

RESILIENT REALITIES

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



**Asia Spotlights:
Re-architecting
Societies, from the
Grassroots Up**

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

Asia Co-Researchers



AURONA SARKER

I'm a 23-year old graduate from Bangladesh, with an academic background in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. My experience of belonging to a religious minority group has made me passionate about connecting individuals with the right resources and opportunities regardless of their backgrounds. I'm also a strong advocate for mental health and I'm currently involved with an organisation that provides mental health and wellbeing services to people of all ages



TING ZHANG

I am a development consultant, researcher, and facilitator originally from China. A graduate of global affairs from the U.S. and active in the field of youth-led social impact initiatives, I aim to strengthen the development of China's social sector and make visible China's impact initiatives to the world.

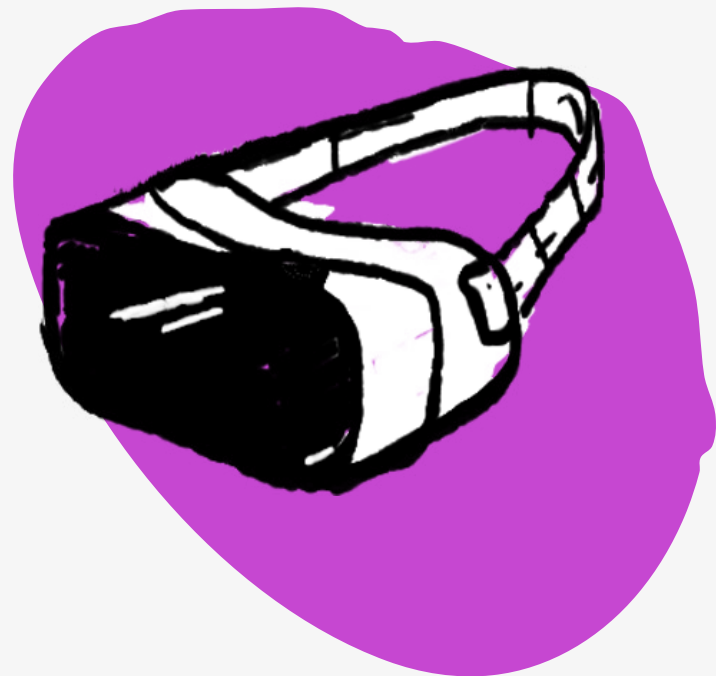
Introduction

Coming respectively from Bangladesh and China, the two of us have been experiencing the COVID-19 crisis at different stages. As we collaborated for this research, daily life had resumed in China and the country was emerging from the crisis. Meanwhile, Bangladesh was still nearing the peak of the outbreak. For this reason, we were interested in the questions:

**How are young people organising to create new initiatives to respond to the pandemic?
How do these initiatives evolve in different stages of the pandemic?**

We each researched these questions in the context of our own country.

We interviewed 8 representatives of youth-led organisations and groups, monitored 25 groups on social media and observed 3 events. Here we each profile three case studies of youth-led civil society responses to the Covid-19 crisis in China and Bangladesh.



What We Learned About Our Research Question:

How are young people organising to create new initiatives to respond to the pandemic? How do these initiatives evolve in different stages of the pandemic?



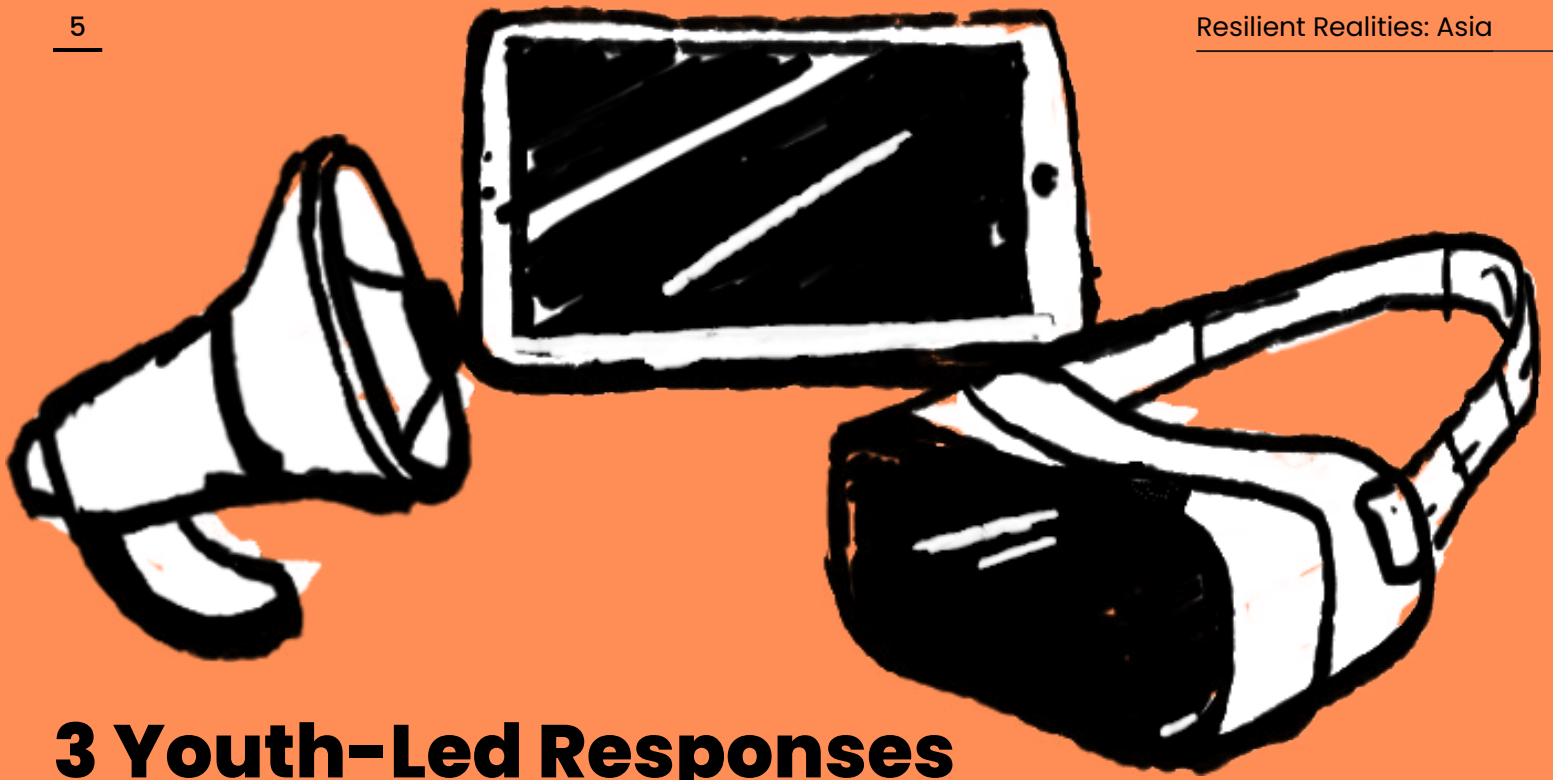
We should keep deepening the relationships and collaboration across sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth-led civil society has improved collaboration across sectors – for example, public and private corporations stepped up to donate supplies and provided free consultations to youth initiatives. Through their work and engaging approaches, young people have been able to build relationships with communities, organisations, governments and private companies. These relationships can therefore act as foundations for further collaboration during restoration of societies and economies at a post-pandemic stage.



We should recognise, support and celebrate youth projects that are finding ways to create impact through social entrepreneurship models. Young people realised the importance of building solidarity with one another and supporting collective initiatives in instances of fear and uncertainty. Yet, as the momentum of the pandemic dies down, donations and funding for relief work might also decrease, posing a risk to the continuity of many youth initiatives. In our view, the initiatives that have more possibility of sustaining their work are those which link strong visions of social change while recognising unemployment and employment precarity as issues that impact the livelihoods of young people. It is important to recognise and learn from those initiatives that find self-sustainable models.



Governments and other institutions should leverage the experience which youth civil society actors drew from their community leadership and crisis management at grassroots level. By working with vulnerable communities, youth have been able to form relationships of mutual respect and trust, and developed deeper knowledge of community needs and experiences. We are not yet clear how youth-led initiatives will transform once the crisis is over, yet this knowledge should be consulted and included in the architecture of societies.



3 Youth-Led Responses in China

By Ting Zhang

COVID-19 Timeline in China:



Below are 3 youth-led initiatives that tackled COVID-19 induced problems or creatively documented its progression:



"Stand by Her" Campaign Poster. Photo from @梁钰(liáng yù) Stacey's Weibo

On February 6th, 24-year-old Liang Yu posed this question on Weibo, a micro-blogging platform in China: "do female front-line medical workers have enough menstrual hygiene supplies?" under the hashtag topic "#Standbyher (#姐妹战疫安心行动)." Her blog has so far been read 500 million times and discussed 525,000 times on the platform. (Data as of July 20th 2020).

1. "Stand By Her", a Gender-Based Crisis Relief Response

According to data from the Shanghai Women's Federation, more than half of the 32,000 medical workers and about 90% of the nurses sent to frontline hospitals in the Hubei province to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak were female.

Public dissatisfaction arose when it was found that mainstream reporting failed to give due visibility to the female frontline workers, with male representation dominating the imagery of the relief efforts. Furthermore, feminine menstrual products failed to make it onto the list of essential goods, alongside items such as masks, gloves, and protective suits, making it difficult for such feminine hygiene products to reach hospitals during the city lockdown. Liang also discovered that female patients in hospitals were affected by the lack of feminine hygiene supplies.

Prompted to act, Liang initiated the campaign "Stand by Her" by partnering with a local charity foundation and mobilising a group of 91 volunteers.

In just over three weeks, the "Stand by Her" Campaign had delivered 320,000 sanitary pads and 301,023 pairs of disposable underwear to 123 hospitals and medical teams, reaching over 57,000 people.

Other than filling the gap of need for menstrual supplies on medical frontlines, the campaign also succeeded in advocating for the rejection of menstrual shaming and shedding more light onto the contributions of female medical professionals in the epidemic by utilizing the hashtag #MakeFemaleWorkersSeen.

"Because of the large amount of attention that our campaign has received, the public can no longer ignore the contributions of women in the epidemic and the workplace," Liang says.

In terms of the campaign's lifeline, Liang explained, "even though our team was created to address specific needs during the pandemic, I don't want the project to end as the pandemic dies down". She hopes that the group can carry out other projects in the future. In the meantime, she is currently working on setting up a database to document the stories of sexual harassment victims to fill in the gap of research databases both within China and globally.

扫描二维码 让您积灰的设备为孩子带去教育的亮光

光援计划

第一期捐助：凉山彝族自治州昭觉县永乐乡中心校



Project Guangyuan's call for donations of electronic devices to bridge the digital divide. Photo from Project Guangyuan's (光源行动) public Wechat account

2. Project Guangyuan, Bridging The Digital Educational Divide in Rural Areas

According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), an agency under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, rural areas in China had an internet penetration rate of 46.2 per cent, compared with 76.5 per cent in the urban areas¹. Although the digital divide has narrowed between rural and urban areas in recent years, there is still a long way to go. Such divides were further exposed by

coronavirus induced tragedies such as the news of a young Dalit girl in India who killed herself over a lack of access to online education, or a hauntingly similar story of another young girl in rural China who attempted suicide over the same cause but was luckily rescued.

Prompted by a drive to eliminate such tragedies, four youths in China came together and launched Project Guangyuan on March 9th, 2020. The name Guangyuan (光源) roughly translates to "Light Aid" in English. The team chose the name because they hope to bring the light of education to students in need by providing them with electronic devices to assist their learning.

1 You can read more about the digital divide in China here: <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3084468/digital-divide-narrows-between-chinese-youth-urban-and-rural-areas>

The team launched the call of action on a brand new Wechat public account at the time, simultaneously calling for second-hand electronic device donations, volunteers, and schools with the needs for such learning tools. By sharing the call in their networks and encouraging others to share, they amassed more than 100 volunteer applicants on the first day alone, with the number reaching 400 applicants within a few days.

“At the height of the outbreak, everyone was very enthusiastic to volunteer,” said Project Guangyuan Co-founder, Chen Kaijun. The volunteers, later stabilizing to around 70–80 members, were allocated to four groups responsible for the functions of managing donations, needs, external communications, and research.

“If it were not for the pandemic, we might not have been able to launch our project so quickly. Before, I didn’t think that I had so much power and determination to push this project forward, but the pandemic created an opportunity in which this (electronic devices) became a necessity.”

Chen believes the need still exists in China despite the end of the mandatory distance learning period. Her group hopes to move to provide access to e-learning resources for students in the future so that the donated devices can continue to benefit students as a channel of education.

3. Being Artspace: Documenting the Pandemic Through VR

Being Artspace, a video productions organisation in Hangzhou, hopes to capture and preserve the living memories of this special period in time, and document the progression of the pandemic from beginning to end, by recording changes in the city of Hangzhou as it emerges from “winter” to “spring,” in a VR documentation project called “Panorama Fight Against the Pandemic” (全景疫战).

The project will utilize VR panorama technology to record the timeline of events under COVID-19, from the state of mass quarantine to the resumption of work, from scenes of emptiness to crowdedness in the city, and the initial tough battle against the pandemic to the eventual victory.

“It’s been a while since the West Lake of Hangzhou, a popular tourist destination, has seen such tranquillity, with a few people around and everyone wearing masks,” Su Jiamin, Founder of Being ArtSpace, reflected on the team’s initial filming experience:

“there’s no special planning or targeted shooting subjects, the team simply hopes to organically capture the incremental daily changes on the life, work, relationships, and mentalities of those living under COVID-19.”

The pandemic inflicted heavy losses on quarterly earnings for Su’s organisation, as travel restrictions impacted his team’s ability to carry out its core functions.

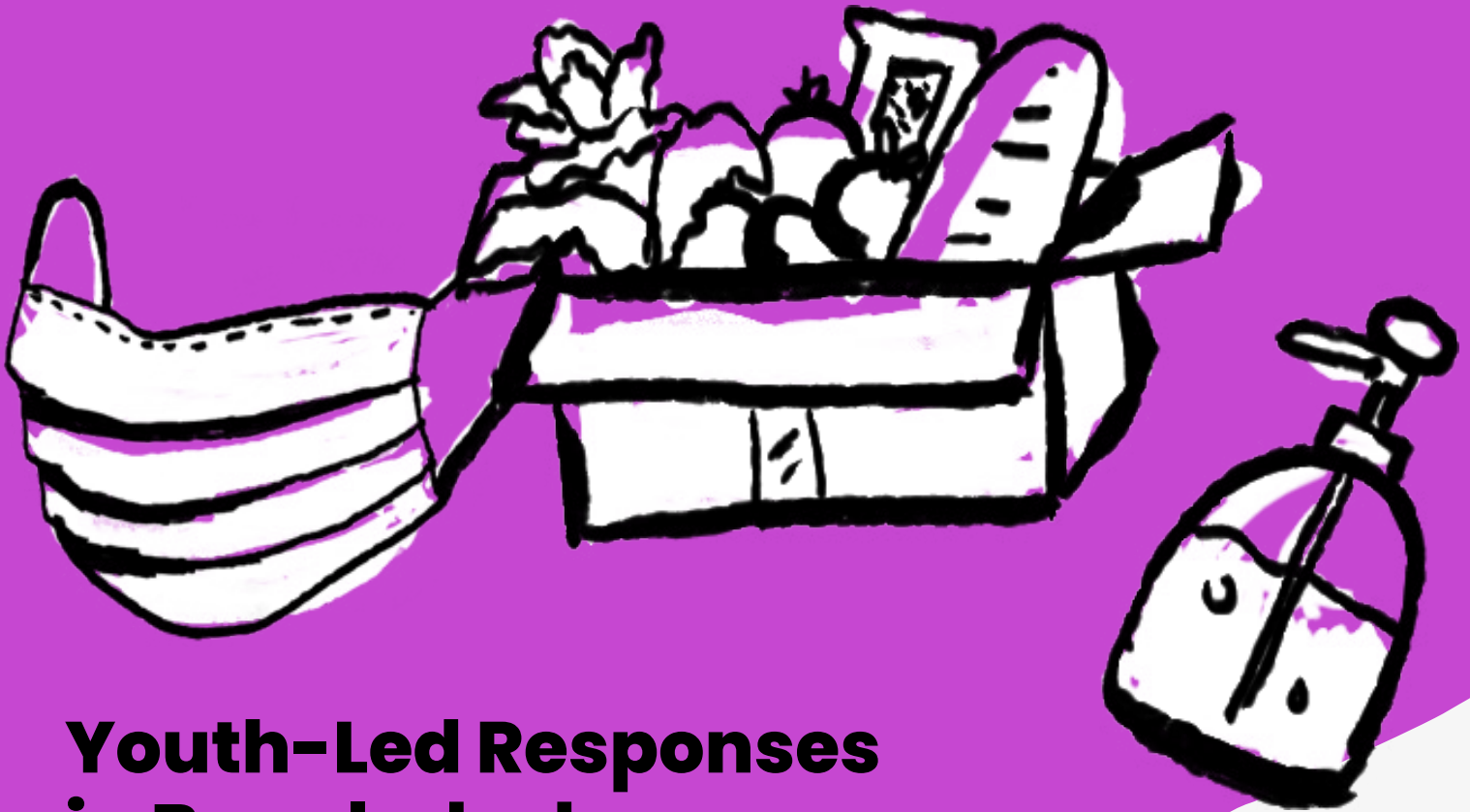
During this period, however, Being Artspace chose to do their part in the fight against COVID-19. They engaged in several pro-bono film projects to help public welfare organisations engaged in pandemic relief efforts to spread their message. Su believes the organisation's core mission of creating social value and the motto of "record stories, restore goodness" was fully realised in the course of this pandemic. He emphasized that Being ArtSpace is not just a commercial enterprise, but rather, a social enterprise. The pandemic,

in his opinion, provided an opportunity for his team to connect and work together with relevant stakeholders to make stories of social impact and compassion more visible to the general public.

Regarding advice for other youth organisations, Su stated, "in this special period, we should pay more attention to the feelings and experiences of individuals, open their hearts, and form new channels of communication to connect with one another."



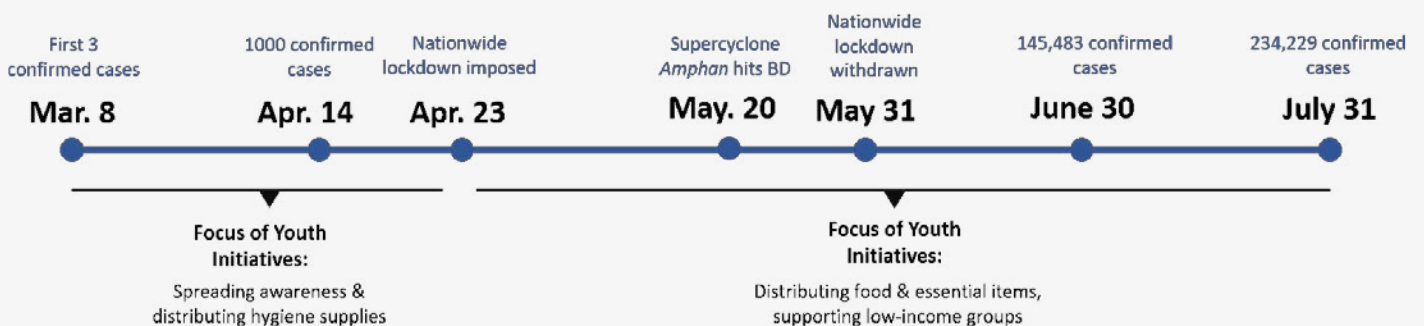
Being Artspace employee shooting at the comparatively deserted West Lake in Hangzhou. Photo from the Hangzhou Being Artspace public Wechat account



Youth-Led Responses in Bangladesh

By Aurna Sarker

COVID-19 Timeline in Bangladesh:



With creative minds and resilient spirit, youth in Bangladesh have founded innovative ways to tackle the challenges posed by COVID-19. Here are a few examples of such initiatives:



Image Courtesy: The Business Standard

1. Hijras distribute masks to fight discrimination

In the streets of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, you would see them quite often. In their colorful clothes and jewelry, roaming in a group of three or four, they are hard not to notice. You would see them going from shop to shop and asking for money from people. You would also see the expressions people make when they're in sight- disgusted, angry, sometimes scared. In local language, they're called "Hijra". In English, they're known as transgender people.

A community that has been long shunned by society, Hijras lead a life of struggle and exclusion. Even when they have the qualification, it's extremely rare for them to be hired in any regular job. Their livelihoods are mostly dependent on "tola" (extorting money from shops), "dholki" (singing, dancing in programs), begging or sex work. Many of them do not live with their own families due to social stigma. They live with their own community groups, usually under the supervision of a senior Hijra leader who needs to be paid a portion of their daily income. Physical, verbal and sexual abuse are part of their everyday experiences.

When the pandemic hit, Hijras lost every means of their income. With nationwide shutdowns, collecting money from shops was no longer an option. There are no clients for sex work. They're bullied when they queue up for relief offered by government or charity organisations. Living in groups makes them more prone to the risk of coronavirus, so now people see them as potential carriers of the virus and are even more hostile to them than usual. Starving, humiliated, ostracized- the Hijra community has been one of the hardest hit communities in this pandemic.

In this situation, a couple of youth-led organisations have come forward to support the Hijra community. The organisation Alokito Shishu, with its mission to help vulnerable and marginalized communities, have reached out to around 500 transgender people in the area of Dhaka, Savar and Khulna and distributed essential food items. "Their condition was so bad," says Mithun Das Kabbo, founder and CEO of Alokito Shishu.

"They were barely eating one meal a day. We tried our best to provide them what they need, but it was like a drop in the ocean."

12 Vaja, another youth-run organisation that provides a platform for gender non-conforming individuals, has also been working round the clock to make sure that Hijras have a source of food and other necessities. In addition to relief work, 12 Vaja has partnered with a transgender entrepreneur named Joyeeta Poly. With money collected from the donation campaign, 12 Vaja bought 200 masks that were sewn by Poly's boutique employees (who are also trans people) and had them distributed among local low-income people. Due to stigma against Hijras, people were skeptical when the employees came to their locality. But when people saw the masks in their hands, they relaxed and happily accepted those from their hands. "An attempt to change the perception towards Hijras," is how 12 Vaja puts it.



2. Employing people to distribute books in quarantine

Sazzad Mia is a bookseller from Dhaka. His tiny bookstore sits in the Nilkhet book market, a popular destination for book lovers with lighter wallets and good bargaining skills. He used to be always very busy – either arguing with skeptical customers about price or helping the curious ones find a good book from new arrivals – sometimes skillfully doing both at the same time.

But nowadays it's a quiet scene. Sazzad Mia silently sits in his store from morning till night, waiting for customers. Hardly anyone comes by. He had to close his store for over two months during the lockdown period, and even when the lockdown ended, the book market remained deserted. With zero sales and mounting rents, he knows he'll probably have to permanently shut down his 18-year-old business very soon. What he doesn't know is for how many more days he'll be able to afford food for his family.

The same uncertainty looms over millions of people across Bangladesh. The average household income reduced to 76% of what it was before over 2 months during the pandemic, while

51% of households saw their income reduced to almost zero. The impact has been hardest for people involved in the informal labour sector, which accounts for almost 80–90% of the jobs in Bangladesh. This group consists of day laborers, bhangari (plastic) workers, restaurant workers, maids, transport workers, agriculture laborers, construction and factory workers, shop assistants and rickshaw pullers.

Witnessing the plight of booksellers like Sazzad Mia, two students of Dhaka University came forward with a creative solution. Tahmid Hasan and Rafiul Chowdhury, co-founders of a non-profit organisation called “Pashe Achi,” started an initiative to help bookstore owners of the Nilkhet area sell their books online.

Using Facebook as the platform, the project started in March by selling books from two booksellers. Now with a digital catalogue, fixed rate of 200 BDT (\$2) per book and relentless effort from volunteers, the project is working with over 50 bookstores from Nilkhet and has received overwhelming responses from readers all over the country. Other than its own volunteer team, the project also employs jobless laborers for packaging and out-of-work ridesharing for delivering books.





"We put our best efforts to make sure that no one is left behind to suffer- not even the most marginalized communities. We distributed food aid among socially neglected groups such as sex workers, sweepers, bede (a nomadic ethnic group), transgenders, differently abled people, as well as people living in the remotest areas where availability of relief was scanty compared to the needs."

3. Gift for Good

Founded in 2019, Gift for Good began as a project through which goods were collected from households, refurbished, and redistributed among underprivileged children. "Gifts bring happiness to both the ones giving and receiving" explains with a smile Mithun Das Kabbo, the project's founder: "And that is the sentiment we wanted to emulate."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Gift For Good evolved into an emergency response initiative, providing relief goods to vulnerable and marginalized communities. At the first stage of the pandemic, the initiative focused on distributing masks and hand sanitizers and raising community awareness on hygiene practices. But soon it became evident that the pandemic is not just a health disaster: it is also an economic disaster, bringing about widespread food insecurity. For the large number of people who depend on daily wages, death caused by hunger was much more likely than by the virus itself.

Realizing how the pandemic has translated into empty plates for millions, Gift For Good shifted its focus to distributing food items. With funds collected through online donation campaigns and collaboration with other organisations, Gift For Good started its relief efforts for the most impacted communities, especially socially and culturally marginalized ones.

In the last four months, Gift For Goods' volunteers have reached 6772 families with their life-saving aid packages.

We are left with a few big questions:

1. How can youth organisations transition from their initial responses to COVID-19 to sustained movements that may address inequalities in their respective societies?
2. How do we leverage the experience that young people drew from their community leadership and crisis management at grassroots level?
3. How can youth engage at a policy level and participate in the national recovery/rebuilding process?



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The background features a vibrant purple field with three large, overlapping organic shapes: a yellow shape at the top, a large orange shape in the center, and a blue shape at the bottom. The text is centered within the orange shape.

RESILIENT REALITIES