Introduction

This spotlight report, conducted by the East Jerusalem YMCA, 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. The methodology included literature and document reviews and focus group discussions. Three focus groups were delivered in the northern, central and southern West Bank districts. The respondents included members of 14 youth civil society organizations in the West Bank, 21.4 per cent of them were disabled persons organisations (DPOs).

In Palestine, young people (aged 18-29) represent one-third of the population. This number is expected to increase by 2030. The United Nations Population Fund reports that the ‘alienation and inactive participation of youth in policy development and decision-making might be one of the most critical developmental concerns encountering the society.’ Another report investigated the reality of people with intellectual disabilities. During the pandemic, they were discharged from boarding institutions for people with disabilities (PwDs) and were experiencing neglected needs with no protection measures to follow-up on getting their special needs met. They had been left behind, with their basic rights and needs unmet.

Results

Organisational impacts during the outbreak of the pandemic

Respondents indicated that the outbreak of the pandemic was a shock, especially the lack of information at the beginning and the subsequent contradictory data, later on. In light of such a state of confusion, paralleled with measures taken by political powers such as quarantine measures to prevent the spread of the virus, youth civil society members – like the rest of the population – found themselves locked up in their houses with an overwhelming state of panic emerging. Their panic stemmed from ignorance of the reality of the pandemic, misinformation and the need to adhere to the announced health protocols and measures, which restricted movement.
Being part of the society as individuals, youth civil society was touched by the agony of their people. They wanted to act to help those around them, including ensuring communication channels were in place. So, they turned government checkpoints into ‘caring checkpoints’, where they were present to deliver voluntary action. Although scattered and random at the beginning, initiatives focused on meeting basic people’s basic needs. This included the provision of food parcels (e.g., rice, flour, etc.) and hygiene kits.

Gradually, action became more organised. District emergency committees were formed to reach out to marginalised people who had been trapped with no access to medicine or food.

Addressing the needs of persons with disabilities

Youth civil society revisited its operational structure and became more capable of exploring the reality of persons with disabilities. They recognised that PwDs were excluded and marginalised. Some of them were discharged from sheltering institutions that were shut down over the pandemic, without any guarantee of ensuring their means of protection and livelihoods. One respondent from a youth organisation from North West Bank shared an example:

“In the light of this decision, two autistic siblings, aged 18, were discharged over the pandemic. One of the siblings lacked the ability to adapt to the situation, and consequently jumped from the fifth floor of the family’s residence, which caused his immediate death. Should there have been protection measures in place by relevant authorities, similar accidents would have been avoided.”

Other respondents reported encountering difficulties in terms of coordination and communication with public authorities to ensure the provision of basic needs. Therefore, youth groups provided the overlooked households with food parcels, medical consumables and drugs, and assistive medical devices such as wheelchairs.

“This experience was full of lessons; we have learned that our presence in the country is vital, and we believe in our potential. We have also learned how to advocate for the causes of the marginalised,” youth organisation respondent.

“The Palestinian context is a highly volatile, which requires having a system of measures in place to face crises across the response, recovery, and resilience stages.”
Adapting needs into action

Respondents expressed that the response and adaptation mechanisms depended on the nature of services delivered. Accordingly, there had been a variety of mechanisms employed:

→ Addressing the needs of PwDs directly, taking into account adherence to health protocols. Some youth organisations including DPOs, focused on awareness-raising, specifically addressing families of people with disabilities being an acutely-marginalised group with a high potential of contracting the virus. The awareness themes focused on the importance of adhering to social distancing and hygiene measures, like handwashing, especially as some PwDs must touch objects to identify them.

→ Utilisation of social media platforms to publish awareness material including getting families acquainted with the proper means of keeping their children safe while under house quarantine. Provision of awareness raising and support by phone calls in instances where access to the internet was unavailable.

→ Employment of webpages and social media outlets for the publication of videos reflecting the reality of PwDs and the massive challenges they encountered during the pandemic. DPOs worked in a team. Some would bring the filming devices, others would manage the filming, whereas others would act to ensure that the final product was inclusive for the needs of PwDs and their families. These videos were used as an advocacy tool to put pressure on duty-bearers towards meeting the needs and rights relevant to health care for PwDs.

→ Distribution of aid such as food parcels and toys for children was coupled with psychological support such as Psychosocial First Aid (PFA) to mitigate impacts of the pandemic, especially for vulnerable households to help them restore their psychological wellness and promote their resilience. Such support was delivered over phone calls or by social media. Some organisations said that videos and toys had a deep impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of the marginalised and helped them cope more positively with those impacts.

“The pandemic also revealed that the youth are at the forefront with the potential to effectively lead change.”
Difficulties faced relevant to adaptation efforts

Respondents expressed a wide range of difficulties. Some were relevant to the need to change from face-to-face into remote action, noting that staff were not yet ready to put such mechanisms into action due to the lack of capacities and operational mechanisms. Another difficulty was the fear of aid recipients contracting the virus while getting in touch with people.

The lack of funding was another issue. The majority of youth initiatives were voluntary and depended mainly on community entities who helped in covering costs of some basic items to meet the needs of exposed and vulnerable households.

In addition, the early response stage amongst youth organisations witnessed some confusion around coordination and referral, which had been negatively reflected on some of the beneficiaries as some received more than one food parcel while others were not even reached. Furthermore, the needs of PwDs and their families had way exceeded the potential and capacities of youth organisations. Multiple complaints were received and youth organisations ensured the follow-up with public relevant duty-bearers and the UNRWA. Yet, responding to their needs remained poorly met due to the scale of needs to address.

“[The experience had revived the concepts of] youth community leadership and voluntarism, which 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
Recommendations

The Palestinian context is a highly volatile, which requires having a system of measures in place to face crises across the response, recovery, and resilience stages. The outbreak of the pandemic highlighted the shortcomings in existing systems. However, the pandemic also revealed that the youth are at the forefront with the potential to effectively lead that change. To develop youth-led systems change:

1. Develop institutional frameworks, whether public or through youth community institutions, by the activation of a governance system, to enable active participation of youth civil organisations and young people in decision-making at all levels. Some surveyed institutions reported that lack of governance leads to stumbled action. And thus, engaging them in political representation and strategic planning needs to be systematised to ensure quality and uninterrupted service delivery and enhancement of youth potential.

2. Empower youth civil organisations, including DPOs, to lead change by scaling up their capacities through training. Equip them with needed skills to change and create a more equitable and just future.

3. Ensure sufficient, uninterrupted funds for youth organisations, mainly for the voluntary-based ones, to enable the delivery of community initiatives. Uninterrupted funding will ensure sustainable youth initiatives that will contribute to making a genuine community change.

4. Engage all society segments, especially vulnerable youth organisations, in protection, response, and recovery efforts in emergency settings and empower them to develop sustainable and resilient community initiatives.

5. Adopt a twin-track approach in all stages of crisis management in the future, by eliminating obstacles preventing equitable access for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups to protection, prevention, and response services, as well as meeting the needs of the marginalised and the alienated. Limit confining measures that are enforced in emergency settings, and which lead to liberties being limited and rights breached.

This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.
No available studies mapping boarding institutions for PwDs in the West Bank.

This study did not target DPOs, but rather targeted youth organisations including DPOs, which represented around 21 per cent of surveyed organisations.

This included interactive parent-child fun activities, physical exercise, keeping children away from both the news and social media outlets to avoid panic, as well as awareness on safety measures and releasing stresses. All those and others were published through videos, phone counselling, posts on social media etc.

Community entities included religious institutions like Zakat Committees, local private businesses and Waqfat Izz Fund (the Government fund for COVID-19 emergency).