

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY

YOUTH POWER IN A PANDEMIC



ABOUT THIS REPORT

What is The State of Youth Civil Society report?

The *State of Youth Civil Society report* is a global, youth-led publication that looks back over the past year and forward into the next to explore the realities that youth civil society and social movements are experiencing. It reflects upon the global circumstances of young people over the past year that have shaped the collective experiences of youth civil society groups.

Now in its second year, this report focuses on the new realities of youth civil society in their quest toward shifting power. The report aims to showcase the many realities that have emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the many others that have been ongoing over time but have been expedited and/or brought to the forefront in the context of the pandemic. This State of Youth Civil Society report specifically showcases the different ways youth civil society has stepped up around the world to respond, recover, and rebuild in their communities in 2021.

How was this report created?

Co-ordinated by Restless Development and The Development Alternative, more than two dozen youth civil society organisations (CSO) or movements have partnered to author this report. As you read, you will find an overview of the most prominent themes and realities of youth civil society in 2021, derived from the 22 spotlight chapters as well as a global survey of some 868 members of youth civil society groups across 87 countries. The report is organised into chapters by these themes of what the state of youth civil society in 2021 is: threatened, resilient, adaptable, creative, outspoken, community-focused, and justice-driven. Each chapter in the report begins with a synthesis of main findings from the spotlights and the survey, and it concludes with the spotlights most relevant to the chapter theme.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While everyone has been profoundly affected by the pandemic, this generation of young people now face challenges unlike any other. They face overlapping crises – from physical and mental health emergencies to the climate crisis to economic hardships. They are in a world where their future cannot be taken for granted and radical changes to the ways we live are underway.

“COVID has robbed [young] people of their aspirations.” - Young person from India

Despite the enormous and unique challenges facing young people, this report shows that there is great strength and optimism in change being led by young people and youth civil society.

Youth civil society’s lack of confidence in formal power and rejection of traditional hierarchies has led it to rely on its own creativity and embeddedness within communities to be a powerful force for good. Without youth civil society, our communities’ recovery from the pandemic to date would have undoubtedly been held back. Youth civil society has been a lifeline for their communities: rebuilding economies, addressing mental health challenges, and pushing back against climate crisis inaction.

This report also shows that youth civil society’s efforts to help communities to rebuild are at risk. Youth civil society is severely threatened.

The State of Youth Civil Society report, now in its second year, is a global, youth-led study that looks back over the past year and forward into the next, to explore the realities that youth civil society is experiencing, the power it has to bring about change, and the biggest threats to its existence. This report brings together a global survey and features in-depth spotlights of:

- 27 youth civil society organisations, groups, movements, and activists
- 868 members of youth civil society groups across 87 countries

The analysis of the spotlights and survey finds **seven key themes**. These themes show the most significant challenges and triumphs for youth civil society that need to be acknowledged and addressed to ensure that youth civil society does not only survive, but thrive.

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS THREATENED

Nearly three-quarters of the youth civil society members surveyed indicated that their organisations’ funding has decreased since the start of the pandemic, significantly hampering their ability to create change.

“Most youth civil society organisations are relying on well-wishers as most are operating without funding... they have to look for employment somewhere so as to fund operations of the organisation.” - Member of a Zimbabwean youth CSO

Other key challenges:

- a struggle to gain legitimate seats at decision-making tables
- an increase in mental health issues
- unequal digital access

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS RESILIENT

More than half of the survey respondents expressed that the state of youth civil society is currently strong, and nearly as many even believed it is stronger than ever before. Youth civil society persisted with addressing pandemic-relief issues and social-transformation causes, similar to 2020, but increased the focus on systemic, sustainable change and increased youth leadership. Recognising the opportunity of using the digital space for activism, youth civil society increasingly stood up for the rights of young people as a means to influence decision-makers.

“I am always looking to the future [...] and never surrendering to the circumstances and keep working on self development to build a better future.” - Iraqi youth activist



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS RESPONSIVE

The majority of youth civil society survey respondents (93%) said that their organisations or groups had to make changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most organisations reported:

- operational changes to their organisations, such as losing staff or cutting projects
- programmatic shifts including developing new approaches for influencing and pivoting to digital or hybrid means to deliver activities

This year brought about a clear realisation about the mental health needs and struggles that young people are facing, and youth civil society responded both within their organisations (e.g., introducing flexible working hours, peer-to-peer support groups) and their programmes (e.g., incorporating psychological first aid interventions).



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS CREATIVE

While youth civil society has always been creative, its ability to problem-solve and innovate has become even more necessary during the pandemic. Compared to civil society more broadly, they are able to be more innovative and take more risks because they are more likely to reject traditional, top-down approaches in favour of creative, community-led organising.

Young people are more apt to reach their audiences in ways that are more creative and personal such as through art, music, and theatre or other non-traditional means.



"Youth make inputs in moving the society and the government forward through creative and innovative [solutions], thereby challenging conventions and upgrading systems to what they should be in tandem with trends."
- Nigerian local social movement representative

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS OUTSPOKEN

More than ever before, young people are losing confidence in formal governance structures and are refusing to accept the status quo. In response, youth civil society is engaging in activism in multiple ways, including well-known transnational movements (e.g., Fridays for Future climate campaign) and national movements (e.g., Venezuelan Assembly).

"The environment youth civil society creates for the youth, enables young people to be heard and more easily perceived by those in power." - Macedonian national CSO representative

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS COMMUNITY-FOCUSED

Youth civil society is embedded in communities and therefore often able to identify the needs of those who are most vulnerable and mobilise a response well-before larger and more established organisations. Youth civil society is working on every issue, quietly, locally at scale.

Youth civil society has been hyper-focused on community response, especially during the pandemic. They have played a key role in:

- spreading information and awareness about the pandemic and social causes (34%)
- leading community public health or social responses to the virus and social needs (27%)
- volunteering to help those hit hardest by the pandemic or other hardships (13%)

92%

say more support from powerholders to young people is needed

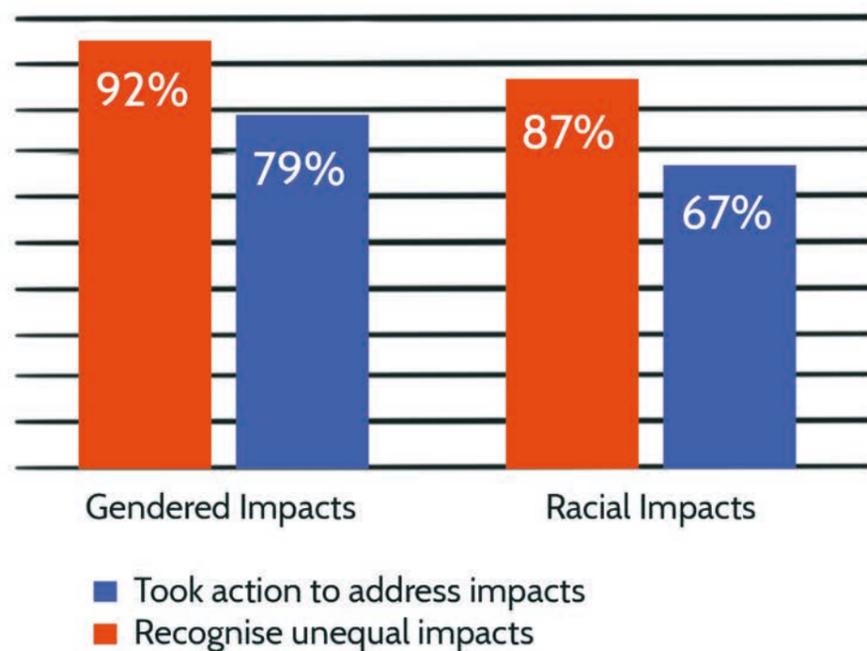


"I do believe that the young people are very energetic and contribute impact in the community. [...] Deep inside we are just waiting for them [policymakers] to ignite the fire that lies inside us to be part of community development."
- Local community group volunteer from the Philippines

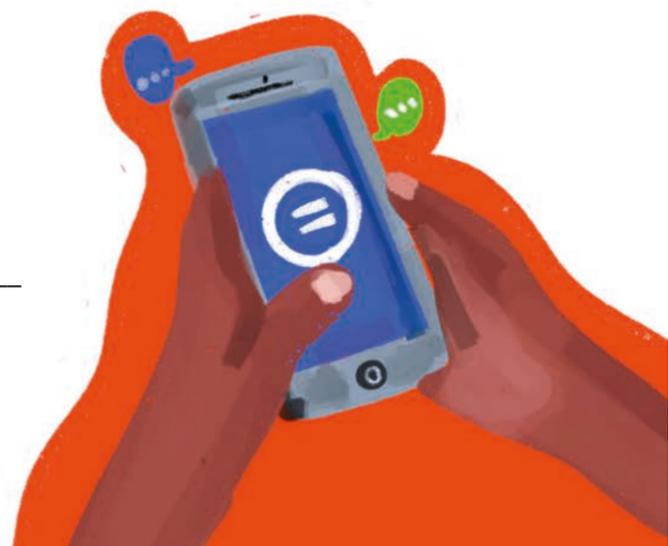
THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS JUSTICE-DRIVEN

We understand that the effects of the COVID-19 crisis are not equally distributed, with people of colour and women disproportionately affected.¹ Racial and gender inequities (among other intersectionalities) are well recognised by nearly all youth civil society representatives and most have addressed these impacts within their organisations and in their work.

Recognition and Actions to Address Unequal Impacts of COVID-19 Crisis



1. Mooi-Reci, I. and Risman, B. (2021). The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19: Lessons and Reflections. *Gender & Society*, [online] 35(2), pp.161-167. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08912432211001305>>.



SUPPORT YOUTH POWER IN 2022

In 2021, youth civil society undoubtedly faced overwhelming challenges. However, these challenges have also provided an opportunity for youth CSOs to *coalesce around issues that they feel the generations before them have ignored*, such as climate change, economic inequality, and gender and racial inequities.

The youth sector is typically less well-funded and supported at national (government) levels than other sectors (e.g., education, health) despite the power young people should have in securing their own future across all sectors. Youth civil society proves itself agile and free from the restraints of traditional institutional and political power, but *making a significant investment in the youth civil society sector is needed*. Doing so would strengthen support for a unified voice for young people, led from the community-level first.

There is a lot to learn from youth civil society's ability to overcome. It became clear this year that there is no going back to "normal" now. *The only way is forward, hand-in-hand with young people*, shaping a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient future.



RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL CSOS

1. Do not drown out local youth organisations.
2. Provide support and infrastructure to youth civil society based on expressed needs.
3. Protect safety and security of youth civil society and youth activists.
4. Yield space to young people to lead and cultivate young leaders.

GOVERNMENTS

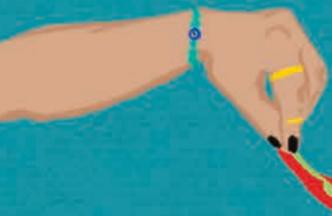
1. Involve youth civil society in policy-making, operations, and development.
2. Put policies into action that support young people and youth civil society.
3. Take meaningful action to address the emigration of young leaders.
4. Guarantee physical, digital, and legal spaces for youth civil society to act.

DONORS

1. Provide youth civil society with flexible, core, long-term funding.
2. Adopt less bureaucratic requirements to make grants more accessible.
3. Prioritise youth civil society as a cross-cutting and vital sector.
4. Recognise young people as an immensely diverse group.
5. Form equitable rather than transactional partnerships.

YOUNG LEADERS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

1. Take action in communities to lead in rebuilding.
2. Be a strong partner for youth civil society worldwide, especially those who are not able to organise freely.
3. Participate in spaces that promote active citizenship.
4. Network with like-minded actors to amplify messages.
5. Take care of each other.



FOREWORD: UNITED NATIONS (UN) SECRETARY-GENERAL'S ENVOY ON YOUTH

Dear Reader,

Our world today is home to 1.2 billion young people. And while 'youth' is a transitional phase that continuously changes, we continue to see the power and resilience of youth-led organisations, groups and movements that persist through generations. The State of Youth Civil Society 2021: Youth Power in a Pandemic report portrays the transformative impact of young people's activism at a turning point: when faced with multi-dimensional global challenges — including the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing climate crisis and ramifications of prolonged conflicts — young people continue to fearlessly challenge the status quo, putting their communities at the centre of recovery efforts.

Whether they are exploring art as an advocacy tool in Colombia; lifting local communities out of economic, social and political crises in Lebanon; addressing youth mental health and wellbeing in India; lobbying for vaccine equity in Kenya; or promoting inclusive governance in North Macedonia, the documented testimonies from young people in every corner of the world once again demonstrate their innovative abilities and accomplishments in trying to expand the civic space that is deliberately being repressed. As young people themselves have explained, they have adapted to new realities shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic through creative use of technology and efficient use of minimal resources. Their contributions will undoubtedly benefit not only current populations, but generations to come.

However, in order to build a fairer, sustainable and more inclusive future, we cannot solely rely on young people's ability to fill in the gaps created by political inaction. This report shows that the mental health of the young people on the frontlines is deteriorating. Youth-led civil society is struggling in an ever-challenging funding landscape. And while the shift towards increasingly using online platforms in more aspects of our lives has opened up some doors for specific groups of young people, it has also widened the digital divide.

Now more than ever, it is essential that we rebuild trust through intergenerational solidarity and multilateral collaboration together with young people. All around the globe, young people are speaking up unapologetically about the injustice they see, and it is our responsibility to listen and act. There is no shortage of frameworks to guide us towards a future where young people are meaningfully included, empowered and protected, including [Youth2030](#), the UN's first-ever systemwide youth strategy which has already delivered important results by improving the UN's work with and for young people globally. Now, we need to keep up the momentum.

We have a long journey ahead of us. In this report, on the streets, and in spaces that are too often inaccessible to them, young people have made their demands loud and clear: in order to ensure that we build back better towards a more equitable civic space, we must protect the safety and security of young people; provide flexible, long-term funding; and recognise young people as equal partners in decision-making processes. Young people are not waiting for positive change to happen — they are already leading us towards that change. I sincerely hope that this report will motivate readers to ensure young people receive the support they need along the way toward a more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive future.

Jayathma Wickramanayake,
UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth



FOREWORD: 2020 STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCHERS

Dear Readers,

A year ago, we, 12 young civil society activists from all around the globe, explored how youth civil society was experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. At that moment, we were uncertain what shape the pandemic would take and the impact it was going to have across the globe. Now, after another year has passed, we can reflect on how youth civil society unleashed their power to stay resilient, innovative, and committed to finding sustainable solutions to COVID-19 and related social, political, and economic issues, since our first State of Youth Civil Society report, *Resilient Realities*, was published.

Since the start of the pandemic, youth civil society has gone to extraordinary lengths to fill the pandemic response and recovery gap left by formal institutions, but not without bearing the brunt of the economic and social crises itself. Young people around the world are suffering from the disruption in learning, loss of employment opportunities, financial insecurity and mental distress, police brutality, suppression of movements, and violations of human rights. However, together as youth civil society, they have been fighting the tides of the pandemic impact to keep afloat. From Bangladesh peripheries to Rio de Janeiro favelas, young leaders, youth movements, and organisations mobilised donations and provided frontline support for their communities.

But youth civil society can no longer continue this without support. We ask that governments, international organisations, and power holders at all levels invest in the leaders of the future. Engaging young people in designing the solutions to the pandemic's challenges and including us in decision-making is essential to rebuilding better and more sustainably. And to do so, we need concrete action!

- Equip us with funding and resources so that we can continue – and build upon – youth civil society efforts in recovery and social transformation
- Enable us, as individuals, to stabilise our lives by providing employment opportunities, financial, and mental health support so we can thrive, holding the hands of the most affected and excluded groups in society, leaving no one behind

We look forward to 2022 with hopeful hearts and resilient spirits. We will continue to work tirelessly to build the world that we believe in. The future is calling on us: help us to respond.

Daniel Calarco and Aurona Sarker
2020 State of Youth Civil Society report authors



INTRODUCTION: 2021 AND YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY

Reflecting on 2021.

2021 was a year of turbulent global events and challenges, not least for young people. Similar to 2020, 2021 was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic that continued to leave its mark on our physical and mental health and created more social, economic, and political challenges across the globe. The economic impacts of the pandemic heightened, leaving more young people and youth civil society groups uncertain about their financial future. Simultaneously, many governments turned increasingly toward stricter state control, making youth organising more difficult.

Key moments in 2021 included:



COVID-19 cases: We passed more than 366 million confirmed COVID-19 cases globally and more than 5.4 million deaths.²



COVID-19 vaccine: 58% of the vaccine-eligible world population had received at least one dose of a vaccine. However, the vaccine has yet to reach the population equitably. Just 8.3% of people in low-income countries had received at least one dose.³



Education: Young people experienced significant loss of learning opportunity. The Office for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) found that upper secondary schools were closed, on average, for 56% of instruction days in the first half of 2021, though this varied greatly by context.⁴

2. Ritchie, H., Mathieu, E., Rodés-Guirao, L., Appel, C., Giattino, C., Ortiz-Ospina, E., Hasell, J., Macdonald, B., Beltekian, D. and Roser, M. (2021). "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)." *Our World in Data*. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>

3. *ibid.*

4. OECD. (2021). *The State of Global Education: 18 Months into the Pandemic*. [online] Paris: OECD Publishing, pp. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1a23bb23-en>. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/the-state-of-global-education_1a23bb23-en.



Livelihoods: The second year of the pandemic exposed some of the more persistent and harmful economic divides. Economies remain hesitant due to the surge in COVID variants and, as a result, unemployment remains high while inflation rises, food insecurity increases, supply chains continue to be disrupted, and security tensions flare, among other challenges.⁵



Political turmoil: Troubling trends of uprisings, coups, and wars have been rampant and deadly including the military coup in Myanmar, the emergent war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, among others.



Climate compromise: Meant to be a pivotal year for combating climate change, promises fell short. The Glasgow Climate Pact was adopted by almost 200 countries, which recognises the global climate emergency and resolves to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5°C. However, its details still lack the mechanisms to combat the reality of funding concerns, subsidies, the inequitable distribution of responsibilities across countries, and the lived realities and traumas for communities.⁶

5. IMF. (2021). *Recovery During a Pandemic: Health Concerns, Supply Disruptions, and Price Pressures*. *World Economic Outlook*. [online] Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/10/12/world-economic-outlook-october-2021>.

6. Barford, A., Hardwick Olwell, R., Mugeere, A., Nyiraneza, M., Magimbi, P., Mankhwazi, C., and Isiko, B. (2021). *Living in the climate crisis: young people in Uganda*. [online] DOI: 10.17863/CAM.75235 Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Living-in-the-Climate-Crisis.pdf>.



Understanding Youth Civil Society.

Youth civil society is always either **youth-led, youth-focused, and/or youth-serving**.⁷ It includes a diverse range of formal and informal groups such as community groups, (international) non-governmental organisations ((I)NGO), faith-based organisations, issue-based social movements, labour unions, media, and more.⁸

With certainty, this report reinforces findings from the State of Youth Civil Society 2020 report, *Resilient Realities*,⁹ that **youth civil society is not homogenous**. Like young people themselves, youth civil society is composed of (and represents) people from all different walks of life across genders, ethnicities, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, disability statuses, and more.

According to many youth civil society representatives, youth civil society groups are more often **informal and unregistered** than other (non-youth) civil society groups. Indeed, the survey confirms that more than half of youth civil society representatives are part of unregistered civil society groups, community groups, or social movements. This is due in part to the poor resourcing of youth civil society. To be registered can be costly, both in fees and the time it takes. In many cases (and contexts), youth civil society members cannot or choose not to spend their limited resources on the registration process. Their informality is also because of the transitory nature of youth civil society groups, especially those that are youth-led (as opposed to youth-focused or youth-serving). Young people are balancing many obligations – education, livelihoods, families, etc. – and to be young is time-bound.

Interpreting the Report Findings.

We heard from nearly 900 representatives of youth civil society groups through the combination of the global survey and the spotlight chapters about their experiences over the past year and their impressions of the new realities youth civil society faces as they work toward responding to, recovering from, and rebuilding in their communities during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we aim to reflect the diversity of experiences where possible, the findings of this report compile the most salient, global themes we have found through the survey responses and the experiences of our spotlight contributors: the resilience, adaptability, creativity, inclusivity, effectiveness in advocacy, and community focus of global youth civil society in 2021.

7. While the United Nations describes 15 and 24-year-olds as 'youth', we understand that youth often means much more than an age bracket. Therefore, flexibility is afforded to the report authors in defining 'youth' in order to be as inclusive as possible.

8. Beauclerk, J., Pratt, B. and Judge, R. (2011). *Civil Society in Action: Global case studies in a practice-based framework*. Oxford: INTRAC. Available at: <https://www.intrac.org/resources/civil-society-action-global-case-studies-practice-based-framework/>.

9. Allen, K., Almario, J., Beek, M., Calarco, D., Devine, B., Gonzalez, E., Inguanti-Pledger, L., Menia, R., Morgen, M. E., Mwale, L., Sarker, A. Zhang, T. (2020). *Resilient Realities: How youth civil society is experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic*. Global Overview. London: Restless Development, Recrear, Development Alternative. Available at: <https://youthcollective.restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ResilientRealities-GlobalOverview.pdf>.

Both the survey responses and the spotlights featured predominantly reflect the realities and perspectives of youth civil society in the global south, particularly low-income countries. While most spotlights are contributed by formally registered groups, they represent a diverse cross-section of youth civil society from large international organisations to small, local civil society groups, to social movements. The survey respondents constitute a highly diverse cross-section of youth civil society, with a nearly equal representation of formally registered and unregistered groups.

Study Limitations.

Due to the global nature of this report and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, data was collected almost entirely online. The digital divide overwhelmingly favours men, those living in urban settings, and the educated. This divide was reflected in the survey results: the majority of the respondents were aged 22-30 years (63%), male (69%), and more than 8 in 10 were educated to college/university level or higher. This survey representation also reflects the nature of youth civil society as favouring those who are more highly educated.

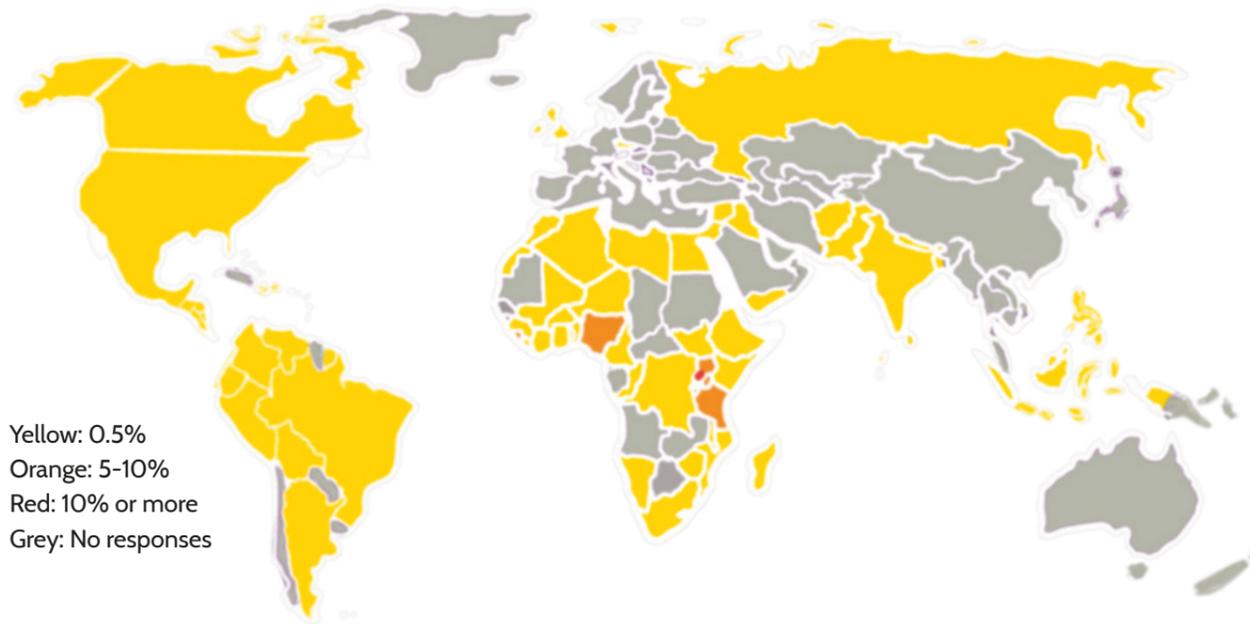
Furthermore, the survey received a very high response in sub-Saharan Africa, and lower numbers of respondents from other regions. Therefore, the survey responses predominantly reflect the views of those representing youth organisations in the global south, particularly low-income countries from the African continent.

However, through the spotlight contributions, hundreds more respondents were reached including more women and those with less digital or professional connectivity, which improves the representativeness of the findings.

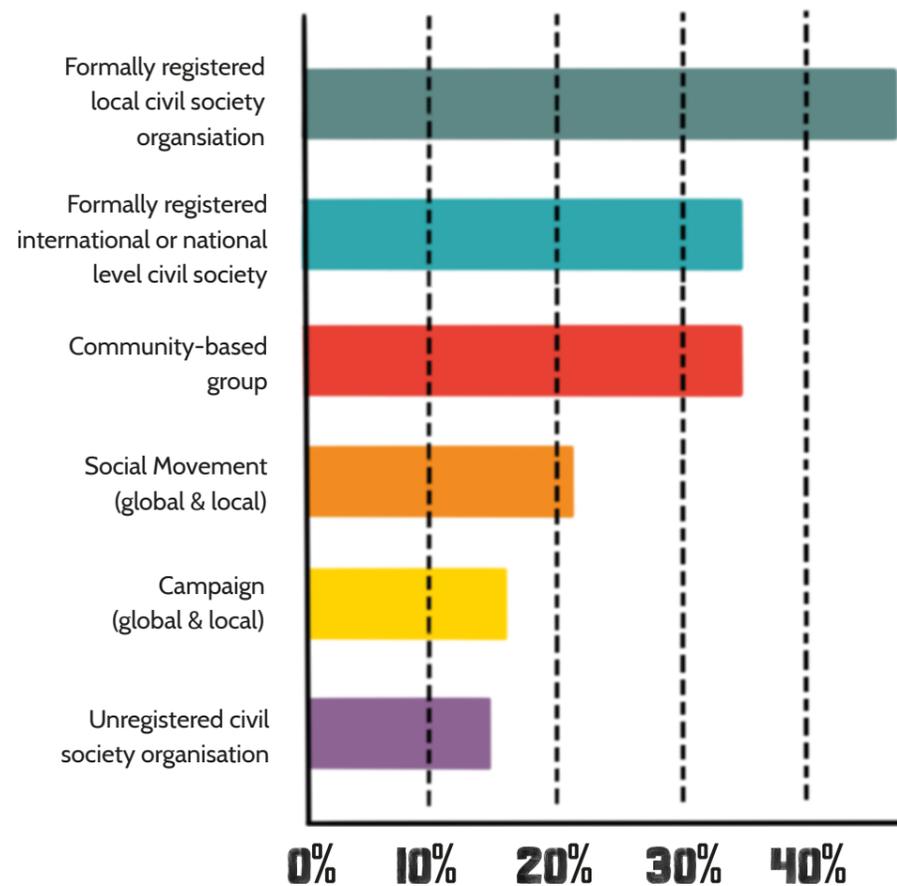


10. According to ITU, the global Internet use gender gap is 12.5%. However, women in lower income countries experience a 71 percentage point gap compared to women in higher income countries. Source: ITU. (2021). *Bridging the Gender Divide*. Available at: <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS: 666 RESPONSES FROM 82 COUNTRIES



Which kinds of youth organisations or groups are you involved with?



Youth civil society representatives were predominantly male with high levels of education, taking up voluntary positions representing a variety of type of organisations.

69% 

30% 

*1% other, and 0.4% prefer not to say

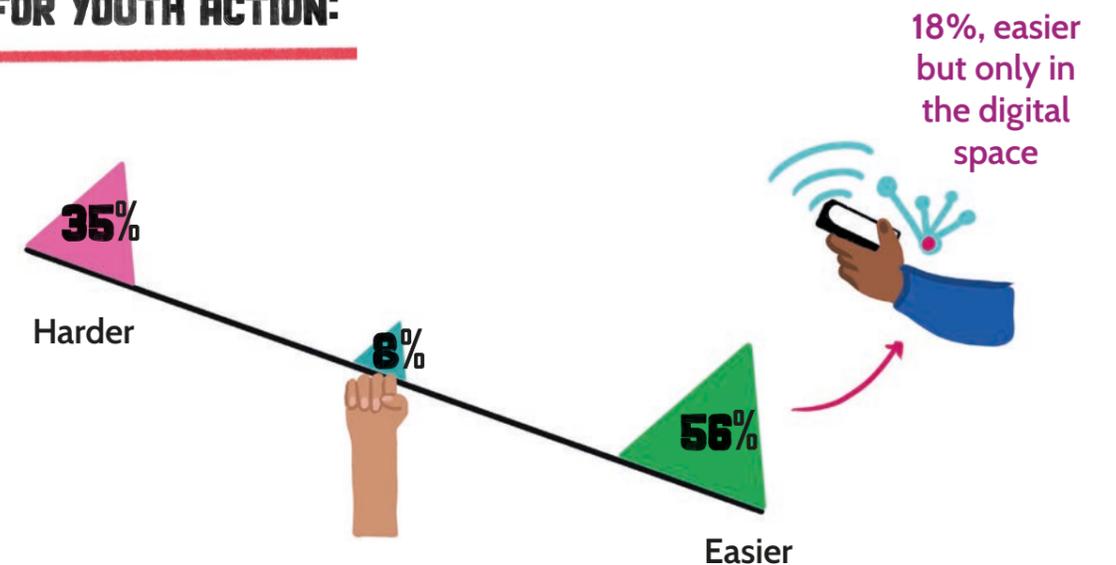
62% 

College/ University degree or higher

90% 

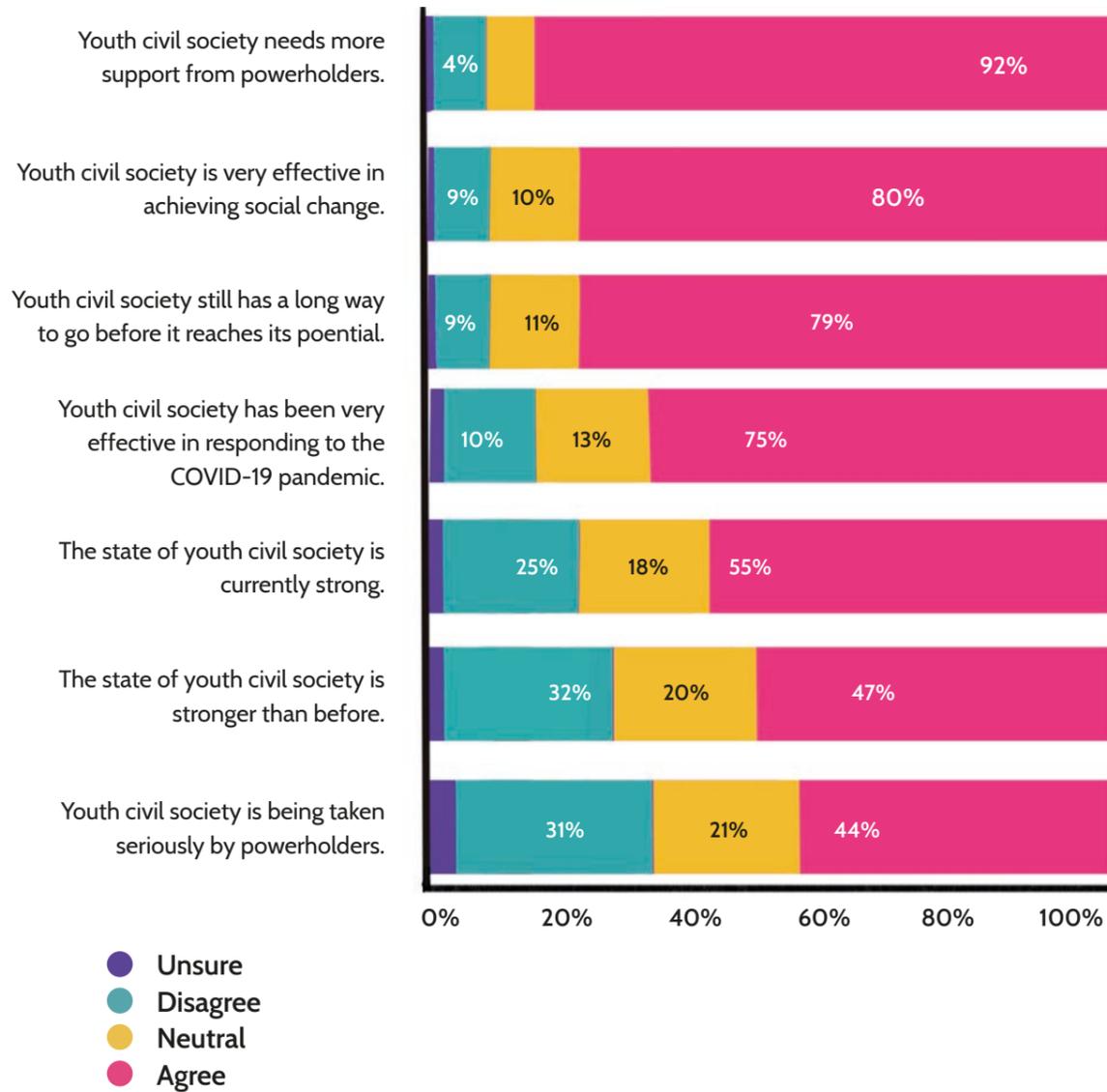
Hold a voluntary role in youth civil society

SPACE FOR YOUTH ACTION:



Over half of the respondents think civic space has become more open for young people to stand up for their rights.

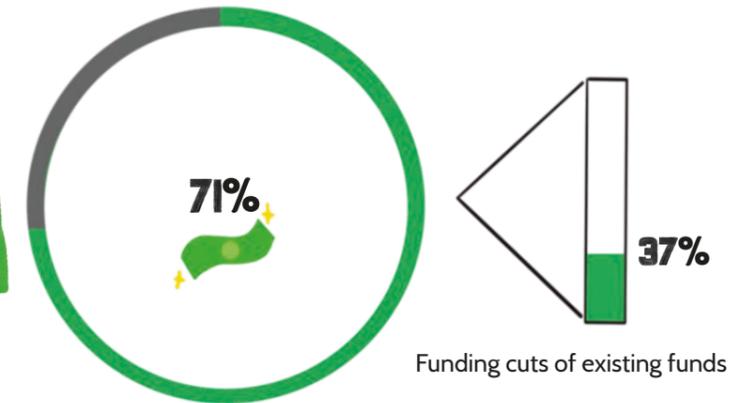
To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



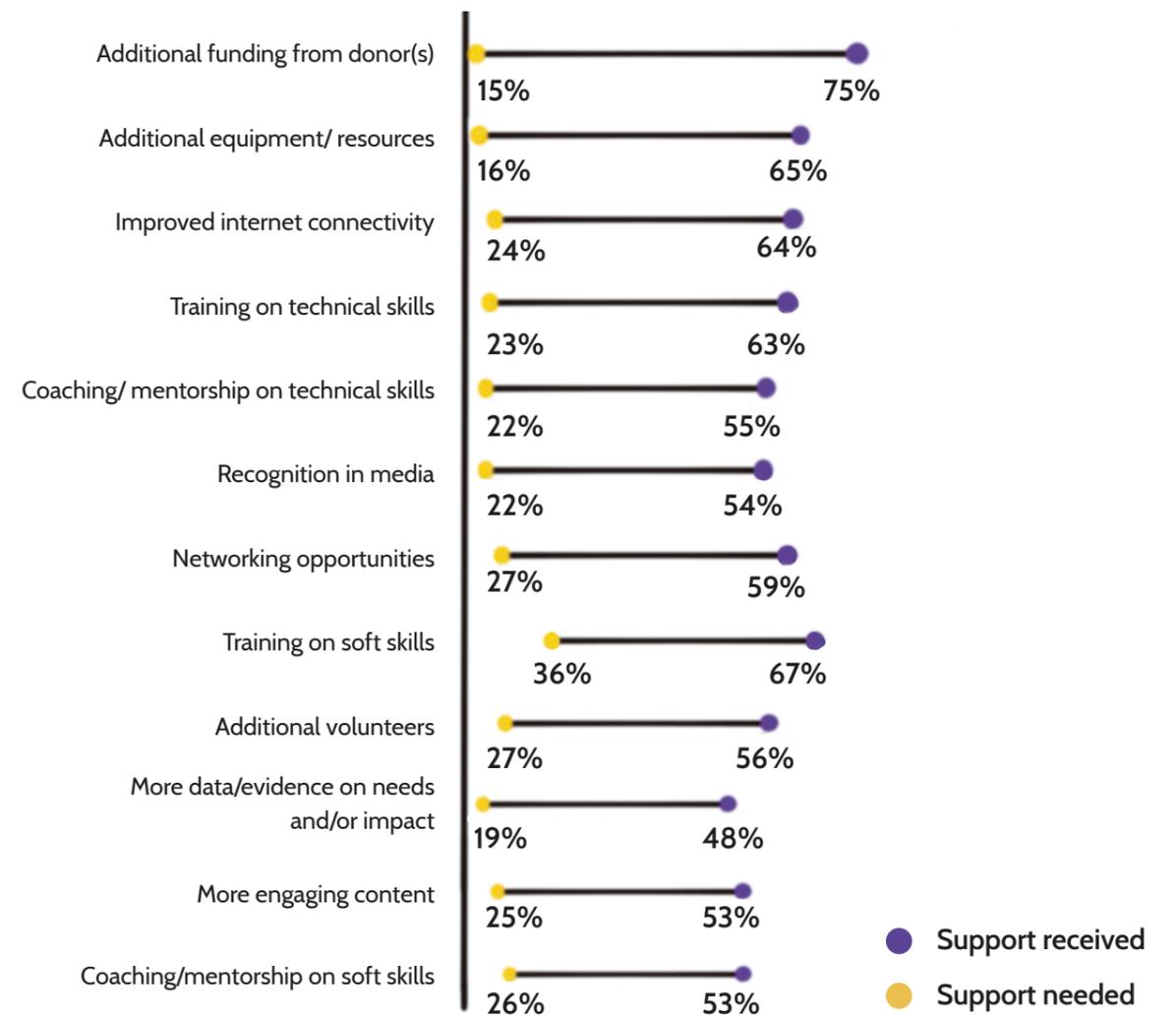
Youth organisations are positive about their ability to make a difference. However, they feel overlooked by those in power.

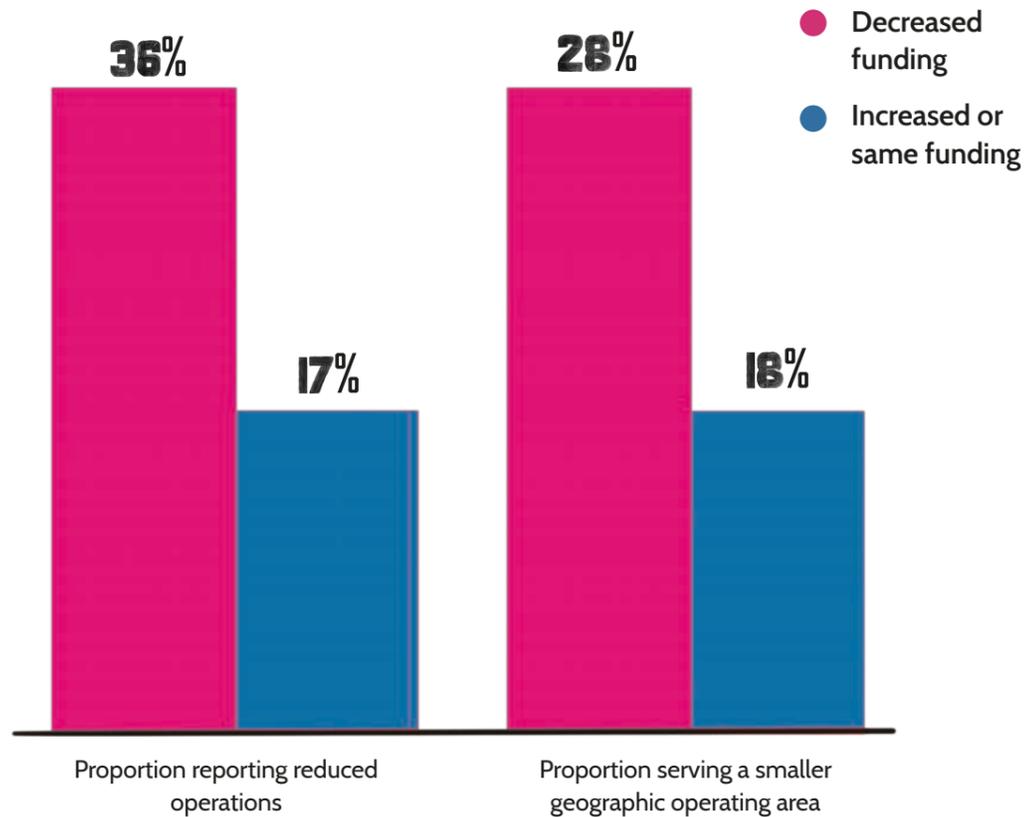
FUNDING & SUPPORT FOR YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY:

Almost three quarter of Youth Civil Society Groups report decreased funding.



Support for youth civil society not aligned with needs, with organisations more likely to receive training than the additional funding needed.





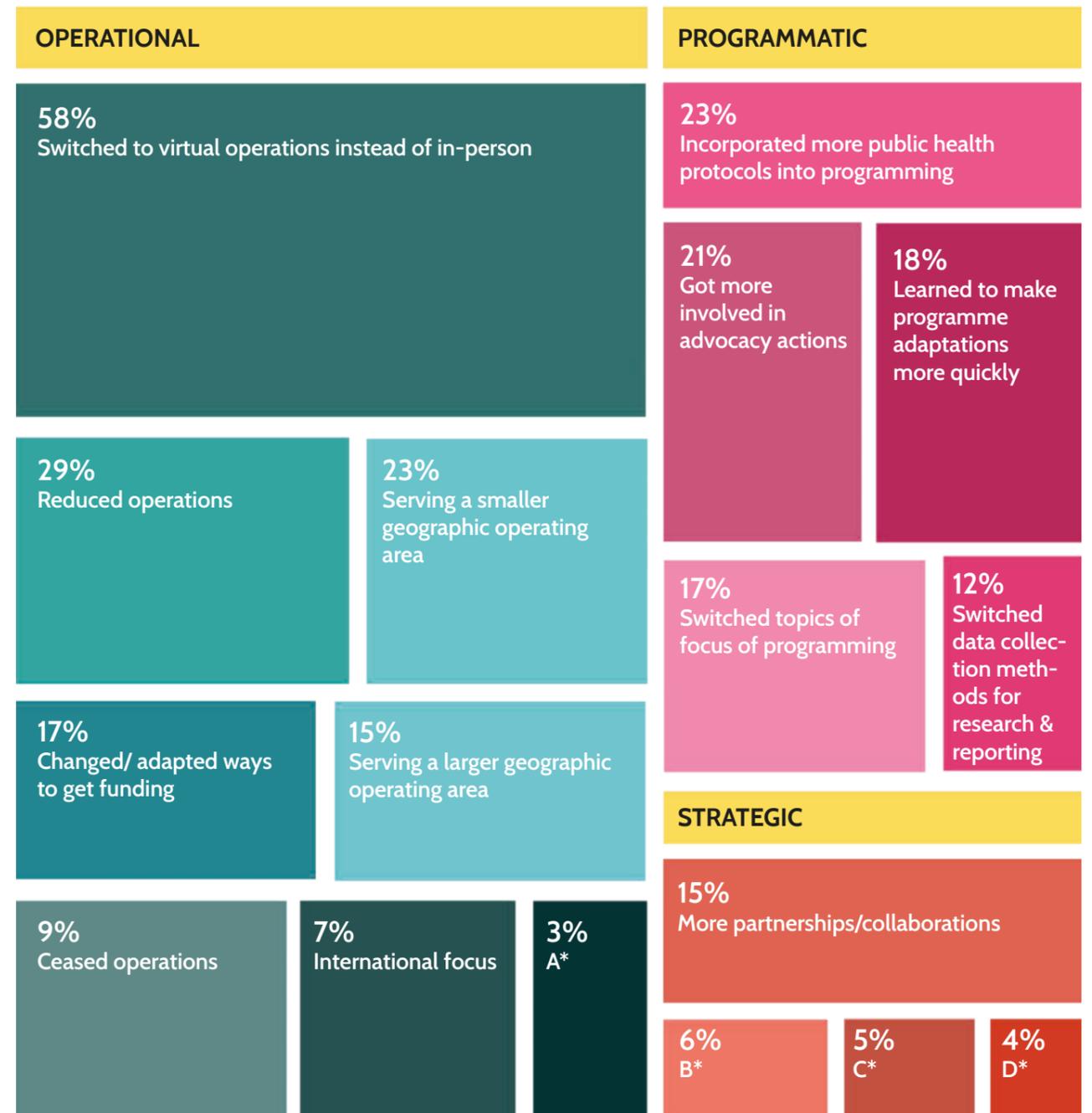
Those organisations reporting decreased funding during the pandemic are more likely to report reduced operations, and to have changed to serving smaller geographic areas than other organisations.

RESPONSES TO COVID-19:

Top 3 most impactful responses:



Youth Civil Society has responded to COVID-19 through operational rather than strategic adaptation.

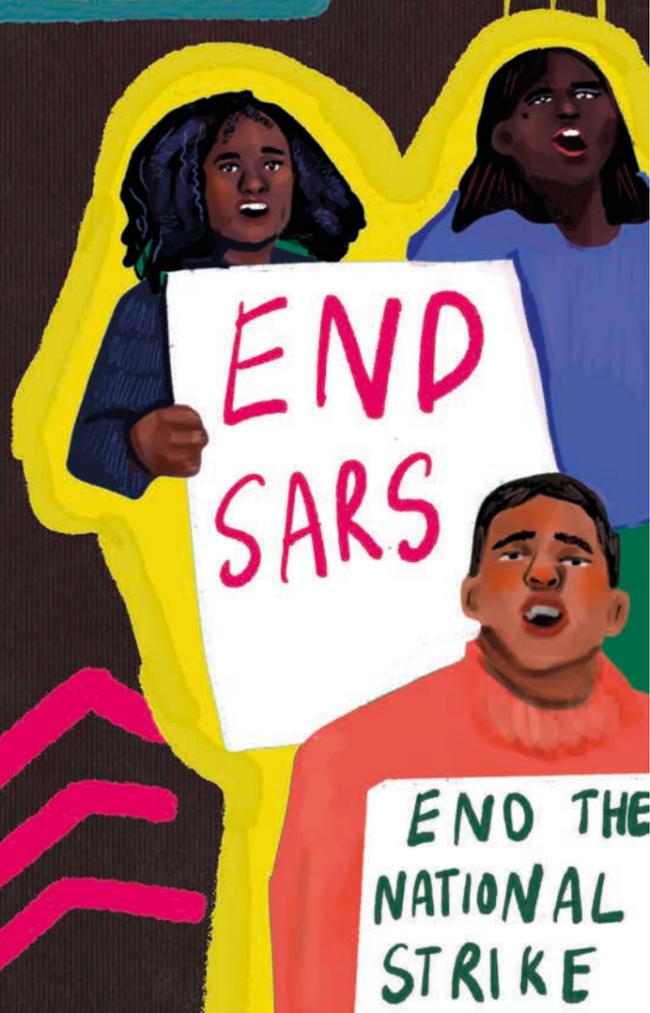


The percentage shown reflect the proportion of organisations reporting each adaptation, many organisations reported more than one adaptation therefore total exceed 100%.

A*: Narrowed from international to national-only focus. B*: Changed the mission/ vision. C*: Fewer partnerships/colaborations. D*: Shifted the primary constituents with which you work.

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS THREATENED

Facing relentless funding shortages, mental health concerns, leadership exclusions, and the digital divide.



Youth civil society experienced many challenges over the past year, many of which have been persistent for years whereas others were unique to the time and their contexts. The main challenges faced this year included diminished funding, struggles with mental health, lack of leadership opportunities, and digital shifts.

Funding. Historically, youth civil society – especially in the global South – has always been relatively fragile in its funding and resourcing. Often, funding is inconsistent, short-term, and with restrictive terms.¹¹ Unfortunately, this has only compounded: nearly three quarters (71%) of the survey respondents indicated that their organisations' income has decreased since the start of the pandemic. More than a third of organisations experienced cuts to existing funds, indicating donors actively withdrawing from support to youth civil society, while just over one in three respondents have been experiencing increased costs. Reductions in funding have made it hard for youth organisations to adapt strategically to new needs and opportunities. Furthermore, as shared earlier, the majority of youth civil society representatives are unpaid. Many organisation representatives who were considered staff (despite being unpaid) had to leave the organisations for paid work to support their families.

These funding impacts disproportionately impact women and other marginalised groups. Young feminist organisers in the Global South who lead women-, girls-, trans and intersex youth-led organisations have been historically limited financially and are really struggling to keep their sources of income during this time. Their activism and organising are jeopardised, shut down or being increasingly surveilled or attacked due to the pandemic. Gender-based violence has been on the rise since the pandemic, and many youth civil society organisations have increasingly had to seek out funds to incorporate elements into their programming to address this challenge.

11. Development Alternative. (2019). Towards A Thriving, Credible, And Sustainable Youth Civil Society. Available at: <https://www.intrac.org/resources/towards-a-thriving-credible-and-sustainable-youth-civil-society/>.

Mental health. A major change in society at large, but especially for young people, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic is the increased burden of mental health issues.¹² Indeed, no other topic came out as many times across the spotlight chapters than youth mental health. A Centers for Disease Control study in the United States found that young people are experiencing mental health challenges more than any other age group, with 63% suffering significant symptoms of anxiety or depression.¹³ A CARE study in Somalia found similar results — with 62% of girls facing severe anxiety and 60% severe depression.¹⁴ This is truly a global phenomenon: a global study by UNICEF found increases in depressive symptoms, sadness, anxiety, and stress, especially for women.¹⁵ Although the reasons why young people are experiencing such severe mental health issues are multifaceted, factors such as the lack of social communication, quality education, opportunities for activities, and increased family and financial burdens have been major contributing factors.

The mental health and wellbeing of young people is essential to the functioning of youth civil society. Youth civil society groups acted as frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing critical relief work and essential services. Not only were they being impacted by the pandemic as young people themselves, their stress was compounded by their reality of being frontline workers as well. For example, in India, one youth organisation shared that, while working to dispel myths about the vaccine negatively affecting fertility, the community threatened that they would place the coordinator under arrest and burn her house down.



“My message [...] for the youths, as I know what we go through everyday and the struggles not being able to be a part of making decisions. [...] Before others address your mental health it is also important to look after on your own because you are your own power, you are the one who will motivate yourself in increasing your enthusiasm to work for your own rights.”
- Female survey respondent (18-21 years old) from Bangladesh, representing a national civil society organisation

12. OECD. (2021). “What have countries done to support young people in the COVID-19 crisis?” OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). [Online] 6 July. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-have-countries-done-to-support-young-people-in-the-covid-19-crisis-ac9f056c/>.

13. Czeisler M.É., Lane, R.I., Petrosky E., et al. (2020.) “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020.” MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 2020, 69:1049–1057. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>

14. CARE. (2020). Adolescent Girls’ Education in Somalia: COVID-19 Adolescent Girls Survey – Summary of Findings. [Unpublished].

15. Sharma, M., Idele, P., Manzini, A., Aladro, CP., Ipince, A., Olsson, G., Banati, P., Anthony, D. (2021). Life in Lockdown: Child and adolescent mental health and well-being in the time of COVID-19. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. Available at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1227-life-in-lockdown.html>

Leadership. Survey respondents were mixed on whether youth civil society is taken seriously by powerholders (44% agreed, 31% disagreed). But, almost everyone agreed that more support from power-holders for youth civil society is needed (92%). Indeed, nearly all survey respondents were conclusive that the top forms of support needed by youth civil society related to enabling them to be leaders and opening decision-making positions for youth civil society members. Overwhelmingly, youth civil society leaders share that youth engagement with power-holders and large development partners remains limited and/or tokenistic. Despite being active agents of change – and occasionally of influence – youth civil society actors are rarely treated as strategic and capable decision-makers.¹⁶ What youth civil society members have found is that, in nearly all contexts, their power has been relegated to local levels. Therefore, for some, because they cannot access seats in higher-level decision-making spaces, they dedicate their time and energy to making a local impact.

Digital shifts. COVID-19 required a shift toward using online platforms in many aspects of life and work. But, the shift did not happen equitably. Inequity of access – also known as the digital divide – is predicted by level of education and income¹⁷ and it is especially stark for women and girls¹⁸ and those from rural communities. The digital divide impacted youth civil society in two ways. First, many youth movements and campaigns felt that the digital means of organising was slow and inefficient. They explained that with face-to-face organising, there is camaraderie that is missed digitally, especially because it requires a good internet connection. Secondly, it created gaps with connecting to participants. Youth civil society representatives in Madagascar, for example, elaborated that because they were unable to carry out in-person activities, and digital connectivity is poor in much of the country, many organisations lost up to half of their participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed the risks of the digital shift to human rights, health, and wellbeing. There are concerns about how these technologies may impact issues of access, data, and privacy. Furthermore, as youth civil society has increasingly moved online, digital threats exist that threaten the safety of young leaders. From things such as trolls sending threats to activists to authoritarian governments intercepting messages and transactions, the risks of the switch to digital platforms are only beginning to be recognised.

16. Development Alternative. (2019). Youth Civil Society Concept Note. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lOHD2WyVn-JrSrm4ljDDBv-fd3f1lOhc/edit#>

17. OECD. (2001). “Understanding the Digital Divide.” OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 49.

18. Cooper, J. (2006). “The digital divide: the special case of gender.” Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 22: 320–334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2006.00185.x> Paris: OECD Publishing, <https://doi.org/10.1787/236405667766>.

FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[INDIA] Mental Health and Wellbeing of Youth Civil Society Members in India by Restless Development India

In India, young leaders associated with civil society organisations acted as frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing critical relief work and essential services. And as frontline workers, these young leaders experienced unprecedented emotional and physical stress. They supported community re-building and sustaining efforts, for example providing online wellness classes and community spaces, running COVID-awareness programmes, and helping young people find slots for vaccine appointments.

[GLOBAL] Protecting Digital Rights in the Digital Age by Students for Global Health

The rapid onset of these digital innovations has highlighted the lack of awareness of digital rights amongst their users. Although the problem of digital inequality spans all generations, the impact on young people is one that shouldn't be ignored, particularly in areas such as education and health. Digital technologies can help our communities to thrive. We need research processes that work with young people to identify the risks they face. We need funding that supports digital literacy amongst young people and that enables youth-led initiatives in developing, implementing, and monitoring digital technologies.

[SERBIA] How Do We Catch Up With the 'new Normal'? by KOMS

This spotlight explores the role of youth civil society in fighting back civic space closure in Serbia, specifically looking how mainstream media representations of the youth civil society sector influence the openness of civic space. It specifically calls for a society with a minimal presence of fake news, with strong trust in public institutions, and values and rights such as freedom of speech, open-mindedness and independent media.



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS RESILIENT!



Dreaming to
thrive while
working to
survive.



The *2020 State of Youth Civil Society report*¹⁹ heavily featured the resilience of youth civil society in the face of the pandemic. We found that they were focussed on addressing the most emergent and urgent pandemic relief issues and the most pressing social transformation causes. This year, youth civil society's resilience follows some similar patterns, but differs in its increased focus on systemic, sustainable change and increased youth leadership.

As shared in the prior chapter on the survey findings, despite the challenges youth civil society has faced as a result of the pandemic, more than half (54%) of survey respondents expressed that the state of youth civil society is currently strong, and nearly as many (47%) even believed it is stronger than ever before. The confidence of youth civil society is likely influenced by their perception of the increased openness of civic space. More than half (56%) of the survey respondents – across organisation types and funding situations – think civic space has become more open for young people to stand up for their rights, with 18% saying it was more open only in the digital space.



Interestingly, this perceived openness of civic space is counter-narrative to the mainstream understanding. According to CIVICUS, civic space is becoming more restrictive, with more states and non-state actors legitimately attacking civic freedoms.²⁰ Youth civil society is perceiving a different experience in part due to an increase in digital activism. Decision-makers have increasingly been engaging with constituents online, which is where youth civil society groups and young people who traditionally did not have access to decision-makers can now reach them for the first time.²¹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, exclusions still exist and activism is not necessarily more diverse or inclusive of many marginalised groups because of the digital divide. However, while civic space has become more connected due to the rising use of digital spaces, monitoring the openness in regard to political and cultural shifts in governance still remains vital.

19 Allen, K., Almario, J., Beek, M., Calarco, D., Devine, B., Gonzalez, E., Inguanti-Pledger, L., Menia, R., Morgen, M. E., Mwale, L., Sarker, A. Zhang, T. (2020). Resilient Realities: How youth civil society is experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Global Overview. Restless Development, Recrear, and Development Alternative. <https://youthcollective.restless-development.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ResilientRealities-GlobalOverview.pdf>

20. CIVICUS. (2021). 2021 State of Civil Society Report. Johannesburg: CIVICUS. Available at: <https://civicus.org/state-of-civil-society-report-2021/>

21. Restless Development. (2021). By Us, For Us: Rewiring Education for a New Generation. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/11/rewired-by-us-for-us-2/>

Youth civil society in Sierra Leone presents a powerful example of resilience. The country was hard hit by the dual crises of Ebola and COVID-19. During Ebola, young people reached more than 60% of all communities in Sierra Leone with community-led action plans to stop the spread of Ebola, overcoming the failure of international humanitarian actors in early months of the outbreak to change behaviours.²² Coming out of the Ebola crisis, they were better prepared to quickly react to COVID-19. Youth groups were able to quickly share messaging similar to prior sensitisation efforts around handwashing, for example, while simultaneously utilising lessons learnt to combat misinformation and gain community buy-in to protect the health of their families and neighbours. Despite their success, the dual crises have undoubtedly had a toll on the mental health of young leaders.

Resilience of youth civil society is shaped by the ability not only to continue to survive through hardships, but also to put mechanisms in place that will support a sustainable future. Youth civil society proves its resilience through its ability to achieve legitimacy, ensure accountability, and uncover leadership opportunities.²³ For example, in Iraq, women and girls have found avenues for leadership through documenting and publishing abuses of women's human rights and running women's shelters to address the needs of women and girls who have escaped attempts of honour killings since the fall of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). They have been able to rebuild some of the social cohesion that had fallen apart as a result of the displacement and violence that had been occurring due to ISIL in Iraq since 2017.

The immense challenges experienced this year – including funding cuts, the emergent mental health crisis, and more – cannot be understated, though. While youth civil society has been resilient enough to survive this challenging year, it has undoubtedly not *thrived*.

22. Restless Development. (2017). Africa APPG inquiry: Call for written evidence on community led health systems & the Ebola outbreak. [Unpublished].

23. Hayman, R. and Pratt, B. (2016). "Civil society sustainability: facing up to new challenges in organisational legitimacy, credibility, and viability (Special Issue)." *Development in Practice*, 26(5). INTRAC. Available at: <https://www.intrac.org/resources/special-issue-civil-society-sustainability-facing-new-challenges-organisational-legitimacy-credibility-viability/>

FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[SIERRA LEONE] Frontline and Fearless: A Look into the Lessons that Two Health Crises have Taught Civil Society in Sierra Leone by Restless Development Sierra Leone

During the health crises of Ebola and COVID-19 in Sierra Leone, youth CSOs were engaged in effective social mobilisation and community sensitisation on preventive measures. Youth civil society representatives share their experiences, including if and how they were able to utilise lessons learnt from Ebola to better respond to COVID-19, in this spotlight. Overall, they shared that these groups already knew what their roles could be and how to execute them. As a result, the COVID-19 response was more organised and effective than during the Ebola outbreak.

[GLOBAL] The Climate Movement Amid the Pandemic by Fridays for Future

As bad as the global disruptions due to COVID-19 have been, the pandemic has impacted the environment in another, very intriguing way. It has reduced carbon dioxide emissions, triggered changes in human mobility, and improved air quality. However, for climate movements like Fridays for Future, the pandemic not only limited their operations but also impacted efforts to raise climate awareness. They adapted by shifting to digital strikes and leaning on regions that were more open – namely those in the global north with vaccine access – to lead in their awareness-raising efforts.

[IRAQ] Iraqi Youth Letters to the Future: Youth's Voices in Action by WarChild UK

In a challenging context, where civic space is closed to youth participation, WarChild UK wanted to provide an opportunity for youth activists and civil society leaders to express their needs and concerns. By offering an inclusive and interactive workshop, WarChild UK, along with the active participation of 16 Iraqi youth activists from the Ninewa Region in Iraq, were able to create a motivating space that encouraged the sharing of their knowledge, information, and experiences in a constructive and positive way, as well as put forward ideas for what is needed to support youth civil society and social movements within the KRI/Iraq in the future.



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS

RESPONSIVE

Unforgiving
restrictions
demand a
constant shift
to survive.



In a year where youth civil society faced continued lockdowns and movement restrictions, economic downturns, and increased social challenges, they were able to rise to the challenges and be highly adaptable. 93% of youth civil society survey respondents indicated that youth civil society organisations had to make changes or adaptations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that youth civil society overwhelmingly faced funding cuts, which accounts for a significant proportion of why operational adaptations were a necessity.

Operational. Since 2020, nearly all institutions worldwide have had to learn how to shift operations toward virtual means and youth civil society was no exception. Indeed, 58% of survey respondents indicated that their operations were shifted nearly exclusively virtual. Not all organisations were able to switch to digital operations, though. As explained by the YMCA Madagascar team, switching to teleworking and video conferencing remains weak because of low internet access for most young people there. In 2021, though, smaller physical gatherings became possible again in many contexts. As a result, most youth civil society groups learned how to operate in hybrid environments, combining both online and offline programming.

Also, this year brought about a clear realisation about the mental health needs and struggles that young people are facing in their organisations. Remarkably, almost all surveyed youth-led organisations (87%) have adapted operations to respond to this issue in some way including introducing flexible working hours (35%), creating peer-to-peer groups for people to connect together more easily (32%), giving more time off to staff/members and/or reduce working hours (29%), and incorporating well-being initiatives into work life (27%).

“There is [a] need for a collaborative effort among youth civil society so that we drive the same agenda. [If we] speak different languages, policy makers won’t hear us. Creating a network of youth civil society in the world will capacitate youth civil society as we are [at] different levels.”
- Male survey respondent (31+ years old) from Zimbabwe, representing a local CSO

Programmatic. One-third of youth civil society groups have made programmatic shifts this year such as incorporating public health protocols into programming, getting more involved in advocacy actions, and switching topics of focus of programming. For example, FRIDA noticed that young feminist organisations have shifted their grant requests toward strengthening community resilience, security, and well-being as opposed to before the pandemic when their requests were typically for networking and alliance building.

RESPEKT started initiating advocacy efforts to push for vaccine equity globally and increased vaccine coverage in Kenya, in an effort to push for the resumption of their regular programming on sexual and reproductive health.

Related, research has also had to adapt to be more youth-led. Local youth groups have been able to take a bigger role in research, especially due to lockdowns and travel restrictions forcing more reliance on local communities. When the University of Cambridge, Restless Development, the Asian Development Bank, and Rutgers WPF Indonesia teamed up to assess the livelihood impacts and responses of young people during COVID-19 in Nepal and Indonesia, they realised that they could not use traditional, in-person data collection methods. Instead, a team of youth researchers implemented a pandemic-safe approach of collecting diary entries written by young people. The study became a demonstration of the ability of youth researchers to adapt and take studies into their own hands successfully.

Strategic. Although strategic adaptations were not common amongst youth civil society groups this year (just 11% reporting), the most common type of strategic adaptation reported was an increase in the use of partnerships. Partnerships took the form of more traditional partnerships, such as between CSOs as well as non-traditional collaborations such as between civil society and other entities (e.g., schools). Sometimes the partnerships were borne out of necessity, whereas other times they came out of opportunity. Students for Global Health, a UK student-led network, was able to start working with organisations internationally as a result of the increased digital connectivity of the pandemic. Youth organisations in North Macedonia collaborated with local high schools to improve access to non-formal education activities for students and capacity building of the school staff on digital skills.

Other organisations, especially funding bodies, have shifted their strategy toward increased flexibility. JASS, for instance, found that flexible funding has also been the most important adaptation they made for supporting the funding of feminist groups. To operationalise this strategy shift, they created a significantly stripped back funding application. Such streamlined processes have allowed partners in the Philippines, for example, to get food packets out urgently to LGBT organisations facing immediate needs in their villages.

FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[GLOBAL] Feminist Realities and Movements: Interviews With Two Feminist Funds by FRIDA and JASS

In two interviews with two leading feminist funds, this spotlight explores young feminist activists' solutions to the pandemic: an intersectional and context-specific blueprint to rebuild our society. This new generation of feminists recognises that gender equity is inherently inter-connected with racial, economic, environmental, and health equity and justice. Young women, trans and intersex youth, and queer people are strengthening solidarity and foregrounding collaboration to systematically address structural inequalities for all people.

[NEPAL AND INDONESIA] Dear Diary: Vulnerable Young People's Experiences of Livelihood Disruption during COVID-19 by Cambridge University & Restless Development Nepal

The extent of the disruption from the COVID-19 on young people was tracked through the innovative Youth Specific Livelihood Impacts and Responses to COVID-19 project, a youth-led diary-based research project. The aim of the project was to assess the livelihood impacts and responses of young people during COVID-19, utilising pandemic-safe, qualitative research captured through more than four months of diary entries written by young people (age 15-29) across Indonesia and Nepal.

[MACEDONIA] Transformation of Youth Sector During Pandemic Crisis – Are We Doing Enough? by Coalition SEGA

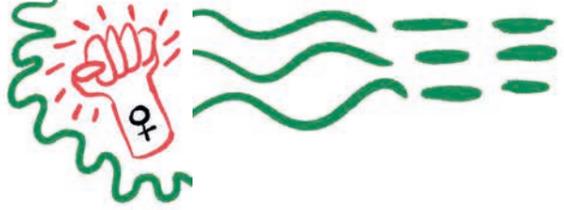
During 2020, the grassroots youth CSOs and informal youth groups in North Macedonia reduced the physical activities and contact with youth, resulting in an immediate change to their regular dynamics. As a result, the young people suffered from lack of social communication, quality education and mental health issues that derived from this situation. COVID-19 required a shift toward using online platforms in many important aspects of life, but it did not happen equitably. Moving to online education nationally and civil society organisations switching programming to virtual were two major changes and challenges.



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS CREATIVE

Imagining new ways to solve old problems.





Young people are more apt to keep pace with a rapidly changing world and are often more connected to diverse segments of their communities. This enables them to reach their audience in ways that are more creative because they can be uniquely personalised. Furthermore, civil society groups with youth at their core often enjoy the freedom to experiment, improvise, and innovate more freely and successfully as they often have less formalised structures with little bureaucracy.²⁴ Youth civil society is more likely to reject traditional, top-down approaches in favour of creative, community-led change.

While youth civil society has always been creative, its ability to innovate has become even more necessary during the pandemic. For example, in New York City, DRUM is using Street Theatre to reach those in their community and shift social norms around domestic violence and street harassment. Meanwhile, in Colombia, young people took to the street with their own brand of “activism”. La Múcura, a youth collective in Colombia, engaged in The National Strike to fight back and to honour the more than 400 young lives lost (both through killings and disappearances) by sharing stories and music through video.

<p><i>“El paro Nacional”- La Múcura</i></p> <p><i>¡Que vive el paro Nacional!</i></p> <p><i>Tumbamos la reforma ahora mucho nos falta para celebrar, La salud, el fracking, sus sueldos, los líderes muertos, la guerra y la Paz.</i></p> <p><i>Y trajo unidad para despertar, Ya nadie puede apagar al pueblo con dignidad</i></p> <p><i>¡Que viva el paro Nacional!</i></p> <p><i>No hay fuerza que nos detenga esta voz que trasciende la brutalidad pues ya no tiene sentido seguir sosteniendo un país desigual.</i></p>	<p><i>“The National Strike - La Múcura”</i></p> <p><i>Long live the National strike!</i></p> <p><i>We knock down the reform now we have a long way to go to celebrate, Health tracking tracking their salaries, dead leaders, war and peace.</i></p> <p><i>And brought unity to awaken. No one can turn off the people with dignity anymore</i></p> <p><i>Long live the national strike!</i></p> <p><i>There is no force to stop us this voice that transcends brutality Well, it no longer make sense to continue holding a an unequal country.</i></p>
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Creativity is not solely characterised by art forms, though. Creativity also looks like finding innovative ways to reach an audience. Youth civil society is finding solutions to the issues those closest to them are facing by recognising that there are alternative ways to share ideas, solicit input, and generate conversations. For example, young activists of the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria have developed apps to inform people about places experiencing police attacks and to send out SOS messages. In Myanmar, the feminist organisation Sisters2Sisters has brought attention to the issue of political prisoners by writing and disseminating personal letters from these prisoners directly. They risked their personal safety, but were able to find a creative way to capture the public’s attention with a more emotional and real-life appeal.

While this creativity is exemplified by youth civil society finding ways to push boundaries in novel ways, it is also finding safe spaces for people in an otherwise unsafe environment. For instance, the Center for Countering Digital Hate and a group of young volunteers in the UK teamed up to combat the growing mis-infodemic around COVID-19 on social media. These young volunteers identified and acted on dangerous misinformation online, particularly where it related to health, COVID-19 or vaccines. To ensure their safety, they used anonymous accounts for surveying harmful content and developed a support network that met for weekly online debriefs, regular one-to-one calls, and peer mentoring.

“Youth make inputs in moving the society and the government forward through creative and innovative [solutions], thereby challenging conventions and upgrading systems to what they should be in tandem with trends.” - Male survey respondent (30-34 years old) from Nigeria, representing a local social movement / campaign

24. Wegner, F. & Williams, K. (2019). Rapid evidence review of enablers and barriers for youth-led and youth-focused civil society organisations in the global south. INTRAC and RECREAR.

FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[COLOMBIA] Audiovisual Series: the National Strike - Art as a Memory and Proposal Tool by La Múcura

When the National Strike broke out on April 28, 2021 in Colombia, most of those killed were young people aged 13 to 28 years-old. The government silenced their deaths and tried to silence the voices of the survivors. However, youth civil society reacted by creating an audiovisual series as a process of systematisation-creation bringing together the voices and expressions of more than 50 artists, most of them young, who participated in the social mobilisations in Colombia. This spotlight features four videos and songs they created.

[UNITED STATES] Organising for Justice for Women & Girls Through Street Theatre by DRUM NYC

DRUM, an organisation focused on the South-Asian community in New York City, identified gender-based violence (GBV) as a pressing issue in their community, but an issue that was not talked about due to its normalisation often by older generations. When speaking to community members and hearing that many denied the existence of GBV, they decided to use theatre as a way of reaching out because of its traditional cultural importance as a way to reach people in the villages of West Bengal. This spotlight shares their experience and clips from three skits (also known as 'natoks').

[UNITED KINGDOM] A Young People's Campaign Against Online Harms by Youth Against Misinformation and Center for Countering Digital Hate

This spotlight documents impact and results from the Youth Against Misinformation (YAM) programme, which was a unique and innovative programme created by Restless Development and the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) in April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme equipped young people with the skills they needed to spot, record, and report online misinformation at a time when its dangers were increasingly a reality. The spotlight describes their processes, experiences, and their outcomes.



NO MÁS MASACRES

THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS OUTSPOKEN



Demanding
rights and
refusing the
status quo.



Recent research and polling has found that young people are disillusioned with government and are losing interest in traditional forms of governance. A 2021 survey of young people across the world found that, especially in the wake of governmental inaction to the pandemic, young people's frustration with politics is increasing.²⁵ Similarly, in the 2021 State of Youth Civil Society survey, almost everyone agreed that more support from power-holders to young people is needed (92%). With only 1.9% of parliamentarians worldwide under the age of 30,²⁶ it is not a surprise that half of young people globally report that they do not see themselves represented in government.²⁷

These challenges may appear to show that young people are not poised to lead in activism and advocacy, but in reality, youth civil society is mobilising in parallel spaces and even creating their own platforms outside of more formalised governance spaces. Young people are refusing to accept the status quo and are fighting for a more equitable world. But, they are not being adequately accepted and supported as leaders. In governance, despite being leaders in breaking down structures (e.g., the Arab Spring), the same foundational structures are being rebuilt again without involvement from youth civil society.²⁸ Large international bodies such as INGOs and UN institutions are also not offering the solidarity needed for community-led youth advocacy and instead tend to support only registered youth civil society organisations.²⁹



25. Marks, E., Hickman, C., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, E. R., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., and van Susteren, L. (2021). "Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon." SSRN. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3918955

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>

27. Restless Development. (2021). By Us, For Us: Rewiring Education for a New Generation. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/11/rewired-by-us-for-us-2/>

28. United Nations (2016). World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/publications/2016/07/world-youth-report-on-youth-civic-engagement/>

29. Wegner, F. and Williams, K. (2019). Rapid evidence review of enablers and barriers for youth-led and youth-focused civil society organisations in the global south. INTRAC and RECREAR.

A major advocacy approach for youth civil society is through protests and campaigns, through which youth civil society has found a vehicle to voice their dissatisfaction. Their activism looks like well-known transnational youth movements such as the Fridays for Future climate campaign or the Nigerian #EndSARS movement, in solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement that originated in the United States. It also includes national movements such as the Venezuelan Assembly, which is using mechanisms like flash mobs, public gatherings, and art displays to protest the exclusion of the youth voice from democratic processes. This approach to advocacy promotes solidarity and utilises innovative approaches such as digital activism, activism, and collaborative partnerships. They bring together shared experiences to deliver shared demands.

However, youth civil society has also remained steadfast in pursuing more traditional forms of interactions with decision-makers – such as utilising reports that showcase evidence and data (38%) and sharing stories of those affected by specific issues/needs (15%) – because they continue to believe these are the most effective ways to influence them. For example, a group of youth researchers (UAEM UK) investigated the funding of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. Their results, which were heavily publicised in the media, found that over 97% of the research funding behind the vaccine came from public and charitable sources (which they argued should make it a public commodity). Their research forced the hand of vaccine producers to make public commitments to provide the vaccine at no profit to many low- and middle-income countries.³⁰

“Youth power for me represents the ability of young people to advocate for their rights, to be able to build critical mass and to influence the decision makers. Young people need the support from the youth civil society to channel their needs and constraints to the general public. The environment youth civil society creates for the youth, enables young people to be heard and easier perceived by those in power.”

- Male survey respondent (35+ years) from Macedonia, representing a national civil society organisation

30. Safi, M. (2021). AstraZeneca vaccine price pledge omits some poor countries, contract shows. The Guardian. [Online] 17 June. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/17/astrazeneca-vaccine-price-pledge-omits-some-poor-countries-contract-shows>

FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[KENYA AND UNITED KINGDOM] Youth Power in Undoing Vaccine Apartheid by STOPAIDS, UAEM, Respekt

UAEM UK and Respekt are two youth-led organisations who have actively campaigned throughout the COVID-19 pandemic for worldwide equitable vaccine access, fighting for health rights for all. This spotlight showcases these two organisations as cases in the power of youth-led action toward influencing decision-makers, educating peers and partners, and attracting widespread media attention.

[GLOBAL] Transnational Activism: Reimagining Democracy Through A Global Youth Movement by Democracy Moves

Distrust of democracy for young people seemingly stems from deep frustration in governmental inaction around critical issues. But there is the possibility of a new, more democratic future if we invest in, and listen to our youngest generations. This emerging transnational, global youth movement for democracy counters the narrative that young people are apathetic towards democracy itself, for example the Arab Spring, when young people throughout the Middle East captured stories of government brutality and shared them on social media, broadcast a common message, and shared techniques of non-violent resistance.

[NIGERIA] 1 Year After #EndSARS, Young Nigerians Still Hoping by Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative

There has still not been justice for the thousands of people who have been killed by the police or the Army. However, the youth civil society in Nigeria will not rest until this justice is served. Civil society came together to respond and help communities and activists, be it doctors who worked for free, the artisans who helped to build and evacuate, the lawyers who lost sleep trying to free illegally detained persons, and civic right activists who were everywhere raising voices.



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS COMMUNITY- FOCUSED



Committed
to where it
matters
most.

Youth civil society groups are typically based within communities where they primarily work, which gives them access to a deeper understanding of the issues, needs, and contexts. Moreover, young people have a feeling of responsibility toward their local communities and the desire to create a better future for them.³¹ They are motivated by being able to see the impacts of their actions. During the pandemic in particular, youth civil society has been hyper-focused on community response. It has played a key role in spreading information and awareness (34%), leading community public health or social response (27%), and volunteering to help those most vulnerable (13%).

“Youth community leadership and voluntarism are concepts of high significance in facing any crises. Youth lead the change and transfer lessons to younger generations to ensure sustainable development and positive change.”

- Youth organisation respondent from The East Jerusalem YMCA

Because of this community-orientation, it is often able to identify the needs of those who are most vulnerable even before larger and more established entities are able to realise there is a problem. For example, in East Jerusalem, youth civil society members were recognising the overwhelming fear and confusion that their communities were facing at the onset of the pandemic. While the government and international organisations were still determining a response, youth groups mobilised quickly. Initially, they transformed the government checkpoints into “caring checkpoints” to deliver basic needs of people such as food and hygiene items. Gradually, their action became more organised when they formed district emergency committees to reach out to marginalised people, especially people with disabilities. Youth groups provided their households with food parcels, medicines, and assistive medical devices such as wheelchairs.

31. Restless Development. (2021). By Us, For Us: Rewiring Education for a New Generation. Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/11/rewired-by-us-for-us-2/>

Youth civil society can form and leverage ad hoc networks, through social media in particular, to meet basic (and urgent) public needs when other institutions fail.³² Nation Station, for example, is a youth-led community initiative which emerged in the wake of the blast in the Port of Beirut. It quickly mobilised local youth through social media campaigns, networking events, and volunteering programmes through partnerships with local universities. Aid was failing to reach some of the most affected areas due to a lack of reliable data and maps from the government. The mobilised network of young people stepped in to map the affected areas and dispatch small teams of volunteers to assess the affected households. Nation Station has since grown from a relief operation to a civil society organisation. Today, this youth-led CSO is leading recovery efforts by focusing on empowering and remunerating unemployed community members (e.g., elderly women are employed as cooks in the community kitchen or unemployed tradespeople are working on the reconstruction projects).

“I do believe that the young people are very energetic and contribute impact in the community. [...] deep inside we are just waiting for them [policymakers] to ignite the fire that lies inside us to be part of community development.” - Female survey respondent from the Philippines (18-21 years old), representing a local community group



32. Wegner, F. & Williams, K. (2019). Rapid evidence review of enablers and barriers for youth-led and youth-focused civil society organisations in the global south. INTRAC and RECREAR.

FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[PALESTINE] Limited Resources, Significant Action: Palestinian Youth Battling COVID-19 by YMCA Palestine

This spotlight report aims to recognise the reality of youth civil action in light of the COVID-19, in terms of their capabilities to respond, adapt, and recover in the northern, central and southern West Bank districts. The main themes include: organisational impacts during the early outbreak of the pandemic, addressing the needs of people with disabilities, adapting needs into action, and the difficulties faced during adaptation efforts.

[LEBANON] How Youth Civil Society Is Lifting Lebanon Out of an Economic, Social, and Political Crisis by Nation Station

In the wake of the catastrophic detonation of the Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020, youth civil society has been lifting Lebanon out of an economic, social, and political crisis. Nation Station mobilised the local youth and latent activists to map the affected areas and then meet urgent needs. In the year that followed, Nation Station continued recovery efforts by involving and empowering unemployed community members and creating a dynamic cycle of solidarity, mutual help and empowerment.

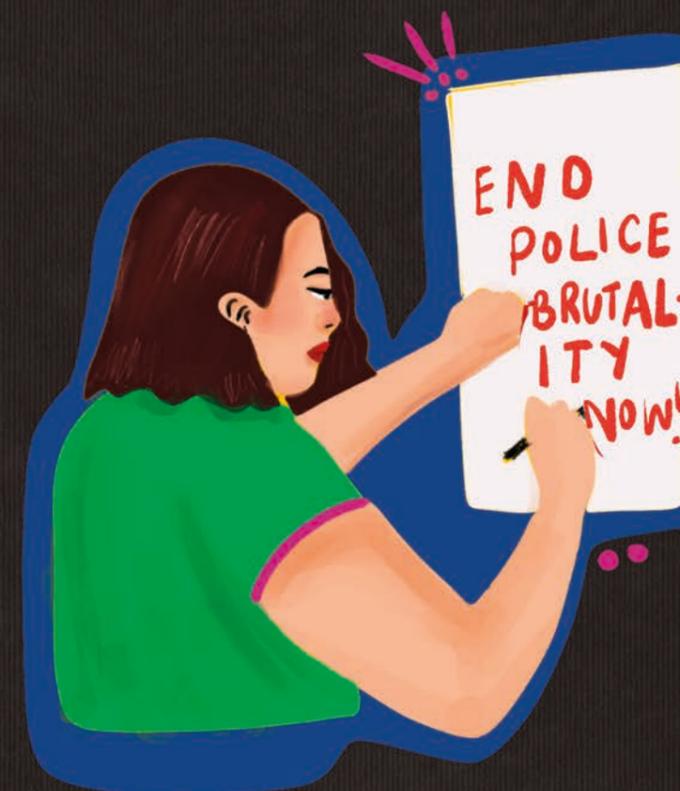
[MADAGASCAR] Conversations and Reflections From a New Generation of Civil Society by YMCA Madagascar

Most of the youth CSOs in Madagascar are made up of localised groups of young volunteers, often with a limited operating budget. Ten members of these groups shared their experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected them and how they were (or were not) involved in government funding oversight initiatives and dialogues.



THE STATE OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IS JUSTICE- DRIVEN

Rebuilding an equitable society where no one is left behind.



We understand that effects of the COVID-19 crisis are not equally distributed, with people of colour and women disproportionately affected.³³ These issues are well recognised by youth civil society. In fact, 92% recognised gendered impacts of COVID-19, and 79% took action to address related issues, and 87% acknowledged the racial inequities resulting from COVID-19, with 67% working to directly address it. Most (but not all) youth-led organisations stated to have addressed gendered-impacts and/or racial inequities related to the pandemic at both internal and at programmatic levels. For example, one-third increased attention toward the mental health and well-being for women and gender minority identities staff/members, one-quarter provided materials and/or resources to staff/members on anti-racist and/or racial justice principles, and one-quarter even adjusted their programming to address gendered impacts of COVID-19.

Studies by CARE clearly demonstrated the disproportionate impacts faced by young women. Many faced increased burdens of caring for sick family members, fetching water, and caring for younger siblings, making the ability to learn from home extremely challenging for many and increasing the likelihood of girls to suffer from depression and anxiety. To mitigate this challenge, a project in South Somalia printed materials tailored to girls' learning levels and linguistic backgrounds. This, compounded with remote support by teachers, contributed to increased uptake of remote learning from 53% in July 2020³⁴ to 70% in May 2021.³⁵ Furthermore, girls have also been supporting their peers through psychosocial first aid and helping to break taboos about seeking support for mental health issues. As a result, the proportion of adolescent girls facing depression was 50% lower among those attending Girls' Empowerment Forums than girls who did not participate in this activity.³⁶

"[Y]oung people, and children with disabilities should also be included in the mainstream advocacy tables, and their hands need to be supported - also their deep grievances need to [be] taken into account too. Excluding nobody, and leaving no one behind." - Male survey respondent (22-25 years old) from South Africa, representing an international civil society organisation

33. Mooi-Reci, I. and Risman, B. (2021). The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19: Lessons and Reflections. *Gender & Society*, [online] 35(2), pp.161-167. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08912432211001305>

34. CARE. (2020). Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia: COVID-19 Adolescent Girls Survey – Summary of Findings. [Unpublished].

35. CARE. (2021). Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia: Quarter 11 Girls' Survey. [Unpublished].

36. CARE. (2021). Secondary analysis of monitoring data, AGES project. [Unpublished].

A group of young volunteers in the UK sought to investigate one of the most common, yet understudied, challenges to young people: the experiences of period (in)justice. What they found was that 29% experienced less or much less access to menstrual resources in comparison to their pre-pandemic experiences. This was even more pronounced along racial lines: the percentage jumped to 37% of respondents from Black and Mixed ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, 45% of the reasons given by Black, Asian, Mixed and other minority ethnic respondents for changing one or more key period products were due to unavailability, inaccessibility, or unaffordability, compared to 30% of the reasons given by their white counterparts. Youth civil society campaigned online to try to rectify this injustice and reformed the importance of youth-led activism for period justice in social media.

Despite inclusivity and representativeness being a major focus of youth civil society organisations, groups, and movements, the sector tends to be predominantly led by young people privileged with higher education and often coming from middle and upper class socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of youth civil society representatives are unpaid (volunteers 35%, social movement leaders 27%, board members 19%); just one-tenth are paid employees. Therefore, members often are those who can afford to engage in unpaid roles. This over-reliance on unpaid volunteers makes youth civil society more fragile as well as less representative of the communities in which it serves. Again, demonstrating the detrimental impact of funding cuts this year.



FEATURED SPOTLIGHTS

[UNITED KINGDOM] Changes, Challenges, and Championing Justice: A Study of UK Young People's Experiences of Period Management During the COVID-19 Pandemic by Restless Development Volunteers

This research amplifies the menstrual health experiences of young people from across the UK. As demonstrated by the inequalities revealed in this study, we need much more extensive research on the unique, disproportionate challenges experienced by young Black, Asian, Mixed and other minority ethnic menstruators to truly address menstrual injustice. This report also recommends that young menstruators and communities should be involved throughout menstrual healthcare planning to ensure that healthcare professionals respond appropriately to young people's varied needs and experiences.

[GLOBAL] Girls' Education under COVID-19: Impact and Solutions by CARE

This spotlight highlights the challenge of education during the pandemic, but focuses on the power of girl-led groups to derive solutions. For example, adolescent girls who engaged in leadership clubs took a key role in disseminating information about COVID-19 in their communities, mobilising study groups, tracking cases of absenteeism and drop-out, and preventing early marriages, with support from adult and youth mentors.

[UNITED STATES] The Change by Vincent Folkes

Through a poem, the spotlight explores the quest for racial justice. It highlights the historical precedent of racial inequities experienced by Black Americans and the inter-generational trauma faced by young people. The poem highlights some of the actions young people are taking to make a change and makes a plea for more support. It expresses the power young people have to change their narrative, collectively.



SUMMARY OF GLOBAL SURVEY RESULTS

In September and October 2021, more than 800 members of youth civil society organisations (CSO), community-based groups, and social movements (we call them youth civil society for short)³⁷ shared their experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their organisations, their work, and the support their organisations receive. This chapter summarises key trends that emerged.³⁸

There is optimism about the strength of youth civil society, despite challenges in operating environments and continued marginalisation by those in power.

Many of those representing youth civil society groups are optimistic about the strength of youth civil society: more than half perceive civil society space to be improving. However, a third of respondents do not feel that youth civil society is strong, and more than three-quarter agree it has a long way to go before reaching its potential. European organisations were, in general, more pessimistic compared to respondents based in Asia and the Pacific region who held more optimistic views on youth civil society and their ability to make a difference.

We asked an open question about what “youth power” meant to respondents and analysed the perspectives with reference to the power cube, described in Table 1.³⁹ The responses indicate a sense of optimism about young people's capabilities, but also a sense that young people are overlooked or held back by those in positions of power and authority.

37. The survey targeted included those leading organisations and/or movements as well as those working for and volunteering with organisations and/or movements.

38. A longer analysis report, which looks in detail at trends across regions and different organisation types, is available to complement this global summary. Available at: restlessdevelopment.org/youth-power-in-a-pandemic

39. Powercube. (2011). Power Pack: Understanding Power for Social Change. Available at: <https://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/what-is-the-powercube/>

Table 1: Perspectives on youth power

Power	Definition	A perspective from youth civil society
Power within	<i>refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a precondition for action</i>	<i>"Youth power is acknowledging that the youth are capable of so much should the opportunities be given to them to step up. Youth power is not the power of a singular person, but of an entire group of people that are geared towards similar goals for the future" - Male survey respondent (18-21 years-old) from the Philippines, representing social movement/campaign</i>
Power with	<i>refers to the synergy which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building</i>	<i>"My overall view is that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively and positively affected youth civil society. It created the opportunity to challenge the status quo and change the narrative for a better future." - Female survey respondent (26-30 years-old) from Nepal, representing an international CSO</i>
Power to	<i>refers to the capacity to act; to exercise agency and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship or voice</i>	<i>"Youth Power means the power to change the society for good, the power to help the community, the power against social injustice, corruption, etc." - Male survey respondent (22-25 years-old) from Bangladesh, representing a national CSO</i>

When asked about how the (national) environment in which civil society operates has changed since the onset of COVID-19, 56% said they felt that it has become more open for young people to stand up for their rights publicly, while 35% feel it has become harder. This mixed picture reflects positive feelings about the inner strength of youth civil society (power within), while acknowledging the reality of a restrictive operating environment and limited opportunities to influence power-holders (power with).

Youth civil society has used its agency to engage communities and support public health responses during the pandemic

Members of youth civil society are confident that youth civil society is effective in achieving social change, and many respondents describe youth power in terms of the change they can bring about in helping their communities and tackling injustice (power to). Members of youth civil society feel their organisations have been effective in responding to the pandemic. Responses show that youth civil society has played an important role in engaging with communities during the pandemic. Over a third of respondents report their organisation has provided information and raised awareness, while over a quarter indicate their organisations have provided leadership at community level for public health or social responses.

Youth civil society has not received support where it is most needed: funding

Prior to the pandemic, funding was identified as a persistent barrier for youth civil society, and often a root cause of other challenges linked with barriers to organisational development.⁴⁰ Nearly three-quarters of respondents reported reductions in income for their organisations during the pandemic. Over a third of organisations experienced cuts to existing funds, indicating donors have been actively withdrawing support to youth civil society. Movements and campaigns and formally registered national and international CSOs were less likely to report decreased funding compared to local level, community-based, or unregistered CSOs. Geographically, youth civil society organisations from Europe suffered more in terms of funding cuts of existing funds due to COVID whereas those based in Asia and the Pacific region were least likely to experience decreased funding.

Furthermore, the assistance that youth civil society has received during the pandemic has prioritised softer forms of support such as training and coaching, while neglecting the gaps in financing exacerbated during the pandemic. The infographic on page 25 shows that while additional funding was the form of support most frequently cited as needed, it was the least likely to be received. In contrast, other forms of support that organisations need, such as training on soft skills, were more likely to be offered. Organisations based in West, East and Central Africa reported a higher unmet need for additional funding from donor(s).

40. The Development Alternative (2019). Towards A Thriving, Credible, And Sustainable Youth Civil Society. Available at: <https://www.intrac.org/resources/towards-a-thriving-credible-and-sustainable-youth-civil-society/>.

Overall, responses suggest that donors prioritise soft support (e.g., training) to youth civil society, but are less willing to invest financial or other resources (e.g., technical equipment) that would ultimately help youth organisations in achieving their mission:

“Refugee youth-led organisations continue to face a number of barriers, including access to funding and resources. [...] Refugee youth-led organisations have been systematically marginalised and disempowered because they are seen as too small or lacking in the formalised capacity that global development actors ‘need’ for impact, scale & rapid social change.” - Male survey respondent (31+ years old) from Malawi, representing a local CSO

Decreased funding has forced operational rather than strategic responses to COVID-19

In spite of the confidence that youth civil society respondents show about their ability to make positive social change and respond effectively to the pandemic, reductions in funding have made it hard for youth civil society to adapt strategically to new needs and opportunities. Unsurprisingly, in the context of shrinking funding, those organisations reporting decreased funding during the pandemic are nearly twice as likely to also report reduced operations, and 50% more likely to have changed to serving smaller geographic areas than other organisations.⁴¹ The most common responses reported were switching to virtual operations, while few organisations made more strategic changes or growth. Organisations in Europe were most likely to have reduced operations, and reported fewer strategic partnerships/collaborations during the pandemic. Scaling back to smaller geographic areas was more frequently reported by organisations based in the East African region.

Youth civil society struggles to access to decision-makers

It appears that many youth CSOs, often well placed to respond to frontline needs, have been overlooked by their donors and supporters at a time of crisis, reporting challenges in engaging with decision-makers and those in power. Fewer than half of respondents report that youth civil society is taken seriously by power-holders, with those in the Americas and Europe more likely to report issues with legitimacy in the eyes of power-holders. However, 92% feel youth civil society needs more support from power-holders. This is reflected in the ways in which youth civil society groups feel they can influence decision-makers. Most cite more formal and traditional mechanisms such as reports and evidence, with few indicating one-to-one conversations taking place.

41. These differences between those with declining income and those with stable or increasing income were found significant at the 95% confidence level using a chi-squared test.

“Youth power means to allow [young people] to be part of the decision making process and provide ownership to them.” - Male survey respondent (26-30 years-old) from Zambia, representing a social movement/campaign

An additional consequence of the barriers in funding and access to decision-makers is that youth leaders are often those from more privileged backgrounds (8 out of 10 reported university level education). They may have networks that allow greater access than their peers, and they are able to sustain themselves and their work without pay (only 1 in 10 respondents are paid). Over-reliance on unpaid volunteers makes youth civil society more fragile as well as less representative of the communities in which they serve.

“Most youth civil society are relying on well-wishers as most are operating without funding limiting total commitment to the Agenda as they have to look for employment somewhere so as to fund operations of the organisation.” - Male survey respondent (31+ years old) from Zimbabwe, representing a local CSO

Movements, campaigns, and registered international and national youth organisations were less affected by the pandemic than local level, community-based, or unregistered CSOs.

In general terms, movements and campaigns (compared to civil society and community-based groups) have fared better throughout the pandemic; fewer reported funding cuts, a higher proportion experienced their needs met for additional funding from donors, fewer reduced their operations, and they reported a less than average switch to virtual operations. Moreover, they were better able to make strategic adaptations to their work. Formally registered national and international CSOs were also slightly less likely to report decreased funding compared to local level, community-based, or unregistered CSOs. They also shared more optimistic views about the space in which youth civil society operates.

Conclusion

The picture painted by this global survey is mixed. Youth civil society members feel that civil society has strength and potential to effect social change; for example, during the pandemic youth civil society particularly supported public health efforts at local levels. There are also more positive perceptions about the space for youth-led action, compared to research carried prior to the pandemic.⁴² However, youth civil society groups have not received the support they need and difficulties in accessing funding observed prior to the pandemic have been exacerbated. With over one third reporting withdrawal of existing funds at a time of crisis, the energy that youth civil society could have brought to bring to strengthening community level responses to the pandemic, has instead been focussed on dealing with reductions in funding. Youth civil society has shown resilience to survive the pandemic, but more consistent support is required to help organisations thrive.



42. The Development Alternative. (2019). Towards a thriving, credible and sustainable youth civil society. Available at: <https://www.intrac.org/resources/towards-a-thriving-credible-and-sustainable-youth-civil-society/>.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022

In 2021, youth civil society undoubtedly faced overwhelming challenges. However, these challenges have also provided an opportunity for them to demonstrate their resilience, creativity, adaptability, inclusivity, and activism.

Youth civil society in 2021 has coalesced around issues that they feel the generations before them have ignored, such as climate change, economic inequality, and gender and racial inequities. Today's young people collectively recognise that we can only build a sustainable society when we systematically address structural inequalities. To do this, power needs to shift to ensure everyone is included: people of all ages and genders, from diverse and interconnected racial, economic, geographic, and disability backgrounds. In fact, when youth civil society survey respondents were asked to share what youth power meant to them, their most common responses related to inclusion. They repeatedly highlighted how current issues in the world, such as unemployment, the COVID-19 crisis, and climate change all strongly affect youth, and youth should therefore have a say in how issues are to be addressed.

Youth civil society cannot do it on its own, though. Support from the wider international community is vital. Youth civil society leaders feel that the most important ways in which they could be supported are to be better funded and to be given leadership roles and decision-making responsibility. Additional funding was the form of support youth civil society respondents most frequently cited as needing, but also was the least likely type of support they received. They want to be listened to by decision-makers, have full autonomy to make decisions, and be visible on influential platforms or in influential spaces to share their voices. Finally, this report shines a light on the precarious state of youth mental health and wellbeing. This is a challenge that the wider international community must step up to address.



Going into 2022, youth civil society recognises the increasing openness of civil society to restoring youth power as the greatest opportunity for the sector. They also believe that governments have become increasingly open to listening to youth voices, likely led by the significant role that youth civil society has played in responding to and rebuilding from the pandemic. But, threats are also on the horizon. Challenges such as insufficient economic opportunities for young people, persistent biases against youth by adults, and social norms that limit opportunities for young people are viewed as the top threats for youth civil society in realising their full potential.

While it may be easy to be worried about the challenges ahead, youth civil society solutions to the pandemic have demonstrated an intersectional and context-specific blueprint to rebuilding communities. Young leaders can provide us with a way forward to a fairer, more resilient, more sustainable, and more equitable world. As we look into 2022, we can expect to see many more examples of youth civil society making positive change despite their systemic exclusion. It is now up to us how we are going to support them to do what they have been doing all along: lead.



RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL CSOS

Do not drown out local youth organisations

Focus on building long-term relationships with youth civil society and giving way to them whenever possible. Foreign INGOs must avoid monopolising the sector by sharing civic space, standing in solidarity with, and listening to these groups to foster movement building. Relationship-building includes creating partnerships and/or youth civil society serving as experts and consultants. This requires being more flexible with systems and processes when it comes to organising with younger generations.

Deliver better and more tailored support

Provide tailored support to youth civil society based on the kinds of support young people express that they need and want. A key element of support requested is with help navigating the complexities of grants and donor engagement. As more established (I)NGOs have a wealth of experience and larger networks that enables them to navigate grant processes more easily, utilise this knowledge to lift up and support less established youth groups to have more funding opportunities.

“Se suele decir que los jóvenes son el futuro del mañana, es importante esta exclamación siempre y cuando se trabaje desde todos los sectores del poder, para formarlos y dar herramientas fundamentales que forjen su carácter, de una forma inclusiva y diversa, cerrando brechas de desigualdades.”

Translation: “It is often said that young people are the future of tomorrow, this exclamation is important as long as it works from all sectors of power, to train them and give fundamental tools that forge their character, in an inclusive and diverse way, closing gaps of inequalities.” - Male survey respondent from Colombia, representing a local community group





Connect youth civil society with needed infrastructure

Listen to youth civil society about the infrastructure needed that will support them to lead change. This can include media exposure, office spaces, or networking events, which can promote growth and cooperation amongst the young activists.

Protect safety and security

Be mindful of the safety and security of the youth civil society sector as a whole and the collective of youth activists. As youth civil society is often at the forefront of change, dedicate safeguarding mechanisms to them and identify the newly emerging risks that are arising in the digital age. Commit to the 'do no harm' principle, especially when working with small, local youth organisations in the Global South.

Yield space to young people to lead and cultivate young leaders

Let young leaders lead within organisational structures, in research, and in advocacy. Build safe places for young leaders to explore their skills without fear of failure or reprisal that they need to embark on the journey of self-growth and preparation for the future roles. Safe spaces are intersectional, with equitable opportunities for youth leaders who experience marginalisation due to their education level, socio-economic status, gender, disability status, or other characteristics that often lead to exclusion. Utilise these spaces for young people to come together and share learnings, skills, challenges.

DONORS

Provide flexible, core, and long-term funding

Shift the power by providing youth civil society with flexible, core, long-term funding. Funding should also be holistic, responsive, multi-year, and timely to ensure that despite any crisis, organisations and movements will have the capacities and resources to respond and rebuild new and better futures. Take the time to listen to youth leaders and members of youth civil society to understand what their organisations and movements actually need to both deliver and to grow. Funds must be sufficient and uninterrupted for youth organisations, especially for ones dependent on volunteers, to enable the delivery of community initiatives.



Minimise bureaucratic, internal processes and requirements

Decolonise aid by adopting less bureaucratic and more manageable requirements that make grants more accessible for youth civil society groups. Such processes and requirements often act as hurdles for young initiatives applying for grants. For example, grants often require youth civil society groups to formalise. First and foremost, take into consideration the context of the applicants' countries of origin and resources available by coupling grants with the guidance, coaching, and administrative support needed to yield favourable results for all. By making the application process less burdensome, donors can accommodate greater flexibility and diversity of experiences. Secondly, change traditional, donor-driven MEL frameworks. It is difficult to capture impact of projects and programmes through these frameworks because transformative changes often do not happen within the time bounds of funding cycles or aligned with pre-conceived notions of success.

Prioritise youth civil society as a cross-cutting, distinctive, and vital sector

The work of youth civil society is cross-cutting: organisations, groups, and movements work on all topics including education, health, digital security, women's rights, and much more. Youth civil society is not confined to working on youth issues, or as a youth sector. Youth civil society has its unique strengths and doesn't fit into other defined long-term sectors. Therefore, donors must recognise the valuable work being done by youth civil society rather than categorising it as a competing priority with other special-interest groups.



"Fund us! We have a world's worth of solutions, energy, skills, education, experience and motivation. Most youth budgets rely on \$5,000 or less, no wonder our change looks incremental from the outside! Stop being risk averse to new ideas because doing the same thing and expecting different results is the definition of insanity." - Female survey respondent (26-30 years old) from the United States, representing an international civil society organisation



Fund intersectional youth-led research

Avoid homogenising ‘young people’ together. Fund research and processes that work with diverse groups of young people – particularly those representing lower socio-economic income and lower educational levels – to identify the risks they face. Research should be done on the unique, disproportionate challenges experienced by young people from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds related to specific topics. Such inclusive, intersectional research would support more effective programming and should be used to inform funding priorities.

Prioritise equitable rather than transactional partnerships

Invest time and resources into developing strong relationships with youth civil society groups in order to build trust and form more meaningful collaborations. The research shows that the reality of what youth civil society is capable of and what they need is regularly misrepresented or misunderstood by funders. Oftentimes donors shape the structures and priorities of youth civil society rather than the other way around, which often results in funds being directed away from the most pressing needs or forces youth civil society groups to formalise due to grant requirements when it may cause challenges for the group to operate independently. Needs such as, for example, technical equipment, funding for shifting harmful social norms, and flexible support to develop their political role have been systematically neglected by donors because of weak partnerships and embedded assumptions by donors about youth capacities.

GOVERNMENTS

Share the decision-making roles and pass the mic

Recognise youth groups as partners in specific decisions and demonstrate this through supporting and promoting youth participation mechanisms that would function at all levels on a regular basis. Involve youth civil society, particularly those representing Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA) formally and meaningfully in important policy-making forums, relief and recovery operations, and development processes aimed at solving social and economic inequalities. As governing spaces are often occupied by cis-heterosexual men, yield space so that decisions can be made with the participation of MAPA representatives.



Adopt and/or implement supportive policies and ministries for youth

Put meaningful policies in place and in action that support the holistic well-being of young people and youth civil society. Such policies would address the needs and challenges of young people, such as education, health, livelihoods, etc. Also, rights and policies must support the effective functioning of youth civil society ranging from secured rights to free speech and assembly to minimal bureaucratic requirements and costs for organisational registration. Simultaneously, government structures must be equally supportive of young people by recognising their intersectionality and the diversity of their needs and interests. While a Ministry for Youth is vital to represent the youth identity, systematically including youth voices and decision-making responsibilities across all ministries must be prioritised.

Address the contextual challenges that force young leaders to emigrate

Take meaningful action to address the hardships, such as the lack of educational and/or livelihood opportunities, that trigger the emigration of impactful young leaders. The continued presence of young leaders in youth civil society will support the development of their home countries. For example:

- initiate scholarship programmes that match opportunities abroad to incentivise young leaders to study in their home countries
- invest in the infrastructure needed to enable internet connectivity for young people, whilst simultaneously putting strong policies in place that protect young people’s data, safety, and security in the digital space
- provide comprehensive and holistic mental health support accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic status

Provide an open civic space

Guarantee physical, digital, and legal spaces for youth civil society to act, demand, and deliver change safely and freely. Support an enabling environment that upholds the rights of civil society to organise, participate, and mobilise freely with other actors. Limit confining measures that are enforced in emergency settings, which lead to liberties confinement and rights breaches. Secure the rights for people and groups to engage outside of institutional means, such as through social movements. The need for youth civil society to engage in creative ways has been augmented by governments increasingly closing civic spaces during the pandemic.





YOUNG LEADERS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Take action in communities

Lead or help in response and recovery from crises. Demonstrate the ability of young people to lead in rebuilding a fairer and more sustainable future, where governments and organisations are held accountable for their promises and actions. Adopt lessons from the pandemic lockdown when possible and relevant. Utilise methods for protests and citizen education that can now happen in places other than on the streets to garner more international attention and support.

Amplify youth civil society in the global south

Be a strong partner for youth civil society worldwide, especially those organisations that operate in the global south and other places where these groups are not able to organise actions due to the restrictions they experience in their environments. Those in the global north could help to amplify their voices and experiences. Work together to strengthen the collective influence of youth civil society with decision-makers by focusing on a diverse range of youth voices, breaking boundaries of class, ethnicity, race, etc.

Engage in active citizenship safely

Participate in formal and informal spaces that promote active citizenship and shifting power structures. A barrier to civic engagement, especially in the digital space, is a natural cautiousness and lack of trust of both the political space and the internet as open and transparent spaces for political expression. Today, political spaces and the internet have been weaponised to monopolise power. Get educated about and seek out ways to find safe spaces and reliable information, navigating comfortable levels of risk for potential harm or mis- or disinformation.

Cultivate, as much as possible, relationships with decision-makers and donors

Network with like-minded youth civil society actors, international and national civil society organisations, government officials, and multinational donors and other actors to amplify messages. Further, seek to influence supporters beyond the usual mechanisms, including actors who may be less inclined to agree or support initially. In times of shrinking budgets and at-risk civic space, partnerships are vital to the functioning of a strong youth civil society.

Take care of each other

The mental health and well-being of young leaders is steadily on the decline. Be mindful of those with whom you work and volunteer and be actively engaged in monitoring their needs. Take care of each other by listening and reacting thoughtfully. Understand that needs are intersectional. Just a few ways to take care of each other include sharing responsibilities and burdens where possible, providing emotional support, and forming peer groups.

”ةيندمرلا تامرظنمرلا نمر اهزيغو ةصنمرلا هذو يف كراشو كنادلب يف تنرتنإل ةوق نمر دفتسا
، مزالسلا ةاعد اونوك [...] ، مراكفأ ن فدتو كبابش ريثأت ةوق لتقت بورجل اعدت ال .ةي لودل او
” ب كوكلا اوذقنأ [...]“

Translation: “Take advantage of the power of the Internet in your countries and participate in this platform and other civil and international organizations. Do not let wars kill the power of the impact of your youth and bury their ideas, [...] be the advocates of peace, [...] save the planet.” - Male survey respondent (22-25 years old) from Yemen, representing an international social movement

CLOSING THOUGHTS: CIVICUS

Dear Reader,

The past few years have exhibited a rising trend of increasingly younger activism, including by teenagers and children. Protest movements around [climate](#),⁴³ [anti-racism](#)⁴⁴ and [gender equity](#)⁴⁵ – to name just a few of the hottest issues of our time – have been powered by fearless young people increasingly frustrated with the institutions, rules and values of older generations. Young people, often mobilising for the first time, are re-invigorating older social movements by giving them a massive street presence and bringing in new ways of organising, creative tactics and an innovative use of technology. They are practising intersectionality in their everyday organising. They are powering cross-generational initiatives across the spectrum of civil society.

The backlash that they are experiencing is testimony to their efficacy. They are shaking the system, and the guardians of the system – state and non-state actors alike – are responding in the form of threats to their physical, emotional and digital security. Youth activism, in turn, seeks to escape repression by the sheer force of creativity and imagination. Hong Kong's Water Revolution has been squashed, but before retreating it inspired millions. Such is youth power: shapeless, mobile and adaptable, like water. Young people in their full diversity are the new civil society frontier, constantly challenging old assumptions about what civil society is and how it works.

Ines Pousadela, Senior Research Specialist,
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from CIVICUS



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 Refugee Spaces Uganda
 Regional Network of Children and young People Trust
 Reign Foundation
 Relief Partners Uganda
 Reproductive Health Uganda
 Research Institute for Community Development (RICD)

Responsables
 Response Organization for Emergency and Development
 Restless Agricultural Development Initiative (RADI)
 Restless Development
 Restless Development India
 Restless Development Nepal
 Restless Development Tanzania
 Restless Development Uganda
 Restoring A Smile
 Revival Family Of Hope Foundation Zambia
 Rihtes Outreach On Human Rights, Justice And Law-Mayuge District-Eastern Uganda
 Rohingya Youths for Society Change (RYSC)
 Rose Namayanja Foundation
 Rotaract Kitgum
 Rotary International, Jigawa State Association of the Deaf, Nigeria
 Royal United Family
 Rozan
 Rulenge Human Development and Environmental Conservation
 Rural Child Development Outreach (RCDO) Uganda
 Rural Education Support and Rehabilitation Unit (RESARU)
 Rural Focus Zambia (RUFOZ)
 Ruth Kendell Empire Foundation
 Sabinu Transformation Initiative
 Sanyu Babies Home
 Save Elders
 Save Our Environment Trust
 Save The Future
 Save Uganda Foundation
 SDG7-Youth Constituency
 Seeds of Hope
 Self Help Promotion For Health And Rural Development (SHEPHERD)
 SERAC Bangladesh
 Shabnam Resources
 Shabwah Youth Organisation (SYO)
 Shakirina Youth for Development
 She Deserves to Soar
 Shitikantha Welfare & Development Society
 Show Abilities Uganda (SAU)
 Sierra Leone Unites Youth Movement
 Sikonge District Council
 Sina Tovuti
 Sinatsisa Lubombo
 Sky Social
 Small projects foundation
 Social Economic Action and Transformation for Humanity
 Society for Refugees and Youths Africa (SoRYAfrica)
 Society for the Improvement of Rural People (SIRP)
 Solidaridad Southern Africa
 Solidarity of Refugee Women for the Social Welfare (SOFERES)
 Somali Union Organization
 SOS-APRID
 Sousse Demain
 Special Door for Single Mothers (SDSM)
 Spectrum Uganda Initiative
 SPLASH-Solid Society Plan of Active Human
 Srijan Foundation, Jharkhand, India
 Stand for Kids Foundation
 STEM Education for Girls

Strategies for Peace, Education, Research and Development
 Student Aid Foundation
 Student Initiative for Sustainable Development Goals
 Support for Girl Child Education Initiative
 Sustainable Women Organization
 Swanirvar, Bangladesh
 Synergy for Community Development
 Talent Connekt
 Tankatopa Development Organization (TDO)
 Tanora Tia Fivoarana Sava
 Tanzania Feminist Initiative
 Tanzania Youth Elite Community
 Tanzania Youth Vision Association (TYVA)
 Tariro Youth Development Trust
 Tdyan Youth Voices and Action Network Uganda
 Teach for Somalia
 Team Advocate My Dreams Never Die Youth Movement
 Team Help, Ranchi
 Team12
 TECHO
 The Fair Internship Initiative (FII)
 The Lowdown Youth Counselling, Northampton
 The Northern Peace Foundation
 The Team GREEN
 The Youth Calling
 Tigwilizane Arts
 Time For Action
 Today for Tomorrow Foundation
 Toto Center initiative
 Transform Eastleigh
 Transformative Women's Initiative
 Tumaini Community Resource Centre
 TYVA
 UCAHAEC
 Uganda Network on Ethics HIV and the Law
 Uganda Red Cross Society
 Uganda Young Positives
 Unemployed and Vulnerable Foundation Trust
 Únete haz algo más
 Union des Jeunes Agriculteurs Moderne (UJAM) Bénin
 Unión Estudiantil Ecuador
 Unique Foundation The Gambia
 United Nations Volunteers
 United Nations Youth Association of Zambia
 United Youth for Peace Building
 United Youth Social Symposium For Education and Development (UYSSSED)
 Universities Allied for Essential Medicines
 Unveiling Beauty Initiative UBI
 Up With Community
 Victoria Community Development Council
 Vijana Life Organization
 VIRTUE
 Vision in Action Cameroon
 Vision Zero Youth Council Nigeria
 Visual Echoes for Human Rights Advocacy (VEHRA)
 Vivo
 Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns Uganda
 Volunteer for Bangladesh
 Volunteers Welfare for Community Based Care of Zambia (VOWAZA)
 Wajibika CSO
 War Child Holland Uganda
 Warriors Zulu Nation Honduras
 Watchman Relief Association Global
 Water Access Consulting
 We do care! Moz
 We help the oldery to perform daily duties
 WeCare Community Based Organization
 Wezesh Masomo Community Based Organization
 Wings of Hope Foundation
 Woman collation of Zimbabwe
 Women and Children Welfare and Development Organisation
 Women and youth in development (WAY UGANDA)
 Women Beyond Borders
 Women for Change (WFC)
 Women For Positive Actions
 Women in Sustainable Energy Lesothoo
 Women of Africa Trust
 Women Vs Men (WVM)
 Word Vision
 World Health Organization
 World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM)
 Y Care International
 Y-PEER-Puntland Somalia
 YALI
 YMCA Madagascar
 Young African Advocacy initiative
 Young Africans Capacity Building Network(YAC-NET)
 Young Africans Community Empowerment Initiative, Sierra Leone (YACEI-SL)
 Young Image Builders
 Young Southeast Asia
 Young Women Destination
 YOUNGO
 Yout Movement For Positive Change Zambia
 Youth Action for Relentless Development Organization Sierra Leone (YARDO-SL)
 Youth ACTS
 Youth Against Drug Abuse YADA International
 Youth and Women Emancipation (YAWE)
 Youth Appeal Kenya
 Youth capital
 Youth Centre for Conflict and Environment Observatory
 Youth Compact Champion (YCC)
 Youth Development Initiative Trust
 Youth development link initiative (YODELI)
 Youth Economic Forum Zimbabwe
 Youth Empowerment and Social Solutions Trust
 Youth Empowerment for Sustainability
 Youth empowerment for sustainable development
 Youth Engagement
 Youth Enterprise Services (YES) Malawi
 Youth for Action Life Improvement (YALI)
 Youth For Climate India
 Youth for Our Planet
 Youth for Peace Movement - Tagum City Chapter
 Youth for Understanding
 Youth Forum for Social Justice
 Youth Foundation of Bangladesh
 Youth Future Connect Ministries
 Youth Gate Zimbabwe Trust
 Youth in Action for Development Sierra Leone
 Youth Innovative for Eligible Society Alteration (YIFESA)
 Youth Lab Initiative for Development

Youth Led Development Project
 Youth Movement for positive Change Zambia
 Youth Nation Kenya
 Youth of Change
 Youth Organisations of Nigeria
 Youth Projects Development Platform
 Youth Rehabilitation and Empowerment Network (YOREN)
 Youth Thinkers' Society
 Youth With Disabilities Empowerment Platform
 Youth4SDGs (YOUTHINK Centre)
 Youths Initiatives Through Education (YITE)
 YSpark
 Zam Ideas Innovations
 Zambia Climate Change Network
 Zanzibar Psychological and Counseling Association
 Zombo Rural Development Network Association (ZORUDE-NA)
 ZTR - Farimbona

تسایسلا ومهفن یجا
 یبرعلا نطولاً یف فنعلآ ءحفالکمل ینطولاً سلجلآ
 یبرعلا فنعلآ ءحفالکمل یلودلا سلجلآ
 یبرعلا نطولاً یف فنعلآ ءحفالکمل یلودلا سلجلآ
 لکیتوا عرف ءیبابشلآ تادایقلل ءیلودلا ءمظنلآ
 یعامتجالآ لمعلآ ءیمنتلل ءینطولاً ءمظنلآ
 بیبط مهمصب
 بابشلآ لیده ءیعمج
 Aidmej جامدا ءیعمج
 نواعتلآ ءیمنتلل دیدجا باب ءیعمج
 برعلآ ورزا دودح الب ءیعمج
 انراید ءیعمج
 یعامتجالآ لمعلل ناور ءیعمج
 ءمحرم ءیعمج
 بابشلآ لیده ءیعمج
 ءاطعو بابش
 نويعلآ بجاحب ءیملعلا ءیتف ءفرغ
 Nineveh's Energy یعوطتلآ یونین ءقاط قیرف
 تاغ ءیلجلآ ءیدیلقتلآ تاغانصلل قوس ءاوساک
 ءیومنتلآ ءیسفنلآ ءیاعرلآ ءسسؤم
 2040 بابش ءسسؤم
 ءمصرب ءردابم
 ءیعمتجلآ ءیمنتلل بابش ءردابم
 یدامو ءلاه ءردابم
 نورینم
 نییریئازجلآ نییقیوقحلآ یدتنم
 ءیعمتجلآ ءکارشلآ ءیمنتلل لیخلآ ءمظنم
 شیاعتلآ مالسلل روسج ءمظنم
 ءفاقشلآ ءیمنتلل نایفوقاش ءمظنم
 Tikrit Center Fot Volunteer یعوطتلآ لمعلل تییرکت زکرم ءمظنم
 Work
 ابابشلآ نحن ءمظنم
 نیلماک وردقن
 ءیوسنلآ نماضتلآ نون

ग्राम दीदी स्वयंसेवी संस्था
 पूरव प्रधानमंत्री लाल बहादुर शास्त्री जन्मस्थली सेवा न्यास चन्दौली,
 उत्तर प्रदेश
 महोत्तरी युवा संजाल Mahottari Network of Youth

RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT
POWERED BY YOUNG PEOPLE



**DEVELOPMENT
ALTERNATIVE**



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