

RESILIENT REALITIES

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



**Europe Spotlights:
What Happened to
Young People's
Personal and Professional
Development During
the Pandemic?**

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

Europe Co-Researchers



LAURYN MWALE

I am a 21 year old Zambian Mathematics student at the University of Edinburgh. My interests include youth leadership, education, equitable development and intersectional feminism. I am currently developing a project to close the gender gap for black women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.



MIRRE BEEK

I'm a 28 year old graduate in Migration and Multiculturalism studies who loves the Arabic language and culture. I used to work on children's rights, diversity, and polarisation issues. Now, I'm passionately working as a Youth Advisor for the successful integration of refugees in Amsterdam.

Introduction



For this research, we decided to zoom in on the personal and professional development of young people during the COVID-19 crisis. Our questions explored issues including personal dreams and aspirations, study choice and professional ambitions.

Many youth organisations work with and for other (sometimes vulnerable) youth, offering extra-curricular activities, cultural exchange projects at home and abroad, labour market advice, schooling or psychosocial support, amongst others. We wanted to better understand how these youth organisations were working during the COVID-19 crisis. We asked the question:

What new ways did youth-led organisations find to support the development of young people?

To answer this question, we interviewed 14 youth leaders and organisations around Europe and surveyed 42 young people. We engaged youth workers and refugees in conversations and creative activities in Amsterdam and spoke to AIESEC representatives from various countries to understand how it pivoted to stay relevant during the pandemic.

What We Learned About Our Research Question:

What new ways did youth-led organisations find to support the development of young people?



Mental health is a critical issue for young people during the COVID-19 crisis, and digital supporting activities are not (always) the solution. The everyday life of young people came to an abrupt end with the announcement of lockdown restrictions. This is especially so for disadvantaged and vulnerable youth such as refugees and migrant youths, members of the LGBTQ+ community and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Youth organisations stepped in to provide mental wellbeing support, coaching and mentoring to young people facing challenges. This was delivered mostly through online means, which sadly are linked to digital-divide exclusion issues and leave the most vulnerable behind. More funding and support is needed to ensure that youth organisations can continue their important work and fill gaps which more traditional organisations cannot reach. Consideration should be given to building safety policies that allow in-person sessions when needed.



Young people are carrying the economic burden. Young people are graduating in the midst of a hiring freeze and unstable work environment. For young people in higher education, quality of and access to learning has been impacted during the pandemic due to universities and schools shutting down or introducing new COVID-19 restrictions. The economic situation is unprecedented and many young people risk finding themselves in debt and without an income. Basic economic support, employability schemes and debt waivers are among some policies that should be considered to ease the burden young people are carrying.

"In Europe, 41% of the young people work in sectors that are at risk during the crisis – such as the food and beverage industry. We are under economic pressure: rising student loans, lacking financial study support, difficult housing market and flexible, vulnerable jobs. This is a poisonous cocktail greatly intensified by the [COVID-19] crisis. Students are told: if you cannot work, borrow extra money. Policy measures are often detrimental for young people."

Board member of the National Youth Council in The Netherlands



Youth organisations should be supported with their advocacy work. Many youth organisations have been shifting their work to focus on humanitarian assistance, the provision of food and hygiene supplies, access to education and enhanced support for vulnerable youth and other disadvantaged populations. This meant that most youth organisations didn't manage to carry out influencing and advocacy work during the COVID-19 crisis; at the very moment when policies and schemes in support of young people are most needed. Young people and youth organisations can be supported by enabling their advocacy work in favour of youth participation in decision making and crafting solutions that take into account the needs of young people.

“I Feel Like I Lost Time, Time That I Need”

By Mirre Beek



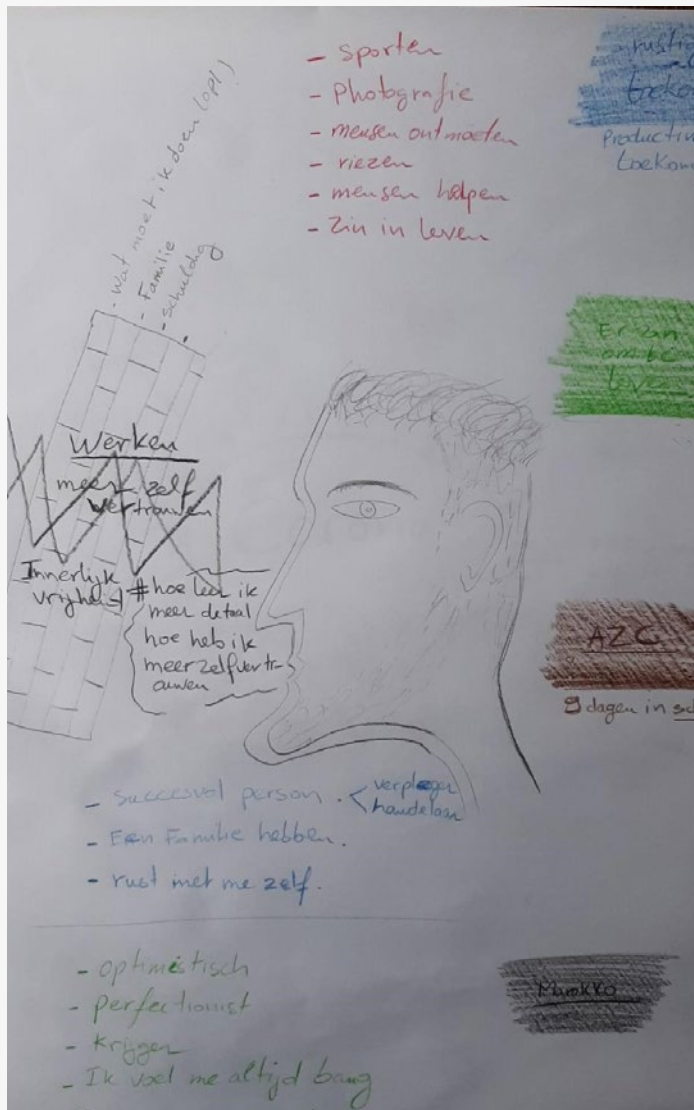
Me and Hamza are sitting at the table. Me, born and raised in Amsterdam and working as a Youth advisor for Refugees. He, once a she, a refugee from Morocco in the midst of his integration in The Netherlands. Caught up in this COVID-19 crisis, I want to take a step back and try to understand what this crisis means for someone that went – and still goes – through intense hardship.

In my role as a Youth Advisor for Refugees, I coach and advise 50 refugees between 18 and 30 years old on a daily basis. When the COVID-19 crisis hit, I first went into a pure reactive state. I sent the refugees I am supporting information about the pandemic in different languages, asked about their wellbeing, managed their unemployment, started job hunting activities, and checked up on their financial situation. I felt frustrated

about jobs, education, and language courses that were either on hold or only being offered online. As daily life and psychosocial issues continued, such as tax letters, money problems, legality questions, pregnancies, (mental) health problems, and family tensions, this period turned into a test of (digital) self-reliance for many refugees.

After my reactive state, questions of personal and professional development came back into the picture. I discovered that many refugees were very receptive to support and future-planning activities during the pandemic. However, others panicked and disconnected themselves from accessing these services. The question arises: what did the pandemic mean for the development of the refugee youth I am coaching and supporting?

“What for me is a dream, is really normal for someone else”, says Hamza. He is 30 years old and originally from the North of Morocco. When he was younger, he didn’t really understand what he was: a girl or boy, gay or lesbian? Hamza is transgender, which is neither socially or culturally well accepted in his birth country. In 2018, he decided to flee to the Netherlands, a country known for its protection towards people who fear persecution for their sexual orientation. I know Hamza, on the one hand, as an ambitious guy with unbelievable Dutch skills after only two years. On the other hand, I know him as a guy full of worries about the future. His dream is to become successful, maybe as a nurse, or a businessman, and have a family. As I know from my role as Youth Advisor, these



ambitions can give pressure, as Hamza still has a long way ahead to become a fully-paid nurse in the Dutch health care system. Other young refugees experience the pressure to decide upon the direction of their future in The Netherlands, and their development entails a Dutch language exam, doing voluntary work or accepting psychological help. I’m wondering what meaning these young refugees give to the COVID-19 crisis. As I already know, some of the refugees I coach are scared while others are relaxed about all the measures. Furthermore, some refugees get isolated sitting alone at home while others organise house parties during the lockdown.

Hamza and I start the drawing exercise that I prepared for our chat. I ask Hamza to draw his face – which he has never done before – and he starts drawing the side of his face. A first outline, and then a second outline. “Until now, I have two people in my body and head”, he says. The fact that he was finally able to draw a beard and moustache touched my heart. When I look at Hamza, I see a man. But his physical transition is still fairly new. “How would you describe yourself?”, I ask. “As a brave man who has many challenges. Every day I have struggles within myself, struggles with the future. I find it really hard to start a new life. I’m trying my best. Because I’m really optimistic. I have no other choice. I have to go on”, Hamza explains. Next, Hamza draws a wall, symbolizing all the barriers for his future: questions on what to do, what to study, where to work, how to learn the language, how to integrate in a new country, and the problems with his family. “How are you going to break this wall?”, I ask. “To break this wall of struggles, I need to study, work, create my own family, find peace with my transgender identity, and gain self-confidence”, he says.

We take another piece of paper and Hamza starts drawing his lifeline. We mark the COVID-19 crisis starting from March 2020. Next, Hamza draws the development of his family life, social relationships, hobbies and leisure, psychological and physical health, and education and work career. A major downfall appears in his life after the death of his father. Also, Hamza's flight to the Netherlands in October 2018 marked a low point for him, starting with the nine days he spent at the airport asylum centre. Besides his mental health issues, Hamza needed to face the fact that he went from being a successful businesswoman in Morocco back to square one as a resident of The Netherlands, feeling safer yet insecure. It was after his breast surgery in October 2019 that Hamza started to positively develop his mental state, learning the Dutch language, and making friends. At the same time, major problems with his family arose as his gender transition started to unfold.

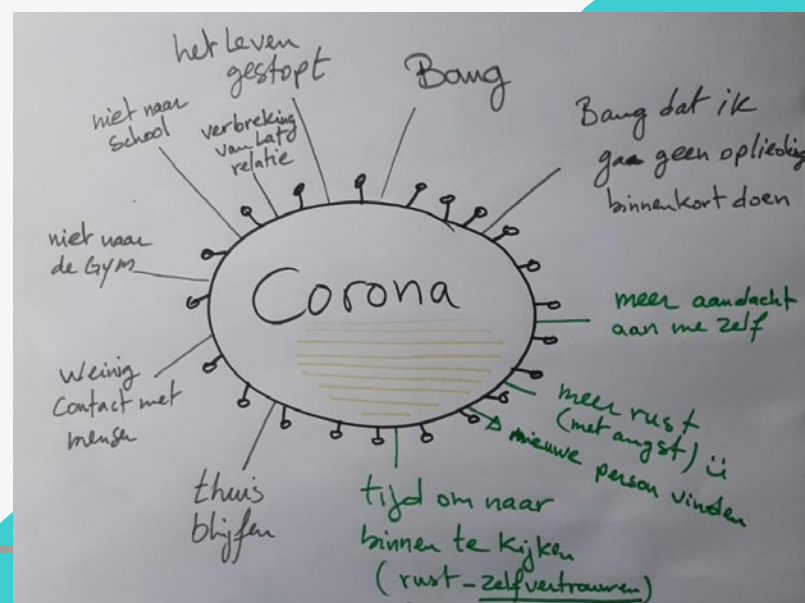
Now, Hamza and I jump to March 2020 marking the starting point of the lockdown in The Netherlands. What happened? Hamza looks at the lines and concludes that they are all going down. The coronavirus had a big influence on his life, more than Hamza expected:

"I just came to The Netherlands, and my life was a bit quiet. Much was happening, but at a very slow pace. When corona came, I couldn't go to my language school or the gym. I didn't have much contact with other people. I was afraid, afraid of the situation, afraid to get sick, afraid that I couldn't start studying or working soon".

As everything turned into online classes, Hamza couldn't develop his language skills as much as before. Being in the midst of – literally – his transition as a man and resident of Amsterdam,

the cancelation of one integration exam had a big impact, and this holds for many of the refugees I coach. Hamza felt like life stopped for a bit. At the same time, it was also a time to look inward for him. A time to reflect on his life and give himself attention. As Hamza tells me, "I found some rest and self-confidence"; something he needs to break down his wall of barriers. Right then, I decided to make this a regular topic in my conversations with refugees: what was on your mind during the COVID-19 crisis, could you develop yourself, and what did you take out from this period?

"What can be learned from all of this, Hamza?", I ask lastly. "It's time to look at the talents and energy of our young people to recover our economy. We should make it easier for people to develop themselves. During the pandemic, I wanted to work. It was so important, and I have the experience as a nurse. But I couldn't do it". This comment is not unknown to me, as many Moroccans arrived in The Netherlands with experience in medicine and health care. But there are still barriers that need to be taken away. "Is there anything you'd like to add, Hamza?". I close my laptop and pore in some more tea. "There are many things that can break me, but I'm still a warrior", he says.



Young Refugees in Europe



Since the official start of the refugee crisis in 2015, millions of refugees from mainly Syria and Afghanistan have requested asylum in Europe¹. Many of these refugees are young, between 18 and 34 years old. Some refugees are still stuck in camps in Greece, others made it across borders and are starting their lives in a new country and society. Refugees in Europe have many challenges to deal with upon arrival and during their integration process.

In The Netherlands, these challenges include learning the host society language, adjusting to the new culture, getting to know the Dutch system in finance, healthcare, and tax payments, legal procedures, obtaining a job or education, and deciding on their future goals. Youth civil society has been making great efforts to support young refugees around Europe, ranging from language coaching to sports and skill development activities.

As in the story of Hamza, due to the COVID-19 crisis, many of these activities were put on hold. Those refugees who face struggles

with online education, unemployment, and delays in psychological treatment, feel like the COVID-19 period is a lost time for their development. Michal Hidas, young humanitarian Fashion Designer, explains about her work and the experience of refugees living in camps in Greece: “Refugees were already traumatized. When the corona crisis hit it only worsened the situation. Refugees are overwhelmed at a more extreme level.” Michal Hidas also highlights the challenge of digital contact with vulnerable communities during a pandemic:

“Organisations came up with the idea to send videos to refugee women on how to use WhatsApp. Teaching refugee women computer skills is very essential. However, what the refugees really needed in my opinion, was a sense of community. To give some kind of meaning in a playful way. To think about something else for a moment. To get hope and relief to their mind. To have the time and place to express themselves.”

¹ For statistics on the number of asylum applicants in Europe consult Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

These challenges of development and digital activities are not only experienced by youth organisations working with refugees, but also vulnerable groups such as homeless young people. As a youth-led organisation for homeless youth in Amsterdam told me: “Boredom increased the chance of addiction. Other youngsters compensated with other extreme behaviors, such as 48 hours of gaming in a row. Most of the young people’s development has come to a complete stop.” Although homeless youth suffered from loneliness and isolation, keeping in contact with them via digital tools turned out to be a challenge.

“Youth social workers tried to do meetings via Zoom or Houseparty. This is far too distant for many young people – or they don’t have internet.”

Stateless or undocumented youth who don’t have a permit to stay in Europe are affected by the COVID-19 crisis in a different way. I talked with young leader James Andersson, CEO of SOULidarity, about their work for these young refugees in the worst situation in Sweden: without food and without shelter. SOULidarity helps youth that cannot get help anywhere else and established a cooperation between

humanitarian organisations like Doctors without Borders, War Child, and the Red Cross.

As Andersson describes, a lot of young refugees didn’t react like we reacted. They have to survive everyday and search for money, food and shelter. Most of them weren’t scared as they’re used to life in worry. With the COVID-19 crisis, a positive opportunity emerged as the Swedish government didn’t want to have youth walk around freely on the streets of Stockholm because of health risk reasons. Thus, they offered financial aid for SOULidarity to house these young people and place them in a hotel for a period of six months. Because of that, young people who are otherwise homeless got a lot of rest, as they could sleep for weeks in the same bed knowing they wouldn’t be kicked out in the morning.

During the COVID-19 crisis, while other youth civil society organisations put a full stop on their face-to-face work, SOULidarity supported these youth with their education, and provided language lessons, sports activities, and mental health care. As James Andersson says: “In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis got us to do what should have been done before. In a way it’s a blessing”.





Adapting Youth Leadership in the Face of Uncertainty

By Lauryn Mwale

I am an AIESECer². My friends have called it obsessive and my parents worry about how much time I give it. Joining AIESEC is easily one of the best choices I made at university. When I was selected as one of the global co-researchers for this project, I immediately thought of my AIESEC family. We aim to develop leaders who are empowered to solve the world's problems and make positive change. We do that by facilitating international internships and volunteer projects. I myself spent last summer in Belgrade, Serbia volunteering on an AIESEC project. It was incredible.

No one will have that experience this year. No young person will travel to a country they've never seen before and make a positive impact. What does AIESEC need to do to continue to

impact youth and support youth leadership in a world where countries have locked down and movement is restricted or discouraged?

So, I asked people that very question. I contacted national heads of AIESEC in various European countries and had wonderful conversations with them. We laughed and shared stories of our awkward transition to online university, AIESEC traditions and how we love and hate working from home. I asked them what they did to keep moving when their countries and cities shut down. Someone told me that they were in Turkey for an AIESEC conference when they were asked to leave mere hours after arriving. The uncertainty that we speak of and hear about in the news is real. An organisation which hinges on travel and

2 AIESEC is a global platform for young people to explore and develop their leadership potential. It is a non-political, independent, not-for-profit organisation run by students and recent graduates of institutions of higher education.

international connectedness is now contending with a global pandemic of unknown impact. All of them expressed their confusion and stress. What is the right choice to make? What are our next steps? How do we support and engage young people?

At this point, I oscillate between Zoom fatigue and a massive appreciation of how much socialising can happen as I sit in my room on my laptop. The AIESEC volunteers I interviewed talked about virtual offices and conferences. The energy of an AIESEC conference is life-affirming. There, you meet perfect strangers and at the end of the night, you have shared your life stories, insecurities and dreams. It is the best burnout cure that exists and I was skeptical of how that energy could be uploaded to a digital experience. But, the reality is that many people are lonely. The mental health impacts of COVID-19 weigh on each of us. As a young person who until recently spent my time on crowded university campuses, parks and social spaces, the seemingly sudden shift to by-and-large being by myself has been jarring.

I'm deriving energy from online interactions and the effort and care that goes into adapting in-person interactions to online ones, when done well, can create powerful experiences. They have created sessions on employability skills like CV writing, preparing case studies and succeeding at an online interview, and taken part in moments of reflection to touch base with our mental and emotional state, appreciate the historical moment we're living through and take a much needed pause. Admittedly, not all traditions can be transferred online, but the symbolic act of being together made up for it.

Managing people is difficult. Anyone who has ever led a team knows that truth. Managing volunteers during a global pandemic is a whole other challenge. The leaders I spoke to have learnt a lot about how to manage efficiently and with empathy. Being an organisation full of young people, we assume that everyone "gets it"; appreciates the way you are experiencing something because you share similar perspectives. That's a massive, often false, assumption to make. The individual nature of each person's experience is valid and can often be surprising. The people I spoke to respect the mental wellbeing impact of what we're all living through and they also had to re-set their assumptions about people's ability to function through trauma, learn how to be better allies and friends and build up their own empathy toolkit.

A theme that kept emerging was maintaining the essence of the organisation; attaining peace and fulfilment of humankind's potential by activating leadership within young people. We drive exchange; that's what we do. But, there are other ways of creating leaders. By providing emotional support, running upskilling sessions, empowering people with virtual experiences and challenges and admitting that you don't have all of the answers and would love their input as we all navigate through hardship in these times. Another recurring theme was how appreciative everyone was of this disruption because it forced them to be creative and adaptable leaders. On a micro level, that's what each of us is doing: adapting, getting creative, doing our best to take care of ourselves and our loved ones. We all get to be proud of that.

We Are Left With a Few Big Questions:

1. As the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the mental health and professional development of young people unfolds, what actions can young leaders take to alleviate that stress now?
2. What support do vulnerable youth need from youth organisations, governments and policymakers to fulfill their needs, in COVID times?
3. How can young people around the world become actively and systematically involved in COVID-19's crisis management and problem-solving processes?



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The background features a vibrant, abstract composition of overlapping organic shapes. A large cyan shape dominates the center, with a purple shape above it and a yellow shape below it. The remaining space is filled with a light green color. The text 'RESILIENT REALITIES' is centered within the cyan shape in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

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