ Restless Development. (2021). *Spotlight on youth entrepreneurship: supporting small-scale entrepreneurs to expand their businesses and create employment opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/05/supporting-small-scale-entrepreneurs/>.

²¹ Davey, C., Fraser, E., Kangas, A., and Schauerhammer, V. (2020). *International safeguarding standards across the education sector*. London: Resource Hub & Support. Available at: <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/documents/international-safeguarding-standards-across-education-sector>.

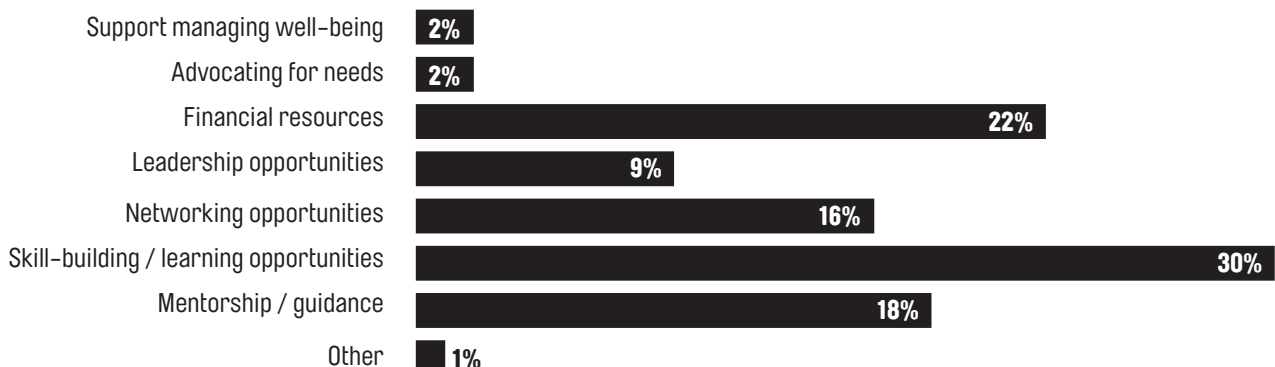
A 22-year-old female student at a university in Ghana shared, *“The fact that we are in classrooms does not validate education accessibility. Many of us find ourselves facing psychological trauma due to sex-for-grade proposals from our lecturers.”* In fact, another young woman said that her aspiration is to create a foundation that deals with sexual violence and is persevering through education and working toward a job that can give her the skills necessary to realise her dream.

A few young people mentioned the **risk of being susceptible to an environment of corruption**. This was especially relevant when young people were speaking about politics and governance processes. They are often turned off pursuing career opportunities in governance because of the perceived corruption of politicians. In some cases, families also stop children from entering this field (see subsequent chapter on youth citizenship) because of the risks inherent in the sector. A young man in Nepal who wants to work in government said that he recognises the drawbacks of corruption and instability but continues to look for inspiration in role model politicians to guide his path.

When young people gain access to practical work experiences, their aspirations often shift.

When asked what support they needed to achieve their aspirations, the most common response was additional skill-building or learning opportunities. This aligns well with qualitative data that strongly emphasises the need for more practical education. One of the biggest desires of young people in rewiring education is to **better link practical experience into the educational experience**. They want to learn beyond theory and classrooms. This also shapes their aspirations. As a young woman from Panama explained, *“Learning methods are the same as many years ago, which leads to being unable to be creative. And there’s also a mismatch between what we learn in school and what happens in actual jobs. We don’t have the soft or technical skills necessary to thrive.”*

Figure 6: Support most needed to achieve aspirations, according to survey respondents (n=1,743)



Many young people struggled to get their first jobs because a certain number of years of experience were often required. They felt they were unable to demonstrate any years of practical experience they might have had during their studies (e.g. internships, apprenticeships, projects, etc.). Even when they secured opportunities like internships, they were relegated to menial tasks (e.g. photocopying, getting coffee, etc.) that did not expose them to real work experience or allow them to gain any skills. Some young people have turned to getting more education as they think having higher and higher degrees may open up more doors for them.

In other words, a person with a bachelor's degree wants a master's and a person that has a master's thinks maybe it would be better to have a PhD. Although young people are always looking forward to improving themselves, **the lack of practical opportunities may contribute toward a perception that more and more education is needed.**

Most practical experiences afforded to young people are unpaid, according to study respondents worldwide. This is a barrier to those who cannot afford to take unpaid internships. This creates a perpetual cycle that favours those who are already more economically privileged to access a wider range of careers that align with their aspirations. A young woman from India explains, *"Honestly, I really don't know whether I will get my desired work opportunities in the future, which is why I sometimes question the relevance of the master's degree. The reason is that the internship experience I have received so far is all unpaid. So, for the sake of getting experiences, I am forced to give up the idea of being independent on my own. However, for me, I can still sustain an unpaid internship opportunity. But, imagine [how hard it is] for someone who is very passionate but cannot work for free."*

When young people do get their first jobs, they say that they struggle to succeed because of the lack of practical experience obtained during their education. A 24-year-old female Algerian respondent said, *"Honestly, I had so many difficulties adapting to my job; especially since it is my first experience. So, I realised that studying architecture at university was not enough, I should have gotten more practical and/or professional trainings that were related to my specialty."* Some young people even said that this struggle resulted in them wanting to make changes to their career paths and made them question the value of their education. While most agreed that education does influence aspirations because earning a degree is the key needed to unlock more job options, they elaborated that **their degree did not help them actualise their aspirations or prepare them with the skills needed for the workforce.**

BOX 3:

HOW A PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE OPENED A STUDENT'S EYES

Paula (pseudonym) studies Food Engineering at a private university in Ecuador. From a very young age, she has had an entrepreneurial spirit. She would participate in community events, setting up games and gathering kids around the neighbourhood. The more she engaged in these activities, the more she began to better understand the life of an entrepreneur.

When Paula turned 18, she decided to study Food Engineering to learn about food processing and developing systems for production. While pursuing her higher education, she realised that she wanted to open her own business to start a food processing company. Aspiring to become an entrepreneur, she focused on acquiring her degree in order to gain deeper insight into her field of interest. Now, at 28 years old, she has realised that although she was dedicated full time to higher education, she still had to engage in practical work to understand the course implications. Paula mentions, *"Many years at university do not make up for what one can learn in practical fields – that too in a shorter time period."* Therefore, she began exploring field educational opportunities outside of the formal curriculum to develop her skills.

Beyond personal aspirations, young people aspire to equitable, inclusive, and more prosperous communities.

Beyond personal aspirations, **many young people also expressed the aspirations they have for their communities.** They are focused on developing a greener and more sustainable environment, appreciating traditional knowledge, finding ways to increase job opportunities for more economic growth, ensuring accessible healthcare, and endorsing better wages for those in the lowest-paying jobs. In some countries (e.g. South Korea, Guyana), young people were also interested in growing the technological resources of their countries. In Guyana specifically, the respondents emphasised that while they may have abundant technology, they lacked sufficient electricity and internet stability. Focusing on strengthening infrastructure is actually more important for growing opportunities.

Across all countries, **young people are keen to build more equitable communities.** Indeed, some of the young people aspired to dedicate their careers toward the betterment of their community and/or country. They want more real inclusion – *actions* – not just words from the powerful. They want more freedom to openly express concerns that they have with their governments without fear, especially in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some young people also mentioned that women’s inclusion is still poor; they felt that the women in powerful positions are little more than ‘window dressing’ in many cases.

Most respondents were open minded and supportive of increased diversity and racial, ethnic, and religious inclusion in their countries. However, they recognised that many of their fellow citizens – especially adults – do not feel the same way. They said that many others view migrants and refugees as people who are taking away jobs for cheap labour in an already tense environment. This was seen in most contexts; however, it was heightened in countries where the economic and political conditions were especially unstable.

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“The most important values are perseverance, ethics, integrity, excellence, respect, and honesty. Even they are personal, but if upheld, they generate community benefit.”

– 24-year-old male respondent from Ecuador

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COVID-19 has forced young people to dramatically rethink their aspirations.

The global pandemic altered the way that young people learn, make a living, and interact in the world. For some, it resulted in some positive shifts, whereas for others, it caused feelings of worry and doubt. Whether positive or negative, most said that the uncertainty that has arisen as a result of **COVID-19 has impacted both their short- and long-term aspirations.** As a female participant from Nigeria shared, *“COVID-19 has affected my present and future aspirations, and I am not sure of what the future holds for me.”*

Most young people have been experiencing a financial shortfall due to the pandemic, which has altered their aspirations. Many of those who were planning to go to university or pursue master's degrees have decided instead to work in order to generate more financial stability. In other words, ensuring financial safety has put other aspirations on the back burner. As a young person from India explained, *"Young people who were focused on volunteering and getting some income have completely shifted on maintaining their financial stability. This means there are fewer young people who are willing to volunteer. Even in my case, my family is suffering a lot due to a financial cut-down. We are out of jobs so volunteering – which I love to do – is out of the question."*

Despite these negative consequences, for many, **the pandemic forced them to think outside of the box and develop other skills**. Some said they were able to study online degree programmes that were previously out of reach for them. They said that due to the shift to online learning, more opportunities in different countries have become available at more affordable prices. Therefore, they have taken advantage of the opportunity to study online in other countries without the burden and expense of travelling. However, obtaining an education is much more difficult in rural settings and areas with poor connectivity. These students are being left behind as both education and work have turned increasingly to the virtual space. This widens an already significant disparity.²² Rural respondents shared that their future outlook became grimmer as income status diminished and doors to educational opportunities have closed. Still, many are trying to stay optimistic that new opportunities will emerge as global trends shift and technology advances.

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"What I expect, since the situation is so complex, is for new employment sources to emerge to dynamize the economy. I am a teacher, and because of COVID, I lost my job. I hope that new employment opportunities appear, since the pandemic has hit us hard."

– 27-year-old female respondent from Ecuador

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Many took the opportunity to explore different career options, especially those with digital connectivity who could use the internet to research the various educational offers. Also, quite a few respondents said the pandemic has inspired them to become entrepreneurs or focus their aspirations toward addressing community needs. This finding confirms a 2020 study by Restless Development which found that, according to 87% of survey respondents, the pandemic revealed young people's realities and changed their perceptions of what is important in society.²³ A young female intern in a law firm in India described her situation: *"Due to COVID, the courts were completely shut. Since the senior lawyers got access to virtual courtrooms and started working remotely, the opportunities that I (interns) used to get were eliminated. We were not needed because of this shift or change in the working environment. This changed my aspirations completely. This was when I started noticing the start-up environment in my country and that is why I shifted to become an aspiring entrepreneur instead."*

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"Ours is a generation that has been hit hard and needs more stability to be able to make more objective decisions and take more firm steps." – 19-year-old researcher from India

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²² Sheppard, B., Han, H.J., and Martinez, E. (2021). 'Years don't wait for them': increased inequalities in children's right to education due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/05/17/years-dont-wait-them/increased-inequalities-childrens-right-education-due-covid>.

²³ Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.

Youth-led recommendations on supporting youth aspirations.

Respondents in the focus group discussions, audio clips, and youth talks shared their recommendations directly on how to support youth to achieve their aspirations. The following are the top recommendations that emerged as most important globally.

1

Higher learning institutions need to diversify opportunities for various disciplines, such as literature and the arts. Along with the diversification, higher education should be more interdisciplinary and should create pathways for people to more easily switch to other subjects if they wish.

2

Put more emphasis on proper on-the-job training that does not limit experiences, especially during internships, to menial work opportunities.

3

Revise curriculums to focus more on the real-life implications of academic theories; for example, facilitate young people to interact with vulnerable communities through practical experiences.

4

Career counselling should be given heavier emphasis so students can understand what kind of work opportunities could be possible for them.

5

Education should be accessed through hands-on educational projects. Public policies, through support from local and international institutions and the private sector, should prioritise practical educational opportunities.

CHAPTER 5: YOUNG PEOPLE IN CITIZENSHIP AND DECISION MAKING.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Young people are not well represented in political decision making, but feel more represented in civil society.
- Barriers such as a lack of opportunities, financial constraints, corruption, government instability, and limitations in laws and policies inhibit active citizenship; these barriers differ by gender.
- Youth participation in decision-making spaces is often tokenistic and historic exclusion and fear of reprisal leaves young people discouraged with their governments.
 - Identifying ways to get involved in their communities that connect to their personal experiences and aspirations is most motivating for young people.
 - Young people are lacking accessible and trustworthy information and/or the skills needed to be active citizens.

53%

of young people feel only somewhat represented in governance.

66%

of young people feel they do not have the opportunity to organise themselves to speak out or feel that they are not listened to by adults.

31%

of young people are most motivated to take action when faced with issues to which they have personal connections.

46%

of young people see lack of opportunities or lack of resources as the main barriers to raising their voices.



Young people want a seat at the table to address the gaps and challenges they experience in their education and livelihoods. Thus, rewiring education is a task that calls for a *radical reimagining* of how young people can be placed at the centre of decision making and embrace their role as active citizens. It requires moving beyond tokenistic inclusion of ‘the youth voice’ and toward genuine representation in leadership roles and decision-making spaces. Young people foster heterogeneous, unique expertise that makes co-leadership approaches invaluable.

Young people are not well represented in political decision making but feel more represented in civil society.

Although young people continue to push for their voices to be heard, their **representation in decision making remains relatively thin**. A slight majority (53%) of survey respondents felt only somewhat represented in civic spaces, and more than one-third of them (34%) felt that they are not well represented at all. These findings were relatively consistent across regions, genders, and ages.

Figure 7: Extent to which survey respondents feel young people are represented in their society (n=1,743)



However, when speaking directly with young people, it is clear that **perception of representation differs by demographic**. Across all countries, young people felt that the exclusion of women and girls in decision-making processes is high. Also, if the respondents were from minority communities in their region, they felt that playing an active part in decision making was even harder. In MENA and Africa, the respondents from rural areas are often more involved in local governance and politics than the young people in cities. However, as also found by IFAD (2019), young people’s voices in rural settings often go unheard in higher-level policy dialogues, meaning their unique needs are not met with the support needed.²⁴

Civil society and university-based organisations are where young people feel better represented than in government spaces, and where they feel that they can have a bigger influence. In fact, groups like student councils can serve as a training ground for youth leadership because they foster and encourage active citizenship through a blended experience with learning; this helps take a lot of young people out of their comfort zone.

²⁴ Trivelli, C. and Morel, J. (2019). *Rural youth inclusion, empowerment and participation*. Rome: IFAD.

However, once civil society collides with the government, there are bureaucratic systems and struggles that youth organisations come up against. While civil society participation may open some doors for young people to lead and be active citizens, those doors rarely lead to government roles. Some young people highlighted that groups like student unions or the youth wing of political parties may be the best way for young people to get an opportunity to become more politically active. These may have negative associations in some contexts, though, due to their affiliation with the national political parties that young people view as corrupt and unrepresentative of them.

Barriers such as limitations in laws and policies, a lack of opportunities, financial constraints, corruption, and government instability inhibit active citizenship.

Young people come up against many **barriers that limit their active citizenship, such as lack of opportunity to get organised, financial constraints, corruption, government instability, and even limitations in laws and policies.** This finding was echoed by the 385 young people from 50 countries who participated in a separate 2020 OpenGov survey: *“96 percent of respondents of the OpenGov Youth Collective consultation indicated strongly that political structures, norms and rules, including the monetisation of electoral processes, have become a huge barrier to youth participation in politics.”*²⁵

In most countries, there are laws in place that influence types of active citizenship for young people. For instance, in most Asian and European countries, voting is viewed as a duty or responsibility. It may even be enshrined in law that citizens must vote. Conversely, there are also laws that discourage young people’s active citizenship. Typically, countries set a minimum age for representation in governance systems. While these are typically at the highest levels (e.g. parliament), they contribute to young people’s perceptions that participation in political processes is not meant for them. As one young woman from Nepal said, *“Look closely at Nepal’s parliamentary seats. Do you see any young people who are below 30 years old? No.”* This woman is right: just 1.9 percent of (single or lower house) parliamentarians worldwide are under 30.²⁶ Some young people suggested that just as there are women’s quotas for participation in many countries, **there should also be youth quotas to increase opportunities for young people to be represented.**

The financial requirement for getting involved in politics is prohibitive for most young people, according to the respondents. They explained that candidates typically must spend huge amounts of money to promote their candidacy and fill out a significant amount of paperwork, which is discouraging for most young people – and sometimes impossible. Young people overwhelmingly perceive that it is necessary to ‘play dirty’, know someone, or have a lot of money, in order to get involved in the political space. Respondents said that the young people who do end up getting involved in a political career are those with economic power or strong networks; often this means they are not very representative of the average young person. These elements are strongest in contexts facing government instability. Without a stable government system, young people see limited opportunities to get involved in formal (or often even informal) decision-making spaces.

²⁵ OpenGov Youth Collective. (2020). *Parliaments and the power of young people: a call to action*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/10/parliaments-and-the-power-of-young-people-a-call-to-action>.

²⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2016). *Youth participation in national parliaments*. Geneva: IPU. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2016>.

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“Every time there is a need for protest or raising of voices, immediately we visualise young people out on the street. However, if you look at the policy level, there is zero representation there. During the election, there was a young 27-year-old woman who stood up for deputy mayor candidacy. But, the only reason why she stood up was because there was nobody from her community to run in the election.” – 21-year-old female social work student in Nepal

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Barriers to civic engagement that young people face differ by gender.

A third of young people described that the main barrier they face to actively participating in civic spaces is the lack of opportunities to get organised and participate, and another third argued that adults do not listen to and/or act on the ideas that young people share. These barriers have also been found in other studies with young people,²⁷ emphasising that – consistently across countries and respondent groups – **adults and decision makers are not listening to the needs and interests of young people.**

Interestingly, this study found that **there are gendered dimensions to these barriers.** The lack of opportunities to get organised was described more commonly by young men (40%) compared to young women (29%). Young women, on the other hand, were more likely to feel that adults either will not listen to them or do not follow through on their suggestions with action (37% of women compared to 25% of men). The gendered differences in what young men and women view as the biggest barrier is statistically significant ($p < .008$). This demonstrates that young men may have an easier time than young women getting adult decision makers to listen to their ideas, but still struggle with mobilising other young people.

Furthermore, when young people were asked to think about their future civic participation, male respondents more often identified a lack of resources as the main barrier that would hinder them from taking action, whereas female respondents more often believed that time pressures or competing priorities would be their major barrier. Typically, women are over-burdened with responsibilities at home and more and more women are working, so the time they have to participate in citizenship activities is often more limited than the time men have. **The over-burdening of women is a key exclusion that young women still see themselves facing into the future.**

Youth participation in decision-making spaces is often tokenistic.

Young people overwhelmingly believe that youth inclusion must go beyond participation: they want to be involved from the onset of policy or programme design through dissemination and implementation. Unfortunately, they understand that **their participation in decision-making processes and governance is often tokenistic.** While they may be invited to participate in conferences or consultations, their presence is simply a number-counting activity.

²⁷ Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world.* Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.

In other words, while they may be consulted, they are not able to influence decisions or take action. This type of symbolic participation enables young people to put forward ideas, but the decision makers remain gatekeepers. Respondents elaborated that in some cases, they are listened to; they are invited to provide insights on a topic, but when these insights are taken to the higher authority, their contributions are not acknowledged. As a result, some young people choose not to participate because they assume that they will not be given recognition for their ideas.

Even at school or university level, young people in many contexts feel that student bodies or councils are powerless. Young people in India said that these student leaders **“have no power to initiate anything, organise events, or take decisions of any sort. They are dominated by students of the majority ethnicity/religion of that area.”** They elaborated that even the youth wings of political parties are relatively powerless to uphold youth interests and needs; rather, they are only able to carry out the orders of older politicians. This leads to **young voters feeling that no party actually represents them.**

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“If you look at politics or decision making in government policies, youth participation is unavailable, although it is very essential. Most of the time, young people are involved in the main discussion. For instance, if there is policy level discussion, young people are engaged in collecting responses but when it comes to actual implementation, we are automatically considered as volunteers and nothing more.” – Young male respondent from Ghana

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Historic exclusion and fear of reprisal leaves young people discouraged with their governments.

Many factors lead to young people being discouraged with their governments, politicians, or governance processes, such as:

- the perception that government does not listen to them;
- fear of consequences for speaking out;
- corruption of political parties and politicians; and
- social norms and mentalities around politics.

The young people explained that they are discouraged to participate in governance because, when they do, decision makers never listen to them; it is easy to ‘brush off’ young people. This sentiment comes up time and time again in youth research: the historic exclusion of young people, or the concern that their ideas would not be given the recognition they deserve, makes young people hesitant to engage with governments.²⁸ Respondents in this study elaborated that the people in leadership positions do not uphold their interests or, worse, they actively stop young people from speaking out. One young woman in Zambia explained that every time young people try to raise their voices against bad governance during a protest, the police arrive to **“shut them up”**. This is demoralising for young people who want to participate in governance and politics. Since young people do not know how they can effectively participate in a way that will have any influence, many choose not to participate at all.

²⁸ Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.

In some contexts – especially in MENA, Africa, Latin America, and South Asia – **young people expressed fear of backlash or consequences from speaking out against their governments.** Family influence is strong for young people; in the case of active citizenship, parents often urge their children not to join politics as it is perceived as something that could corrupt them or physically harm them. In India, for example, focus group participants explained that politics is considered to be highly dangerous as there are many cases of political violence, so engaging in civic activism or holding political positions is strongly discouraged by parents. This discouragement and fear are heightened for women. There is very little female representation in the public sector because they fear for the safety of themselves or their family. They also often have to accept sexual harassment in the workplace in order to move into worthwhile roles. Young people understand that when women voice their opinions, especially when they disagree with others, they are often labelled with negative associations. This discourages women from speaking out and becoming activists or politicians. As a result of this fear and/or discouragement, there are not many role models for young women to inspire them to engage in governance.

The heterogeneity of youth results in different perceptions of how to be active citizens. **Most young people said that their peers who are active in politics are not good representatives of the majority.** As one male respondent from Zambia said, *“Once in leadership positions, the young leaders forget about us and they focus more on themselves.”* Respondents felt that the youth leaders are in their roles just to make money. The dialogue meetings that youth leaders hold with young people are rare and almost exclusively symbolic. This perception of youth in governance leads most young people to look for other outlets for citizenship. However, getting involved in civic action outside of the designated spaces condoned by the government is intimidating for most young people. Those who do are often perceived negatively by the government, which discourages others from participating out of fear of the consequences.

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“We have snubbed politics, but now it is our duty to take it back and stop feeling sorry for ourselves.”
 – Young male respondent in Italy

Identifying ways to get involved in their communities that connect to their personal experiences and aspirations is most motivating for young people.

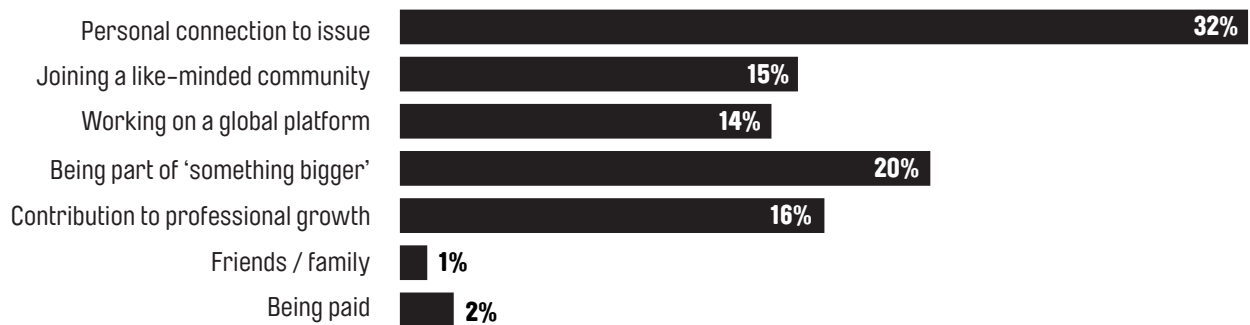
A key learning from the focus group respondents was young peoples’ general lack of interest in governance and citizenship at the national level. **The respondents were more interested in engaging in decision-making spaces in their local communities, but still only on a limited scale.** When the young respondents spoke about youth leaders and activists, they typically viewed these individuals as *others*, and did not consider themselves in these categories.

Young people are balancing their lives with studies, work, volunteering, and family and friends. This time period between ages 18–30 is foundational and transformational – and young people recognise this. They are busy working toward achieving their aspirations because they understand that they are shaping the way for their future during this time in their lives.

They expressed that they need to invest their time and energy into roles and responsibilities that have meaning for them and bring them closer to their goals. Due to their discouragement with government and perception that their voices ultimately will not matter, **many choose not to be active citizens and instead focus their time on things in which they find value.**

However, young people said that they find joy and a sense of purpose when they are given the opportunity to contribute and actively participate in decision making regarding policies that will impact them when enacted. Similar to findings from other studies,²⁹ **young people shared that they tend to be most passionate about creating change in the spaces to which they have a personal connection:** their local communities, schools or universities, and workplaces. Indeed, the highest proportion of survey respondents (32%) said that volunteering in their community was their preferred way of engaging and being active citizens. Many expressed a feeling of responsibility to their community and creating a better tomorrow. They are finding a sense of purpose when they are given the opportunity to contribute and actively participate in leadership and decision-making activities where they can directly see their contribution or where it aligns with their future aspirations.

Figure 8: Motivation of survey respondents to take action (n=1,743)



BOX 4: WHAT MOTIVATES YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE ACTIVE CITIZENS?

"Injustice and inequality motivate me."

"Environmental education motivates me, and it motivates me to be the voice so that more young people can be heard."

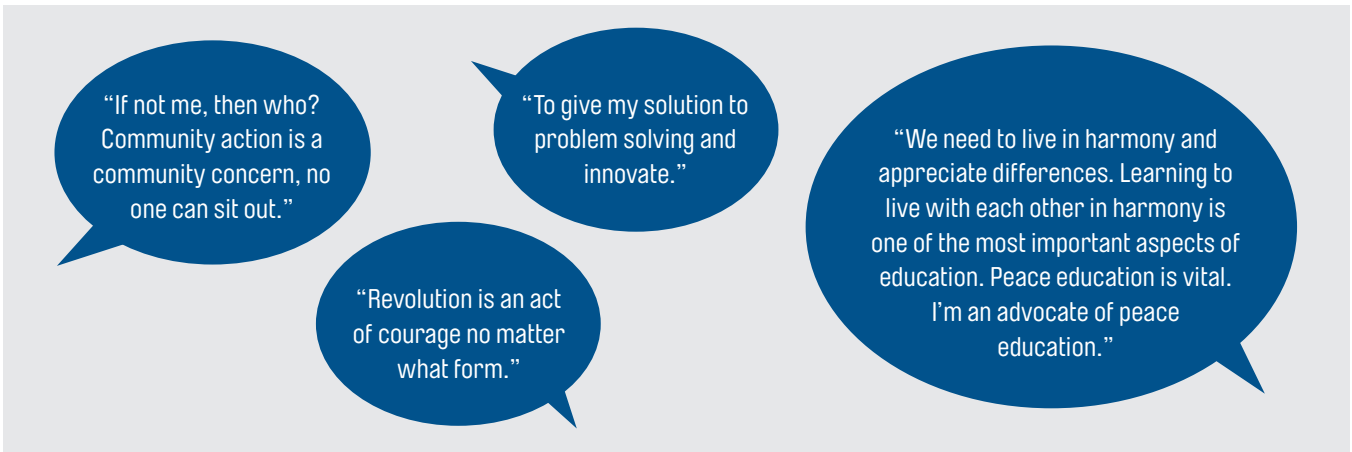
"The experience I gained from my own life and my friends' lives."

"Seeing talent feel undervalued, dismissed, or talent not being able to achieve their full potential."

"Participation of males and females in sports is unjust. If a girl is muscular, people assume they're LGBTQ... and it's worse in rural areas. People are slowly getting more advanced ideas about humanity than in the past. I know I need to speak up for people to eradicate injustice from the world."

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²⁹ Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.



Young people lack accessible and trustworthy information and/or the skills needed to be active citizens.

In many cases, young people did not feel that they had sufficient information to be able to participate actively in their communities or countries. Some respondents felt that many young people did not even fully understand the laws of their country or their personal rights. **Granting young people civic capacities is a crucial step to addressing both the economic and socio-political challenges** that are faced locally, nationally, and internationally.

Interestingly, **many young people experienced changes in their personal knowledge about their society as a result of COVID-19**. Numerous respondents said it made them more aware of social issues and reflect on what matters in society; they became more eager to help those in distress. While movement restrictions have limited the opportunities for young people to mobilise and participate in decision-making spaces in some cases,³⁰ online platforms have surged and opened up new opportunities for young people to engage with wider networks.³¹ Some respondents experienced politicians becoming more accessible as they started using virtual platforms more. This finding is a recent shift in young people’s perceptions: early into the pandemic in 2020, young people said that their leaders and politicians were not using virtual platforms to connect with constituents and therefore, such platforms were not effective at reaching them directly.³²

Time and time again, young people emphasise that **the media plays a big role in how they get their information as well as how they may exercise their voices**. Media outlets provide young people with a platform to share their opinions, ideas, and experiences. More than ever before, young people are active on social media and view such digital spaces as a way to consume news, learn new viewpoints, and share their own opinions. A 2020 study by Restless Development found that 85% of young people felt that social media activism is effective in creating positive change and 45% believed that it has created more opportunities for young people to have their voices heard.³³

³⁰ International Labour Organization. (2020). *Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

³¹ Search for Common Ground. (2020). *Covid-19 discussion paper: youth and the Covid-19 crisis in conflict affected contexts*. Available at: https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Youth_and_COVID-19_in_Conflict-Affected_Areas.pdf.

³²⁻³³ Restless Development. (2020). *It’s our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/>.

Social media can be used as a way for young people to expand their civic knowledge and engagement. However, many young people feel that **social media can distort information, making it a key space for spreading mis- and disinformation**. Some said that they know political parties are sharing inaccurate information through social media channels in order to manipulate young voters. As one female respondent in India said, it *“is an information crisis, especially affecting rural areas.”* Young people struggle to parse out what information can be trusted. Also, digital platforms are ripe with aggression. In some cases, in the virtual space, people can argue with, insult, or even threaten young people, resulting in an unproductive space for dialogue. While young people say they experience benefits from online engagement, they also felt unsatisfied with it as a long-term solution for their engagement.

In order to be better prepared to take on a more active role in their communities and countries, young people want to develop stronger soft skills. They view this as the gateway to having leadership skills. The Development Alternative (2021) also recognised this skills gap: young people needed stronger capacities in storytelling so they could better tell their own stories.³⁴ However, the respondents in this study felt that **the education system perpetuates a structure where free speech and thought are not taught or supported**. Children who freely express themselves may even be punished. This all leads to young people not knowing how to effectively express their views or intentionally holding them back. While many young people say they and their peers have ideas to support development, they do not share these ideas out of inexperience and a lack of confidence.

“Until and unless the media play a crucial role, youth voices do not get represented. One example is what happened recently in India. One of the Youtubers passed a derogatory comment on people living in North East India. The comment stormed the young people to start a hashtag challenge in Twitter (#northeastlivesmatter). ... The media plays a role in capturing youth voices and that is how they get representation. On the contrary, law and policy makers do not interact with young people on the ground.” – 20-year-old female participant from India

BOX 5: WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE RAISE THEIR VOICES

When young people raise their voices, change happens. That change is not always met positively by power holders and when it is, young people may still be left behind. In the following examples from Nicaragua and India, young people were able to have a significant influence, though with differing results.

“In Nicaragua, we have a socio-political crisis. If you are a supporter of the government, they give you a card with which you can more easily access any job opportunity. But, if you are against the government, you will not be able to have this opportunity. As a college student, this is something that worries me. In 2018, there was a socio-political crisis where university students came out to protest the burning of Indio Maíz. The authorities did nothing during the protest, which killed university students. We currently have more than 130 political prisoners, including university students. There are also students who were expelled. This month, five students were expelled due to the law called ‘attempt against peace’.” – 21-year-old female respondent in Nicaragua

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³⁴ The Development Alternative. (2021). *Working better together*. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/working-better-together/>.

“If we are taking India as an example, look at the political discussions that happened before COVID in Kerala. All these discussions happened in universities in central Kerala, where there are the highest number of young people. Students identified that the Citizenship Act needed some amendments. Most of these discussions started from the universities among young people. Eventually, intensive lobbying was done using arts, strikes, rallies, and so on. Only after this, the issue was in the limelight. What I mean to say is: usually dialogues on any political issues are only taken after youth raise their voice. However, when the dialogues meet their conclusion, young people are not acknowledged. So, even if youth have a voice and show clear vision, they are not credited for their efforts.” – 25-year-old male respondent in India

Youth-led recommendations to strengthen active citizenship.

Respondents in the focus group discussions, audio clips, and youth talks shared their recommendations directly on how to improve youth engagement in citizenship. The following are the top recommendations that emerged as most important globally.

1

Make political engagement opportunities that are available in capital cities more accessible in other settings such as rural communities and/or online. Politicians should continue to use digital platforms to reach young people in dialogue even after the pandemic.

2

Allow positions for young people in parliament and other government positions by reducing the age of nomination and/or creating a youth quota.

3

Women’s inclusion programmes should be made available to empower and motivate young women leaders. Start mentorship programmes that support young women in political participation and governance.

4

Initiate a government mandated process through which commissions or councils formed to draft or amend policies have to include young people from the relevant professional background in the policy-making process.

5

Ministries of education and educational institutions should introduce civic learning and mentorship programmes to supplement what young people are learning in their academic syllabus on civic engagement. Ensure young people know their civil rights, especially in rural areas. Skills such as fundraising, oratory, writing, mobilising, and volunteering need to be incorporated into curriculums especially for women, people with disabilities, people of the LGBTQ+ community, minority religions, etc.

CHAPTER 6: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF ASPIRATIONS, LEARNING, LIVELIHOODS, AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP.

“Education is a primal factor towards aspirations. Education gives you a broader view of things.”
– Young female respondent from Zambia

Overall, young people are dissatisfied with the opportunities around them.

The majority of respondents had at least somewhat **negative opinions about their education and livelihood opportunities as well as their access to engagement in civic spaces**. Young people are struggling with an outdated education system because it does not provide them with the necessary opportunities to develop their skills, expand their knowledge, and cope with technological advancement. They are looking for a radical change: they believe that a skills-based curriculum is far better than the traditional theory-based curriculum. They strongly believe that acquiring skills as opposed to gathering information is the change that must happen in education to support their success. However, they do not feel listened to by power holders. This overwhelming dissatisfaction has diminished or extinguished the aspirations of many young people.



Education is the cornerstone for aspirations, livelihoods, and citizenship.

If there is one component that does not work in this system, all are harder to achieve.

- Without high quality learning, building success in the workplace is more challenging.
- Without a good education in which civic knowledge is emphasised, and the soft skills needed to speak out are taught, being an active citizen is difficult.
- Without an education that inspires discovery and facilitates the learning needs of students, achieving their short- and long-term aspirations becomes less likely.

Despite a strong interdependency, young people experience a **mismatch between education and available work opportunities**. The majority of young people across the globe shared that they do not feel their education has prepared them for the world of work. Young people are looking for work and employment opportunities that add value to their personal and professional development and are keen for both soft and technical skills to feature more prominently in their educational journeys. They are discouraged that the 21st century skills that they need to fulfil their dreams and succeed in the workplace are rarely taught in their educational institutions. Strengthening soft skills such as leadership, communication, and entrepreneurship came up time and time again as critical competencies that young people feel they need to be successful but are not receiving through formal education. These are vital skills for living and working in the dynamic societies and economies of today.

Furthermore, young people are being asked to be active citizens, but they are not afforded the opportunities to develop the skills necessary to be taken seriously in the public sector. Also, many said that their educational institutions or the systems around them do not equip them with adequate civic knowledge or even knowledge about their rights. Because they feel ill prepared – or that their voice is not being taken seriously by decision makers – many say that they are choosing to be less active in their communities. Young people clearly say that their **participation in decision-making spaces is tokenistic at best**, which discourages them from aspiring to engage in citizenship practices.

.....

“Gradually, when I began volunteering, I understood the purpose of my education and started enjoying the work. So, for me, it was the work opportunities rather than the education [that shaped my aspirations].” – 24-year-old female respondent from Nepal

.....

External factors influence educational and livelihood choices.

Young people experience external influences – including **their families, their financial status, and opportunities available** – that dictate their educational and livelihood choices. Families are one of the primary influencers of educational, work, and citizenship choices. In fact, many young people feel they cannot make their own choices: they must do what their families insist. There is also a gendered dimension to what many young people are or are not allowed to do. Young men are expected to go into lucrative careers to support their families and young women are expected either not to work or to ensure their work will allow them sufficient time to dedicate to caring for their families.

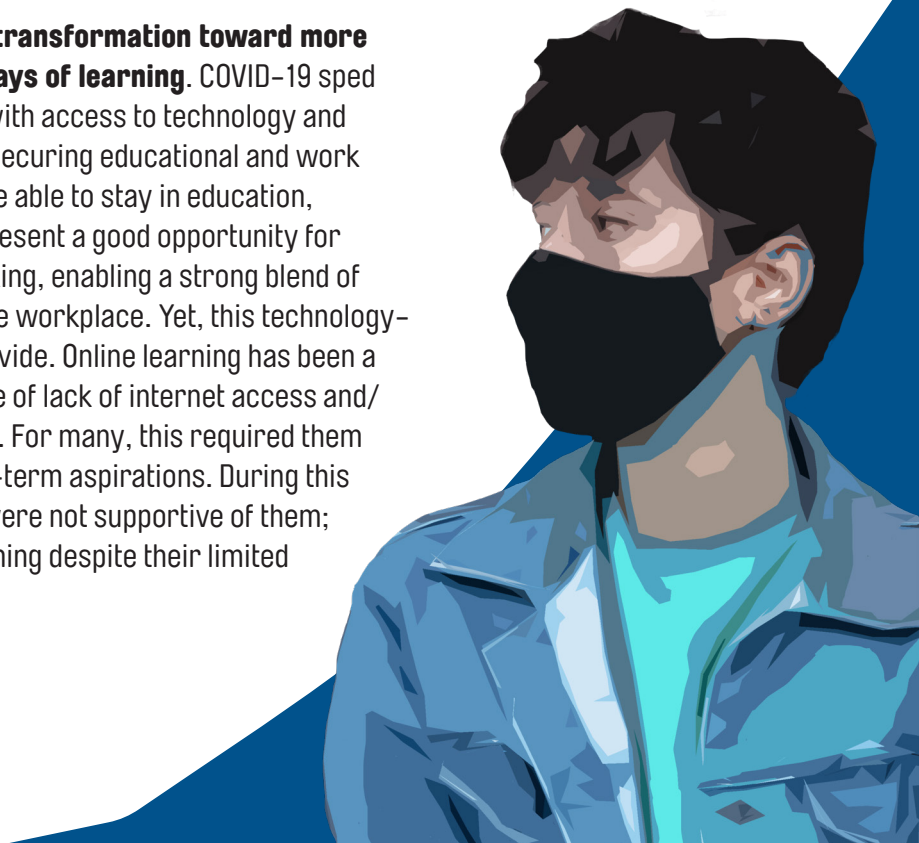
Aspirations and educational and work opportunities are based on the environment in which young people live. For example, **financial status affects their aspirations, educational access, networks, and voice.** Those who come from families with more wealth typically have more opportunities for better education, more meaningful work opportunities based on their networks, and more likelihood of having their voices heard in decision-making spaces. Respondents (especially in Africa and Latin America) said that when the public (i.e. no cost to low cost) education systems are poor, opportunities for learning are less feasible except for those who have the financial means to access better education through private institutions or migration. When possible, young people are eager to migrate in search of better opportunities.

“As we grow, our understanding of things grows. Personally, my understanding of the current happenings guides my aspirations. My passion and the available opportunities drive my aspirations.”
– Young male respondent from Ghana

COVID-19 triggered changes to youth aspirations, educational journeys, and livelihood priorities.

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of young people’s lives and futures, but its impacts are not homogeneous across all young people. Some young people had to leave school to start working in order to provide for their family. However, a smaller proportion of respondents actually (re-)enrolled in higher education due to losing their jobs. Many of those who had been working have increased focus on keeping their job; as a result, they are less attuned to their professional aspirations and more focused on maintaining financial stability. Due to the pandemic, there is a significant employment gap and young people said that they – as well as many of the people they know (both young and adult) – are willing to (im)migrate to find a chance of better economic opportunities. Unfortunately, international border restrictions have made migration difficult.

Higher education for the future is marked by **transformation toward more digitalised, diffused, customer-focused ways of learning.** COVID-19 sped up this transformation. Those young people with access to technology and other resources have a far better chance of securing educational and work opportunities. For the young people who were able to stay in education, most have shifted to online courses. These present a good opportunity for many to study abroad and also continue working, enabling a strong blend of academics as well as skills development in the workplace. Yet, this technology-centred transition has increased the digital divide. Online learning has been a disadvantage for those in rural areas because of lack of internet access and/or connection speed and electricity reliability. For many, this required them to pause their education and shift their short-term aspirations. During this time, many felt that educational institutions were not supportive of them; they were just forced to deal with online learning despite their limited connectivity.



Negative consequences in mental health emerged as a significant global finding among survey respondents. Many young respondents shared that their mental health is suffering due to isolation, education shifting to virtual platforms, extracurricular activities being stopped, difficulties running their small business, loss of opportunities to study (especially abroad), losing work, not being able to find job opportunities after graduation, and more. This has had a profound impact on their aspirations and the way they are (and are not) engaging in their communities. An 18-year-old young woman in India elaborated, *“COVID-19 has created a situation which has made my depression worse and often uncontrollable. This leads to me to barely being able to do even the most basic of tasks. Additionally, school has been reduced to academics alone, and this causes me a whole lot of stress. All of this combined has made it very hard for me to study and learn to the best of my abilities, and furthered the degradation of my mental illness.”*

“Everyone who has an education hasn’t changed their goals or felt really happy. Biggest goal is just employment – it makes me reconsider what the point of education is. In the system we live in, we’re expected to work 40–60 hours per week so there’s no time for anything else. So, it’s a system change. Maybe education can help people figure out how to find other hobbies and priorities to make a better work-life balance?” – Young female respondent from Panama

CONCLUSION.

Young people’s realities are overlapping and interdependent. This research highlights this ever-present interdependency clearly. Young people are feeling a strong urgency and pressure to make the best education and livelihood choices that align with their personal and community aspirations and goals. However, they are struggling with an outdated education system that does not provide them with the necessary opportunities to develop their skills, expand their knowledge, and cope with technological advancement.

They are looking for a radical change: they believe that a values and skills-based curriculum is far better than the traditional theory-based curriculum. But they do not feel listened to by power holders. This overwhelming dissatisfaction has diminished or extinguished the aspirations of many young people. Despite these challenges, young people remain hopeful and optimistic that education can – and will – continue to be a light to guide their path. The urgency of rewiring education is profound in order to ignite the aspirations of our future’s strongest asset – young people.



CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS.

For government actors.

Legislate youth-supportive work policies: Young people have been immensely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many being forced to postpone education and/or experiencing difficulties accessing work. Even when they can access work, they are often the lowest wage workers and they experience discrimination and ageism in the workplace. Governments should consider the following short- and long-term policies that support youth livelihoods:

- In countries that have not yet established a minimum wage, such a policy should be set and monitored so that it is being followed by the private sector.
- Labour policies specifically targeting the informal sector that ensure young workers are being adequately paid and kept safe must be implemented.
- Consider making unpaid internships illegal. This type of labour is targeted to young people as they are the most vulnerable to feeling obliged to take these roles, and they create an added layer of social exclusion for the poorest young people who cannot afford to take an unpaid job.
- Institute short-term relief programmes for young people affected by the pandemic. Supporting them financially to restart their education and/or transition back into their chosen profession (as opposed to the temporary jobs many young people were forced to take in response to the crisis) would propel young people toward more stability and prosperity.

Legalise youth inclusion policies: As women's quotas exist in many governments, so too should youth quotas. Opening up decision-making seats for young people and formally instituting a youth quota in policy-making bodies will ensure that young people have systematic voice in decision making. This will reduce the tokenism that youth roles currently experience and will place important decisions about the future in the hands of those whose lives will be most affected.

Mandate youth inclusion in decision-making forums: Dialogues between decision makers and young people need to be reshaped, refocused, and strengthened to become more meaningful. Enhancing these engagements may mean fostering more inclusive conversations and letting young people bring their solutions to the table. Formally, initiating a government-mandated process through which commissions or councils must draft or amend policies that require inclusion of young people from the relevant professional backgrounds in the policy-making process could be a structural solution. Put the Ministry of Youth (or equivalent) in a leadership role over this process to ensure that they remain an integral part of governance.

Protect social movements: Young people are typically the leaders and most active citizens in social movements and protests. These are important ways for citizens to voice their concerns and to make change happen. Many young people are fearful of exercising their right to speak out because they encounter police and violence during protests. Support young people by creating a safe space for them to be active citizens and rights holders. Do not disband protests, respond with police and violence, or silence their voices.

Decentralise power: Young people are most active in their local communities. These are the spaces where they feel most comfortable and empowered to voice their concerns and share their ideas. However, power structures in many countries mean that issues raised locally rarely influence higher-level decision making. By decentralising power structures, young people will be given more power to address their issues and local communities more generally will be able to come up with more contextual, meaningful solutions to their issues. This minimises chances for systemic corruption and better distributes power at local levels.

Utilise digital spaces: Implement more technologies in the governance process that will enable greater inclusion of young people in dialogue and decision-making spaces. During the pandemic, young people have had more opportunities to engage directly with policy makers and administrators on topics that affect their lives through online platforms including social media. This has motivated more young people to become active citizens. Continuing the use of these digital spaces post-pandemic will be critical to maintaining and increasing youth engagement in public policy. However, it requires mitigating the digital divide. Innovative ways to reach those without existing internet connectivity through different approaches or technologies (e.g. WhatsApp groups) are essential.

Guarantee internet as a right: The internet must be a guaranteed right to make educational and livelihood aspirations possible for all young people. As education institutions and workplaces are increasingly digitalised, the digital divide will become harder to overcome for many young people. Guaranteeing internet access to all young people, regardless of geographic location and socio-economic status, must be a right afforded by governments. The cost for the internet must also be accessible and subsidised if necessary for the lowest income families.

Make localised investments: Investments in education and training programmes need to be made at local levels rather than sub-national (e.g. provincial) levels. By making small-scale funding and training opportunities for students and/or aspiring young entrepreneurs available at the most local level possible, students from all backgrounds have easier access to these resources. Furthermore, through investing at local level in research, innovation, and competencies such as literacy, the education and livelihood gap between young people in different geographic settings could be narrowed.

Ensure education is affordable: A tremendous barrier for many young people to pursuing high quality secondary and tertiary education is its exorbitant costs. As education is a right and also necessary for sustainable development, the government must step in to regulate the cost of education to ensure it is accessible to all. Put a cap on costs for public education and fund public education adequately to guarantee it is high quality. For the lowest income young people, make financial aid available to cover the cost of education so all young people can access education equitably.

Invest in educational infrastructure: Ensure that quality educational infrastructure is accessible in all places, especially in rural locations that are often not privy to the same opportunities as those in urban centres. Additionally, educational facilities must be more accessible for people with disabilities.

Support young entrepreneurs financially: The taxes and registration fees for business are typically too high for a young person to manage, acting as a barrier to entry for entrepreneurship. The government could adapt the tax code in such a way that supports young entrepreneurs to start their first businesses. The government could also issue seed grants for young entrepreneurs to use when starting up their businesses. Not only would these approaches support youth innovation, they would also help launch small businesses and benefit the economy.

Support vocational education: Technical and vocational education programmes should be supported at policy level to the same extent as secondary and tertiary education institutions. This includes policy and funding frameworks that ensure sufficient educational infrastructure is in place, support financial aid for students, fund training programmes for teachers, and monitor and evaluate their performance.

For educational institutions.

Incorporate practical learning: Revise curriculums to focus on real life implications of academic theories. Higher learning institutions/business schools should incorporate educational trips, collaborations with the public and private sectors, and workshops to promote practical learning. Integrate more practical and community-based engagement and increase emphasis on proper on-the-job training that does not limit the experiences young people have to menial work. Incorporate informal learning opportunities for young people aspiring to be entrepreneurs. Students should be able to be assessed based on hands-on educational projects as opposed to only on exams.

Teach soft skills: Learning institutions must train young people with 21st century skills such as critical thinking, entrepreneurial thinking, data analysis, financial literacy, communication, emotional intelligence, people management, and other relevant social skills. Young people are loudly requesting to develop curriculums that focus less on theory and instead build the skills that they need to be professionals and engaged citizens. Educate children to think on their own, to read beyond school books, and to express their opinions in class. Encouraging students at all levels of education to read the news, discuss it in class, and express themselves and their opinions will help them develop useful professional skills as well as the knowledge needed to become more active citizens.

Design interdisciplinary, adaptable curriculums: Revamp the curriculum to be suitable to current market trends, challenges, and the global economy. Curriculums should provide a structured avenue for exploration and inquisition for students in higher education so that students may more easily switch fields of study as they learn more about what interests them. Link various disciplines together to help students see the interconnected nature of topics and fields and be more creative and innovative. An interdisciplinary curriculum can support students to learn to apply concepts and skills from one domain to another, which is highly relevant in the workforce and when students want to be entrepreneurs.

Diversify curriculum topics: Recognise the diverse aspirations and talents of young people and ensure that curriculums can meet their needs. Higher learning institutions must diversify learning opportunities for various disciplines, especially those such as literature and the arts as well as entrepreneurship. In addition to core topics for study, other topics that support students' life skills and development are needed. Courses in civic learning can help to ensure that young people know their civil rights, especially those living in rural areas with less exposure to the urban centres, and ensuring courses integrate teachings on ethics, responsibility, and values help young people develop their own stances. Skills such as fundraising, oratory, writing, mobilising, financial literacy, and sustainability were highlighted as vital topics missing from curriculums.

Build digital skills: The future of work is increasingly evolving into digital forms in this dynamic information age. To harness this evolution, education must be rewired to support young people to build their digital skills and empower them with greater access to remote learning opportunities and digital resources.

Teach young people about their rights: Young people have said that they and/or their peers do not know about their rights. These are the rights they have as citizens, but also as students. Providing sessions and/or courses that target young people as rights holders to educate them about the rights they are entitled to would help young people as they go into the world as active citizens. Allowing time within the course structure for active community engagement, such as giving credit for volunteering activities, could help to support rights awareness.

Provide sufficient counselling resources: Young people desire to have counselling resources made more available, especially as a result of the pandemic when their mental health is suffering. Educational institutions should incorporate mental health sessions into their school activities, including focusing on students who are burned out in order to help them get back on track with their studies. Anti-bullying and peer groups for mental health support, including those led by a psychologist, should be standard in educational institutions. Students are also in need of career counselling and are asking for peer-to-peer mentoring during their classes to promote the art of professionalism. Counselling extends to families as well: holding awareness raising sessions for parents to build their understanding on how to better support their children and bridge the generational gap would help mitigate the pressure young people feel to conform to their families' expectations.

Improve teacher training: Support educators to keep their teaching skills and knowledge about trends and methodologies current. Train teachers in different approaches to evaluating students, teaching students in methods that best facilitate learning, and the different types of intelligence that young people have. More support for teachers to better educate young people will reap tremendous benefits for the young people themselves. Institute a requirement to regularly upskill teachers, equipping them with modern digital tools to facilitate their learning process.

Adapt examination processes: Just as young people need a more practical curriculum, they also need different approaches to being assessed. Traditional written examinations are not the way many students can best prove their knowledge, nor are they the way that most workplaces assess the performance of their workers. Designing project-based curriculums where students can be examined based on their performance in delivering the project would not only more accurately assess their skills and abilities, but would better prepare students for the workplace and ease their school-to-work transitions.

Reduce education fees: Reduce the cost for tertiary education and make more bursaries, financial aid, and scholarships available to successfully qualified young people wishing to pursue education. Fee reduction could also be achieved through making grants available to students and families who need extra financial support. Opening up more high-quality public colleges (as opposed to expensive private colleges) with more varied courses at undergraduate and graduate levels could also be a means to reduce fees for many young people. A final consideration for reducing education costs would be to think creatively about credits: volunteering, community leadership, and/or work experience could also count toward graduation credits.

Reimagine the admissions process: Admit students based on a more holistic examination of their skills, competencies, and achievements. Admissions should be based not only on exam results, but also on many more inclusive parameters. This would create more access to universities for students who would traditionally have been eliminated because they do not respond well to tests or have access to the same exam preparation opportunities that other students may have.

Build up extracurricular activities: The creation and functioning of clubs and/or extracurricular activities (such as volunteering) is an alternative way for young people to develop skills and be exposed to different experiences. The clubs and activities also provide leadership opportunities for students to strengthen these skills in a way that cannot happen traditionally in academia. At an institutional level, time must be allocated and appropriate incentives (e.g. credit, networking opportunities, etc.) given to students to be a part of these activities. Such clubs could inspire students to get more involved in their communities and/or explore different interests that they may not be learning about in their studies.

Support the school-to-work transition: As they transition from school to work, young people's ability to achieve their work aspirations could be strongly enhanced by developing more robust and youth-friendly channels of communication, information sharing, and networking.

Many young people are failing to achieve their work and employment aspirations simply because they do not know where to access these opportunities or from whom they can access them. Instituting an active networking programme with alumni, local employers, and even professors could be a means to support the transition period. Also, leverage diverse media channels to reach young people directly with youth-friendly information. Across countries and demographics, young people shared that the media (including social media) was one of their main sources of information. Closing the information gap could accelerate a transformational reversal of rising unemployment rates and increase access to work opportunities – thus widening the pool for many young people who are competing for very limited job openings.

Provide stronger support for young women: Support for young women must happen in two key ways. First, put strong policies and procedures in place that protect young women from harassment, assault, and coercion (i.e. sex-for-grade propositions). Make sure prevention, mitigation, and response mechanisms are in place. Second, hold seminars and sessions that educate people about gender stereotypes and social norms that hold women back from certain fields and careers. Regularly take stock of women in traditionally underrepresented fields and actively diversify courses, while supporting the women in those fields to succeed.

Put differentiated infrastructure in place: Ensure that education is accessible to all, especially to students with disabilities. This may require renovations to physical facilities, but it also includes adaptive equipment for visually- or hearing-impaired students, students with neurological disabilities, and students with other types of learning disabilities. Course curriculums must be adaptable to meet their learning needs and teachers must be educated about and supported to make teaching and assessment appropriate for their needs.

For employers.

Develop gender-sensitive policies: At an institutional level, policies should be in place that support women to have equal wages and equal opportunities for leadership. As safety is an important concern for young women, policies must also include efforts to avoid gender-based violence and address sexual harassment issues. Safe places to report issues of gender discrimination, harassment, or violence must be instituted and communicated clearly to all employees.

Cultivate a positive work environment for young people: Workplaces should develop policies and structures that accommodate the interests and aspirations of young people. This includes training supportive and understanding managers, having respect for mental health needs and providing support as needed, giving opportunities for voicing opinions safely without fear of reprisal, providing opportunities for upskilling, giving new and challenging tasks, and making sure young employees feel a sense of purpose.

Reconsider work experience requirements: Young people, especially those who have just graduated from high school or university, struggle to find jobs that meet their qualifications. Most job positions require some number of years of experience, but this is something that new graduates cannot have. Employers should review job descriptions and postings to make sure they are reflective of the skills needed rather than the years of experience required. Counting volunteer experience as work experience would also be a way to support young people in their transition from school to work. Also, importantly, be mindful of the impacts of COVID-19 on young people's work experience. Many had to reprioritise their career paths by leaving education early, losing work, taking jobs outside their aspirations in order to make money, etc. Being flexible in the coming years will be required while accounting for these adaptations that young people had to make during the most foundational time in their careers.

Partner with schools and universities: Identifying local schools and universities nearby to partner with would yield benefits for students as well as employers, educational institutions, and the local community. Employers should collaborate with institutions on projects so that students can have practical, real-world experiences and opportunities for examination (beyond written exams). Such experiences would bring energy and innovation into workplaces. These partnerships could extend into offering job opportunities to recent graduates, which could in turn benefit communities by preventing ‘brain drain’; talent can be kept locally rather than students leaving for big cities or other countries in search of opportunity. Also, ensure better information dissemination (e.g. career fairs, mentoring, lectures, or even flyers) to institutions so students can learn about the different opportunities available to them.

Ensure satisfactory work–life balance: Young people are desperate to have a sensible work–life balance. They realise that they need to ensure financial stability, but they are more mindful than ever about their mental health and the need to maintain their own personal commitments outside of the workplace, such as families and hobbies. Young people often feel that they are overworked and underpaid because they are viewed as more expendable. Their well-being and personal lives outside of work must also be prioritised to ensure the most satisfied and productive workforce.

Make internships more meaningful: Many young people feel that internships do not provide them with the experiences or skills they need to succeed in future workplaces. They are often relegated to menial tasks that do not teach them what their internship offers entailed. In order to better prepare young people, internships must provide them with the chance to engage in meaningful tasks, from which they can truly learn and grow, and also give them the opportunity to have input and think creatively.

Make mentors available: Young people overwhelmingly want to have opportunities to learn and grow. They desire mentors and coaches who can help better prepare them for future opportunities and train them in the skills they need to succeed. Workplaces should institute mandatory mentoring for young employees with more experienced employees who are experts in the skills that young employees want to learn.

For donors and civil society actors.

Let young people influence: Ensure that young people can take the lead, especially in influential spaces with decision makers. To create a youth-led or youth-centred community, young people must have real opportunity for making their ideas and voices heard and acknowledged. This could entail sending young people as representatives to government meetings, engaging young people in programme design, implementing ideas for funding, and more. Donors and civil society must act as bridges for youth inclusion.

Design programmes led by youth inclusion and cooperation: Reshape funding and support to be more responsive to the needs of and leadership by young people. Placing youth aspirations at the centre will ensure that young people’s priorities and values are at the heart of education interventions. Use systems-level thinking, implementing and evaluating to address structural constraints affecting young people’s livelihoods by integrating youth-specific programmes into the wider social, economic, and political contexts. Treat young people as citizens in their own right and afford them the civic capacities to co-lead approaches to the challenges they face.

Shift gendered social norms: Girls experience gendered social norms from a young age that limit their aspirations and dictate their education and livelihood choices and opportunities. Investing in social norm change interventions that target families, community members, and leaders to shift the norms around the roles girls have in their communities will open doors for young women so that they can dream bigger and have equal opportunities to young men in educational institutions and in the workplace. Interventions could include awareness raising sessions with parents to enlighten them to the success their daughters could have in roles traditionally reserved for men, and gender sensitisation classes in schools for young boys and girls to understand the barriers women face so they may contribute positively to removing those barriers in the future. Women's inclusion programmes, such as mentorship programmes with female role models, should be made available to empower and motivate young women leaders.

Strengthen youth movements: Young people are heavily involved in social movements and are the key actors in demanding change. Ensure that they have the support they need, strengthen their skills, and amplify their voices to enable them to be change makers. The volume of young people's voices on different matters is important to gain traction and attention for the issues that concern them. Create more platforms – with young people at the centre – so they can connect and hold constructive discussions with key decision and policy makers. Importantly, many young people are unaware of their rights; social movements can be a channel for ensuring rights are widely known.

Invest in seed grants: Young people have ideas, but they often lack the funding to make their ideas a reality. Investing in seed grants for students, recent graduates, young entrepreneurs, and aspiring leaders can catalyse youth innovation and support young people to achieve their aspirations. Young entrepreneurs and those who want to run for governance positions experience financial barriers that often prohibit them from turning their dreams and ideas into reality. With access to funds through small grants, young people will be better positioned to run for office and/or start up their micro-enterprises.

Sensitise families: Focus programming on sensitising families to support the aspirations of the children in their lives. Since families have such a strong influence over the choices that young people make, ensuring that families do not perpetuate harmful gender norms or stifle aspirations will support young people to take charge of their own decisions. Families in fragile contexts are especially important to reach, as they often limit their children more due to safety concerns. Getting involved in active citizenship and governance in these contexts is typically forbidden by families, leaving young people's interests and needs even less represented in decision making.

Partner with media: Young people get most of their information from the media, especially social media. Developing collaborative partnerships with media and creatively using social media to reach young people can be an effective way to disseminate information directly to young people about educational and livelihood issues as well as citizenship opportunities. Young people emphasise that a lack of access to the information they need is one of their main barriers to active citizenship, identifying educational opportunities, and the school-to-work transition. Using media effectively could minimise that barrier. Be mindful to create media partnerships that reach young people in rural settings and communities that are harder to reach so that the digital divide does not widen.

Prioritise mentoring: Having a mentor, especially for young women, can mitigate many barriers that young people currently face in their personal and professional development. Identify role models who are willing to act as mentors (and coaches) to young people based on their skills, topics of expertise, and willingness to empower youth. Such mentoring can also serve as a means to diminish harmful social norms about gender and age.

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RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT

ABOUT RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT

Young people's career aspirations and working lives are often decided by their education. But not all education is equipping young people in the right way. How can we solve the education and work crisis facing young people? It starts by listening to young people and supporting them to lead solutions.

Every year Restless Development trains, mentors, nurtures, and connects thousands of young people in more than 70 countries to solve problems and lead change in their communities. Some are social entrepreneurs, setting up businesses to provide for their families and create jobs, while others campaign on issues like gender inequality and the youth unemployment crisis. We have worked with young people since 1985 and our work is led by thousands of young people every year.



ABOUT REWIRED

Led by Dubai Cares, in partnership with Expo 2020 Dubai and in close coordination with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC), and delivered in partnership with global stakeholders, RewirEd aims to be a catalyst in redefining education to ensure a future that is prosperous, sustainable, innovative, and accessible to all. Taking place in December 2021, the RewirEd Summit presents an opportunity for the global education community to come together, in person, to scale and jumpstart some of the positive change we want to see in education.

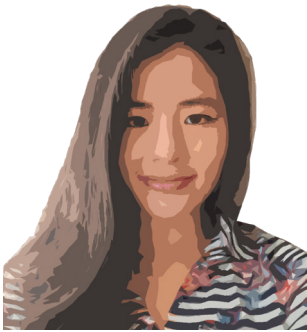


ABOUT DUBAI CARES

Since its inception in 2007, Dubai Cares, part of Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, has been working toward providing children and youth in developing countries with access to quality education through the design and funding of programmes that aim to be impactful, sustainable, and scalable. To date, the UAE-based global philanthropic organisation has successfully launched education programmes reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries.

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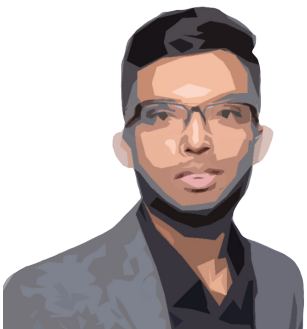
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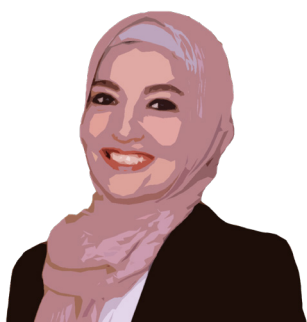
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