

# RESILIENT REALITIES

How youth civil society is experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Global State Of Youth Civil Society Report

Participatory research coordinated in partnership between Restless Development, Recrear, & the Development Alternative



# Dear Reader

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Welcome to Resilient Realities, where we explore how young people between the age of 18 to 30 are organising during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

In this research we are driven by the question:

**How is youth civil society responding to the COVID-19 crisis?**

This question matters because by observing how youth civil society organisations (CSOs) respond to the crisis, we learn how our generation can cope through rapid disruption and what new strategies for adaptation, resilience and change are emerging. It matters because it sheds light on how youth civil society will continue to mobilise and evolve moving forward.

Through this participatory action research project, 12 young civil society activists from around the world took the time to share and learn about each other's experiences over the last few months. From this place of introspection and collective reflection, we extended our questions about resilience to other youth organisers in our neighbourhoods and communities, countries and regions.

Based on our experience, we know youth civil society manages to be adaptable and agile: we are used to engaging with our communities with very little funding. These points have been reflected in recent publications by FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund<sup>1</sup>, the Development Alternative<sup>2</sup>, CIVICUS & Recrear<sup>3</sup>, and Restless Development<sup>4</sup>. These and many more organisations and initiatives have been advocating to the donor community that more financial (such as flexible, unrestricted and long-term funding or co-designed schemes) and non-financial (for instance opportunities to network across countries, closer working relationships with donors, provision of tailored capacity building, and mentorship support) resources towards youth-led

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1 You can look to FRIDA's 2019 publication 'No Straight Lines' and the latest publication 'The Young Feminist Pluriverse': <https://youngfeministfund.org/>

2 To read more about the Development Alternative's research you can read: 'Towards a thriving, credible, and sustainable youth civil society (2019)': <https://restlessdevelopment.org/the-development-alternative/>

3 CIVICUS and Recrear jointly published a 'Playbook' on resourcing youth-led groups and movements. It is available at: <https://www.civicus.org/documents/en-Playbook-2020-march.pdf>

4 Restless Development carried out youth-led research about the challenges of youth civil society titled 'Shifting the power: what will it take to do development differently?'. This research was led by young people from Iraq, Lebanon, Madagascar and Uganda and it is available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/07/shifting-the-power-research/>

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initiatives will go a long way in supporting social transformation. These publications reflect the momentum in advocating the donors' community to support youth civil society more intentionally and effectively.

While COVID-19 spread around the globe, young people and their communities had to navigate a new reality as it emerged. We saw many young people organise to be at the front lines of providing relief in response to the pandemic. Other young people continued to demand social transformation, for instance through protest movements like #BlackLivesMatter, demonstrating that amid the rubble of this global crisis, the need for systemic change has become ever more urgent. Many groups of young people continued their work with communities to build resilience, finding alternative ways of delivering key services and supporting economic recovery.

Resilient Realities is not meant to be a comprehensive global study of youth civil society and COVID-19. Instead, each co-researcher sought to open a window into the stories of resistance and resilience of our regions and communities. Here we share a summary of what we have learned in this process through conversations, interviews, surveys, observation of events, creative activities, engagement in social media, and our own reflections as youth civil society members.

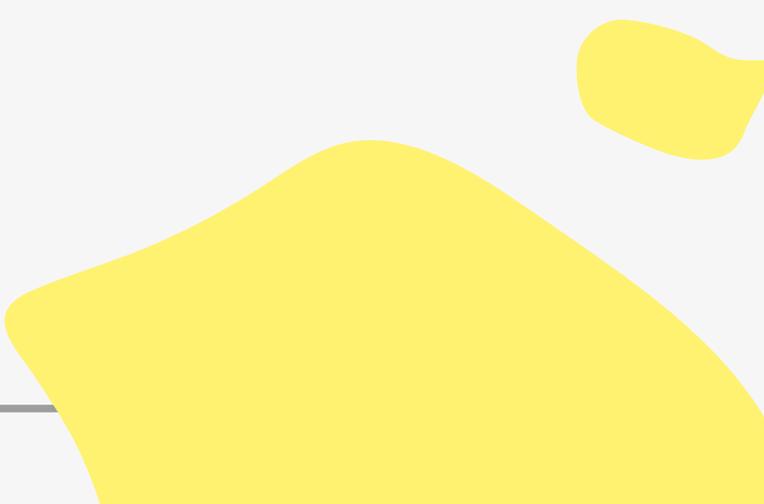
We draw our own key findings and recommendations because we believe that amidst the chaos, COVID-19 has brought transformation and an opportunity to reconsider the role young people play in social justice. This is our chance to do it differently.

We hope you, our reader, will find our insights inspiring and useful whether you are a donor, young person, government official or ally. More importantly, we hope that you will respond to them by collaborating with young people in your community to reimagine a more resilient, sustainable and just world for all.

Thank you for reading,

**The Co-Research Team**

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# The Co-Research Team

- Bangladesh -



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SARKER

- USA & Colombia -



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- Zimbabwe -



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- Papua New Guinea -



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- Australia -



**LIA**  
INGUANTI-PLIEDGER

- The Netherlands -



**MIRRE**  
BEEK

- Algeria -



**RIM**  
MENIA

- China -



**TING**  
ZHANG

# Global Findings

What have we learned about how youth civil society is responding to the COVID-19 crisis?

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*First of all, we cannot generalise.*

There are huge differences across regions, between and within countries: youth civil society is enormously diverse, composed of groups, organisations and movements that are very different from each other. This diversity is precisely its value and richness, and what has helped inform the ways youth groups, organisations and movements have gone about responding to the problems that are most urgent in their contexts. At the global level we noticed the following patterns:

## **Youth-led groups, movements and organisations have been forced to look inwards and develop new ways of working.**

Quarantine was a shared experience for many people around the world, inviting us to become more aware of our internal environment. For many, COVID-19 emphasised a sense of loneliness and the need for community, while also contributing to the destabilisation of our mental health. Yet, as Jimena from the Latin America research team reflects, there is a power in going inwards. By doing so we can question, recognise and reconsider the structures and systems that we (sometimes unconsciously) internalise, replicate and sustain with our choices and actions.

Throughout all the regions, organisations, groups and movements showed an incredible capacity to reorient themselves, and then respond with agility and flexibility in an uncertain context that requires experimenting, risk taking and boldness.

As Lia from the Oceania research team stresses, youth organisations have close bonds with their communities. They often belong to the very same communities they seek to serve and they are uniquely positioned to act quickly, identifying emerging needs and organising responses. Many youth organisations pushed the boundaries of how technology could be used, for example they organised political action and social solidarity campaigns through tools like Tik Tok and Instagram (see campaigns such as #LebanonProtests or #NiñasNoMadres.)

**The COVID-19 crisis put the spotlight on all the inequalities deeply rooted in our societies. Youth CSOs have been filling the gaps left by slow or oppressive government responses.**

Quarantine found many young people 'stuck' at home in situations of domestic violence and abuse<sup>5</sup>. Quarantine also meant that education and employment came to a standstill for many. The unemployment rate of young people is growing and the Europe research team found that young people will likely be among those taking on the biggest share of the economic burden generated by this crisis.

For others, quarantine was not even an option. In countries in which large chunks of the economy is mostly informal, many jobs have disappeared with dire implications for those young people and families whose livelihoods depend on daily wages. Daniel, writing from a favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, asks: is quarantine a right or a privilege?

Eric from Zimbabwe interacted with youth leaders across Africa, who reported that in many communities lockdown meant people going hungry because of their inability to work and earn an income to sustain themselves. In these contexts, as Daniel explains, the fight against COVID-19 became a fight for survival. Youth organisations have been stepping in to compensate for the inability of some governments to respond to the crisis appropriately.

The COVID-19 crisis has further evidenced structural injustice, sparking a moment of intense social mobilisation. In the United States, for example, Black people have been disproportionately affected by both COVID-19 and racist violence by state and non-state actors, undeniable signs of the depths of systemic racism. Black & Indigenous Americans are experiencing the highest death tolls from COVID-19, with Black Americans dying twice as much due to the virus compared to White and Asian Americans<sup>6</sup>. While social distancing measures were imposed, widespread protests as part of the Black Lives Matter movement continued, reflecting an urgency for public debate and action against long-standing racist practices of the state and white supremacists in the US. This movement and the frustrations and anger felt by young people towards systemic racism and human rights violations quickly spread around the world.

Many young activists have shared concerns that their governments are using COVID-19 as a distraction while they attempt to pass laws which further restrict civic space and persecute human rights activists. In Colombia, human rights defenders, environmental activists and indigenous leaders have become more vulnerable during the lockdown: Indepax reports 176 human rights defenders have been killed in 2020 alone. In Zimbabwe, young people have reported that lockdown measures led to tighter restrictions towards protests and demonstrations in the country.

<sup>5</sup> The rise in domestic violence and abuse during the pandemic has been documented by a number of organisations. See for example this research published by UNFPA on the impact of COVID-19 on increasing rates of gender based violence globally: [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_impact\\_brief\\_for\\_UNFPA\\_24\\_April\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> APM Research Lab documents COVID-19 deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S.: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

**Youth-led CSOs have been quick to respond in their communities and are building resilience from the ground up.**

All around the world, COVID-19 unmasked the way our social, educational, economic, and health systems are struggling. Eric from Zimbabwe, Daniel from Brazil and Aurna from Bangladesh report that government response was inadequate and the social support offered to vulnerable groups too weak to make any difference. In overcrowded communities all around the world maintaining social distancing was impossible making it harder to reduce the spread of the virus. In Bangladesh, COVID-19 overlapped with monsoon seasons and triggered further food insecurity, already exacerbated by loss of income for informal workers due to lockdown restrictions. In many African countries, populations have experienced food shortages due to droughts. In these contexts some youth initiatives shifted their focus to providing basic needs such as food delivery, distribution of masks and hygiene products to support the most vulnerable.

In the words of Mariana, a black community organiser from Rio, “The most vulnerable to the virus are the most vulnerable in general.” Daniel indicates that in Brazil black and brown communities are two times more at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In The Netherlands, as described by Mirre, migrant and refugee communities struggled the most. Their need for a sense of community, relief, and life development couldn't be answered by offering online courses to learn digital skills. In Sweden, permits to stay came to a halt for thousands of young asylum seekers. Her research shows how youth organisations have stepped in to provide for their basic needs, such as food and shelter, as well as education, language, sport, and mental healthcare support.



## COVID-19 has presented youth civil society with an opportunity to advocate for a more inclusive society.

While youth groups, organisations and movements are refocusing their attention to provide emergency and relief work, many are doing their best to ensure that other important issues don't lose visibility and momentum during COVID-19. For instance, Ting from China found that youth organisations have been mobilising public attention in support of women frontline workers who are taking on the burden of community relief work without being supported or recognised by the government.

In Bangladesh, Aurna reports of a youth group that recruited the "Hijra" (transgender) community to distribute masks as a strategy to change the public perception of this excluded social group. Rim, from the Africa research team, found that the COVID-19 crisis encouraged more transformative approaches to economic recovery focused on establishing self-dependent food systems managed at the community level. Meanwhile, Emilia, researching in North America, documents an initiative led by youth from The Desta Black Youth Network in Montreal: a youth-led community-based food programme that brings meals to people at risk, resulting in trust building across communities.

In short, as the pandemic unfolds, many youth organisations and movements are asking: Could it be that as we unmask the failure of our structures, young people have an opportunity to heal them?

The crisis has made us ever more aware of our interconnectedness: we cannot advocate for issues in silos. Instead, we must tap into our collective power and build wider narratives.

Bonnie and Rim both argue that bringing in a gender and feminist lens towards the COVID-19 crisis is not only about recognising the role of women, but also about fundamentally and radically questioning oppressive systems which miss out on the richness and diversity present in our societies. In Australia, Lia interviewed 'Democracy in Colour', a racial and economic justice grassroots organisation run by people of colour that has been at the forefront of advocating for a more just governmental response. She reports of the institutionalised racism which ignores how minority groups are disproportionately affected by the virus and its political and economic implications.

The push for inclusion and access that we are seeing globally makes it clear that we cannot create more resilient and healthy societies without having a wider diversity of people in positions of power.

# Recommendations

What actions should donors and governments take to support youth civil society organisations?

## 1. Investing in and learning from youth civil society can scale up the resilience of communities to crises.

In many contexts, the response of governments to the COVID-19 crisis fell short and international action came to a halt: the resilience and readiness of young people to organise at the grassroots level was often the single driver keeping communities afloat. This shows once again – and more so in moments of deep crisis – that young people are able to generate agile and effective strategies to manage and alleviate the effects of instability. We are more than implementers, we are creators, we are leaders. In our rapidly changing world where environmental, economic and health crises are likely to hit with little forewarning, it is worth learning from and investing in the resilience of grassroots and youth organisations.

## 2. Young people have been at the frontline of the COVID-19 response: it's time to make room for them at the policy-making table.

It is clear from this research that youth civil society has been among those at the frontline of the COVID-19 response. Youth

civil society provided much needed relief and creative solutions to the challenges the pandemic presented. But, despite the agency young people have shown to drive change, civic space continues to shrink around us.

Researching in the Latin America region, Jimena shares this reflection in one of her blog entries:

*“Who is in control of the decision making that is affecting society as a whole? Are we being heard in those formal and legislative spaces of power which have a wide impact on the use of our resources? In my opinion, such spaces are still reserved to the elite and remain inaccessible to our participation. As youth organisations, we have been knitting community bonds and germinating seeds and ideas that offer creative responses. But our limited impact in more formal spheres of participation was made evident in this quarantine.”*

It's crucial to sustain and support our involvement in public debate to ensure that our voices and those of our communities are at the heart of policy-making. We want to be actively involved in informing COVID-19 recovery strategies at the local and global level.

### 3. Engage with new approaches to leadership, modelled by young people, as a pathway to rebuilding and renewing our societies.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how vital community support and solidarity initiatives are for the very survival of our world. This raises the question of what leadership styles are better suited to face the challenges ahead of us. The leadership models that have been utilised by youth civil society make room for introspection, inclusion, vulnerability and care. Those in positions of power should identify strategies to harness and build on these new styles of leadership.

In the words of Daniel from the Latin America research team:

*“Leadership for them [community leaders] now means being able to listen to people, understand problems, and create collaborative solutions. Power is measured by the ability to mobilise peoples and resources, and no longer for titles or brutal force. We want new realities in which human relationships and solidarity will be valued more than relationships built out of fear, dependence, or exclusion.”*

### 4. Work with us, young people, to build partnerships across regions, movements and issues.

The COVID-19 crisis has created more awareness of the interconnectedness between different people, causes, perspectives and groups, as well as the need for coordinated social responses. Youth initiatives often connect issues across contexts, such as in the case of global solidarity movements like #BlackLivesMatter, and the pandemic opened new horizons to expand and learn about cross-movement collaboration. Now is the moment to invest in testing and scaling collaborative initiatives across different youth movements, groups, and organisations to drive social change.



## 5. Ensure that recovery from the pandemic works for all “segments of society”: taking a radical approach to leaving no-one behind.

Five years ago, governments signed up to Agenda 2030, committing to leave no-one behind and ensure that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets would be met for “all nations and peoples and for all segments of society”<sup>7</sup>. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has made visible the discriminatory and unequal structures that continue to be well rooted in our societies despite these commitments and the annual accountability processes that governments engage with. Issues such as discrimination against women, racism,

oppression and inequality can no longer be ignored.

To fully understand the devastating and diverse effects of this crisis, we must ask: whose voices are we still not hearing in our communities? How do we connect with and amplify these voices? In many cases, technology has provided platforms to mobilise and exchange even in times of social distance. However, many people are still lacking access and risk being excluded. We need to reimagine more critical approaches to how and who is involved in decision-making so as to create more open and equal spaces (including virtual ones). Young people are already utilising transparent, accountable approaches to tackling the challenges they face; harnessing this expertise is crucial to the ongoing response to COVID-19 and must inform the eventual process of recovery.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ declaration, paragraph:4 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

# To Go Deeper

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Visit the [Resilient Realities page](#) to find out more about the regional reports and the methodology behind Resilient Realities.

- ◆ **Contemplating New Realities:** Findings from the Latin America region
- ◆ **Realising our interconnectedness:** Findings from the North America region
- ◆ **Youths' personal and professional development during a pandemic:** Findings from the Europe region
- ◆ **Grassroots resilience:** Findings from the Africa region
- ◆ **Re-architecting societies, from the grassroots up:** Findings from the Asia region
- ◆ **The 'Access Revolution':** Findings from the Oceania region

[Read more about the research team](#) behind Resilient Realities.

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*Resilient Realities is the first in an ongoing series of State of Youth Civil Society Reports that will be published each year to explore different issues affecting youth civil society around the world.*

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# About The Development Alternative

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The Development Alternative is a group of organisations trying to change what it means to do development. We want to help shift power to communities and young people so that they can hold development actors to account, and lead the design of solutions to problems they identify.

The Development Alternative is convening a Youth Collective to bring together youth-led and youth-serving civil society organisations, to radically shift how development works and to ensure young people have the support and resources to lead change. By putting young people first, we enable them to unleash their individual and collective power and make real, sustainable changes to our world.

It is a space for youth organisations to come together to co-create tools that address common challenges including resourcing, leadership, coordination, negative perceptions of youth civil society and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. In this space, development partners and donors will be linked to the Youth Collective members to ensure a joined-up approach to tackling big development challenges.

The Youth Collective launched in August 2020. You can find out more or join the Youth Collective at:

[www.youth-collective.org](http://www.youth-collective.org)

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