

SETTING SPACES FOR YOUTH AND STUDENT-LED ADVOCACY

Analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on youth and student organising calls for urgent action towards inclusion of youth and students in advocacy spaces

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Foreword by Global Campaign for Education

Voices from the GCE's Network of Youth and Students Spur an Urgent Action Agenda

“Our principle has always been that you cannot talk about education in the absence of the beneficiary. The statement that is often used by young people ‘nothing for us without us’ resonates with the Global Campaign for Education’s goals.”

Grant Kasowanjete, GCE Global Co-ordinator

The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) is the largest civil society organisation movement promoting the human right to education. The Education Agenda 2030 (E2030)/SDG4 is at the heart of the GCE’s strategy to pressurise governments and the international community to fulfil their commitments to provide free, inclusive, quality public education and lifelong learning for all, particularly for children, youth, women, and those from excluded communities.

A fundamental goal of the GCE is to create brave spaces and platforms for youth and students. Spaces and platforms that include leading discussions, documenting perspectives, co-creating strategies, and developing shared agendas for education advocacy and activism. This is the main motivation behind the youth and students’ engagement work and initiatives championed by the GCE and the movement in recent years.

As GCE grows and strengthens its youth and student engagement, an imperative is the creation of spaces and platforms for youth and students to also build bridges of solidarity and capacity across the membership, especially in a ‘post-pandemic’ era.

At the 5th World Assembly in 2015, the full membership of the GCE formally acknowledged the need to include meaningful children and youth representation progressively and structurally in their constituencies. In turn, the need for staff or collaborators to facilitate engagement with those representatives in decision-making, planning and actions – aligned with their interests, needs, and age.

In November 2018, prior to the 6th World Assembly, the first Youth Caucus of Global Campaign for Education kick started an ambitious vision of mobilising global youth to ensure genuine and meaningful youth engagement at all levels of the movement. The vision has been embraced by the GCE as one of its goals.

The commitment and voices of young activists, students, and youth change-makers has been felt and heard throughout the movement during COVID-19, national crises, and social movements calling for economic and political reform. The leveraging of inter-generational solidarity and allyship is a great strength within the movement.

In March 2022, GCE hosted the second Global Youth and Students’ Caucus in Arusha, Tanzania. The Caucus was aimed at creating an enabling safe space for youth and students to meaningfully engage and ideate around student and youth led actions that may feed into the mechanisms for achieving impact across the movement. This was in response to the need for a youth and student led space to build solidarity, share insights and co-create our shared vision for actions across all regions of the movement.

Having heard the resounding call of youth and student activists across the movement to centre decolonisation, feminism, and inter-generational solidarity, the GCE is ready to take up the challenge. Doing so through the GCE’s engagements and strategy will contribute to ensuring that those voices, perspectives, leadership, and contributions maintain the momentum. This research Report and action agenda begins to do exactly that.

Executive Summary: Key Findings and Recommendations

There is overwhelming evidence on the complex and multiple impact of the pandemic on young people's education and employment. However, little is known about how COVID-19 has influenced youth and student organising and activism.

This Report – commissioned by the Global Campaign for Education – brings fresh insight on the realities and experiences of youth and student organisers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from a desk review and semi-structured interviews with youth and student organisers, stakeholders, and regional leaders from the GCE's youth and student networks in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East & North Africa, and South East Asia.

This research demonstrates that youth and student organisers are innovators and creative-thinkers, unafraid of breaking the mould and challenging the status quo – regardless of limited resources, new challenges, and punitive responses from state and non-state actors. During fast-paced and intersecting crises during the pandemic, young people take matters into their own hands and responsively adapt their work to the needs. When given the space to influence policy, young people demand accountability and improvements to policies and programmes that fail them. Accountability for and improving corruption, policing, and censorship towards significantly reconfiguring power relationships in activist spaces.

Unpacking the state of youth and student organising during the pandemic, this Report presents the following key findings.

- **Moving across platforms: shifts in tools and modes of organising**

While many youth and student activists turned to virtual and online spaces to protest, raise awareness, and conduct activities, several maintained face-to-face interactions and hybrid forms of organising. The shift to online resources extends their reach and maintains connections with existing networks despite restriction. However, the widening digital divide – lack

of or limited connectivity and/or devices, and technological skills constrained participation in organisational activities. The constraints led to individual forms of organising like volunteering in their local communities.

- **Recalibrating aims and advocacy priorities**

The complex impact facilitated by the pandemic influenced young people to shift their focus to respond to the realities at that time. The changes occurred in five ways:

1. they remained focussed on education while highlighting the COVID-19-related challenges
2. they used education as a 'tool' to respond to the pandemic – like awareness-raising, combatting fake news
3. they took accountability and monitored governments' response to the pandemic
4. they found new territories of activities and new target audiences
5. they connected issues like education and health.

- **Changing resourcing and funding landscapes**

Youth and student organisers needed to navigate a funding landscape that shifted its focus to financing immediate responses to the pandemic, tech-based interventions to education. Relatively well-resourced youth and student organisations repurposed savings from cancelled face to face events towards purchasing data, grant-giving, and research.

- **Increased demand for genuine and meaningful participation**

Young people are pushing back against tokenism and non-representative spaces for dialogue further restricted by criminalisation, policing and control. Young people, stakeholders, and regional leaders have highlighted the importance of meaningful youth engagement and representation in policy dialogues that impact their lives.

- **COVID-19 has had multidimensional impacts to youth and student organisers**

While common discourse has focussed on young people's contribution to pandemic responses, this Report highlights the complex physical, mental, and economic impact of the pandemic on young people's personal lives, livelihoods, and schooling. Student and youth organisers are also vulnerable to trauma and violence during their activism.

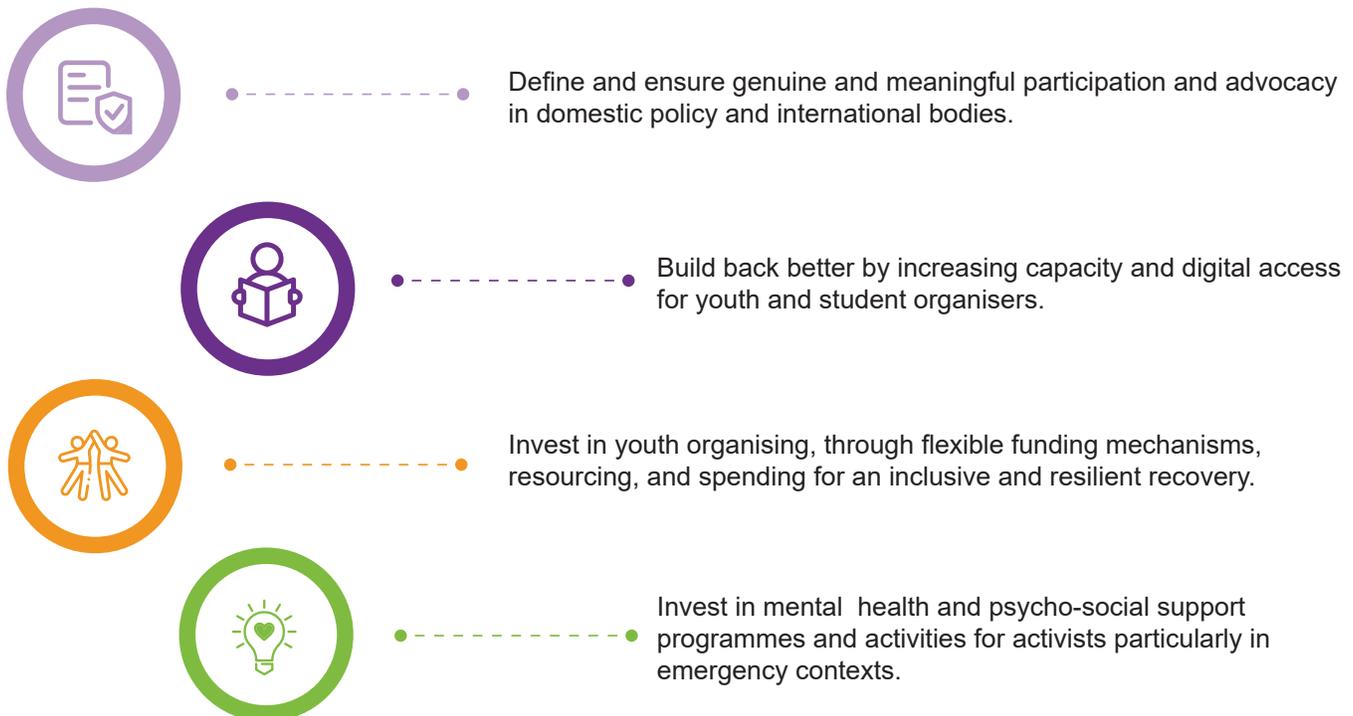
- **The pandemic has helped facilitate borderless solidarity**

The pandemic became a shared experience that facilitated solidarity and inspired youth and students – regionally and internationally, to collaboratively find solutions to local problems. The collaborations and linkages provided opportunities for learning and sharing best practices.

Based on these findings, this Report puts forward three principles to facilitate genuine and meaningful youth and student engagement in context of crises:

- 1 decolonising participatory practices
- 2 intersectional understanding of youth and students
- 3 situated and global solidarities

Within that context the GCE makes four key policy recommendations aimed at government, policy makers, international organisations, and civil society organisations.



1. Introduction

COVID-19 has impacted the lives of over 1.8 billion young people all over the world, ninety percent of whom live in so-called Global South countries¹ and are already facing intersecting vulnerabilities and marginalisation.

Global youth unemployment has risen² with young workers twice as likely to be living in poverty as compared to adults³.

Schools have closed for over 168 million children⁴ while a lack of connectivity and digital devices left at least one-third of students unable to access online learning⁵.

Inequalities have increased where the most marginalised are disproportionately suffering⁶.

With less than a decade to 2030, the pandemic has reversed progress on many of the sustainable development goals relating to health, education, and poverty alleviation⁷. Particularly impacting on SDG4 – education.

Despite strong assumptions of an apathetic youth cohort⁸, young people are at the helm of many social movements, leaders in their own communities, and main movers and shakers in their schools and universities. All of which during and beyond COVID-19⁹.

Against the backdrop of an adult-dominated world, these acts of activism challenge what has been described as ‘youth deficit’ thinking prevalent within discussions on youth political engagement¹⁰. Young people and students are often seen as apathetic, frustrated, and disenchanting¹¹. When they do organise, their work is devalued because they are thought of as inexperienced, troubled, and at-risk for being derailed from responsible adulthood^{12,13,14}.

During the pandemic, there were many negative stereotyping references like young people being averse to getting vaccinated or too stubborn to follow COVID-19 rules¹⁵. Still, their movements exist even

against the backdrop of shrinking civil society spaces that meet youth activism with unfair criminalisation, surveillance, and policing¹⁶. Young people’s and students’ social action persists even in moments of multiple crises exacerbated by the pandemic and the challenge of growing inequalities, the climate emergency, unemployment, and continuing conflicts and wars.

Across the GCE movement and network, young people are mobilising to advocate for education financing, equality in education while confronting the lived realities within their contexts to further their advocacy.

Youth-led contextual analyses of the experiences during GCE convenings in 2021 and 2022 revealed numerous themes and realities on the ground. Some of the emerging themes include the negative impacts of increasing privatisation of education, and the need to ensure free accessible education for all.

The context included the issue of disconnected global structures and strategies for youth participation. The digital divide exacerbated by COVID-19 and shrinking spaces for organising and lack of transformative power are among other themes that emerged from the contextual analysis by youth and students within the GCE constituency.

The lived realities highlighted the urgency of the situation, and clearly set out that youth and students should be at the centre of advocacy on issues that directly affect their education and future. They should be identifying the agenda and the solutions to the challenges they face daily.

Young people have persisted in their activism, despite or due to the multidimensional and pressing impact of COVID-19 on their lives and their communities. From young people in Chennai and Bangalore in India distributing food packets to urban daily wage workers¹⁷ to setting up online campaigns and apps to address challenges faced by young people with disabilities in Latin America¹⁸.

1. UNFPA, n.d.
 2. International Labor Organization 2020
 3. UN 2020
 4. UNICEF 2021.
 5. UNESCO n.d.
 6. Leach, et. al. 2021
 7. UN 2020
 8. Earl Maher and Elliott 2017 discuss the strong deficit discourse that frame young people’s political participation.
 9. ILO 2020
 10. Osler and Starkey 2003

11. See the exploration of della Porta 2019
 12. Millora and Karunungan 2021
 13. Power 2012
 14. Grasso and Bessant 2018
 15. Simpson and Altiok 2020.
 16. Millora and Karunungan 2021
 17. Citizen Matters: <https://citizenmatters.in/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/03/HELP-INDIA-PDF.pdf>
 18. UN Women 2021 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2021/12/persisting-in-the-pandemic-youth-activism-during-covid-19>

Much research on the links between young people and COVID-19 focus on how the pandemic impacts their socio-economic situations – like their employment and education. However, little is known about how the pandemic has impacted youth and student organising activities.

Organising, activism, and movements are an important feature of young people's lives. Likewise, youth and students have been instrumental in many social movements both within and outside educational spaces^{19,20}. From Canada and Chile to South Korea and South Africa, many youth and student movements have been challenging the seemingly unstoppable neoliberal policies in higher education. Policies that lead to increased fees and decreasing education quality^{21,22,23}.

Beyond education, students and young people have also played significant roles in responding to wider social issues like the protests against the Vietnam War, the Black Lives Matter movement, climate action, sexual health, and unemployment.

Aims and scope

The GCE commissioned this Report with the main aim of understanding how youth and student organising adapts and thrives in the midst of today's intersecting crises. In turn, what this means for stakeholders that support and advocate for youth engagement going forward.

As the world begins to grasp the gravity and breadth of the challenges and opportunities brought about by the pandemic, this Report takes a deep dive on how youth and student organising was tailored and flourished during the global pandemic. Specifically, this Report aims to:

1

Map, unpack, and document the realities and experiences of youth and student organisations, organisers, and activists during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2

Explore shifts and changes that occurred in the motivations and methods of youth and student organising within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

3

Document the lessons learnt, and insights gained by youth and students organisations to date.

4

Identify policy and practical recommendations for youth and student organisations, civil society organisations, international organisations, policy makers, and the various actors committed to engaging them towards a basis of further advocacy work in this area.

This Report comes at a time when there is an increased commitment from the GCE and international organisations and groups to harness young people's voices towards development²⁴.

During the 2015 and 2018 GCE World Assemblies, an overwhelming majority of GCE members recognised the power of young people in achieving change, especially when building on their own agency. This has materialised through the passing of a resolution²⁵ to include a youth constituency on the GCE Board. In addition, the GCE has been undertaking a series of initiatives since 2018 to provide young people with spaces where they can lead discussions and co-create agenda in aspects of education that concern them²⁶.

This call is echoed elsewhere. During the ECOSOC Youth Forum, High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet declared, "Establishing and improving participation channels while recognising the value of young peoples' voices is an urgent priority"²⁷. In his *Our Common Agenda* report, the UN Secretary General includes in his agenda for action the need to include meaningful, diverse, and effective youth engagement in a variety of pressing global concerns²⁸.

This Report provides policy recommendations on how organisations such as the GCE and other state and non-state actors create an enabling environment for youth and student social action to thrive – an important component as societies begin to imagine a post-pandemic future.

19. Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017

20. Millora and Karunungan 2021

21. The 'Maple Spring' in Canada saw the largest student protest in the history of the country (around 300,000) walk the streets of Quebec to protest against increasing tuition fee following austerity measures by the government. See Bégin-Caouette and Jones 2014

22. Privatisation alongside decreasing public expenditure have also driven students in South Korea in 2000 to protest in the streets against tuition fee increase, see Shin, Kim and Choi 2014

23. The Chilean 'Penguin' Revolution has challenged neoliberal policies in education in the country, see Chovanec and Benitez 2008

24. See for instance ASPBAE's (2021) initiative on Youth Led Participatory Action Research

25. See Policy Resolutions adopted by the 6th GCE World Youth Assembly: <https://campaignforeducation.org/images/downloads/f1/1081/2019-policy-motions-en.pdf>

26. GCE Caucus Report 2022

27. See statement by the High Commissioner here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2022/04/covid-19-recovery-youth-taking-action-sustainable-future>

28. See the Summary of 'Our Common Agenda' here: https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Summary_English.pdf

GCE Timeline of Youth and Students' Engagement



2015 World Assembly

At the 5th World Assembly in 2015, the full membership of the Global Campaign for Education came together and formally acknowledged the need to commit to include meaningful children and youth representation progressively and structurally in the movement.

In November 2018, prior to the 6th World Assembly, the first ever Youth Caucus of Global Campaign for Education was held kick starting an ambitious vision of mobilising global youth to ensure genuine and meaningful youth engagement of the movement at all levels.



2018 World Assembly

During the 2018 World Assembly in Kathmandu, Nepal the amendment regarding the youth constituency representation on the GCE board was proposed to ensure two seats for organisations managed by youth at the regional or international level.

November 2018



In 2019 a strategic meeting was held in Johannesburg and attended by youth and students from across the movement, the meeting was the beginning of the realisation of the adoptions and commitments made in the World Assembly held in 2015. The discussions and agreed actions taken at this meeting may be found outlined in the Youth Strategic Meeting Report.



Between 2019 - 2021

Elections were held for the GCE youth and student board seats. The board seats for the constituency for International and Regional youth and student-led organisations

Global Youth and Students Caucus in Arusha, Tanzania to finalize the Youth Strategy and the Youth Action Group Formation across GCE Youth and Student network.

2019 Strategic Meeting



March 2022



Methodology

This research draws chiefly from 19 semi-structured interviews with 11 youth and student organisers who are part of the GCE's youth and student network, five stakeholders and three regional leaders that support youth and student engagement in education.

Many of the youth and student activists are leaders of their own youth and student organisations while others are members and facilitators of regional student networks and youth coalitions. The participant selection started with a long list of potential participants from which a number of young people were invited. That followed purposive sampling and ensuring gender parity and representation from the four regions where the GCE works: Africa, South East Asia, Latin America, and Middle East & North Africa.

A brief introduction to the research was also presented during the GCE Youth and Student Caucus which served as an invitation to anyone who is interested to participate in the research. The research was also advertised via the GCE's youth and student network WhatsApp groups.

The youth and student participants are leaders of local organisations, regional coalitions, and international campaigns. The stakeholders included leaders of international non-governmental organisations, education campaign coalitions, and regional group leaders. Appendix A outlines the profile of the interviewees.

A desk review included existing reports, academic articles and other documents on youth and student organising during COVID-19, relevant GCE member reports, and grantee mid-term reports of the GCE's COVID-19 recovery response grants to youths and students²⁹.

This Report is also informed by some online observations conducted during the GCE Youth and Student Global Caucus that gathered over 20 youth and student activists from different parts of the world³⁰ to discuss and shape the GCE's youth engagement strategy³¹.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted from April-May 2022. The interview questions revolved around participants' experiences of organising students and youth movements before and during COVID-19, including how the current pandemic has affected their motivations, activities, priorities, and aspirations. The semi-structured interviews enabled the sharing of any other comments and ideas that were not covered by these topics (see Appendix B for the list of topics discussed during the interviews).

In line with the commitment to a decolonial and feminist approach to research, it was important to place the voices of the youth and student activists themselves³², at the centre stage. This therefore will be the main content of the results section of the report (see Part 3). To ensure that participants were able to share their thoughts freely, the GCE provided real-time translation service for those who preferred to conduct the interview in a language other than English. Participation was voluntary and participants were given a participant information sheet before signing a consent form.

This Report used thematic analysis as the main strategy for data analysis. Interview recordings were listened to repeatedly and interview notes were checked to produce an initial list of emerging codes. Similar codes were grouped in themes and an overall narrative and argument was developed in consideration of the connections between these themes.

True to the participatory ethos of this research, the analysis was further strengthened through a series of feedback meetings and review. Early analyses and a mid-term update was presented to a research working group (Appendix C for the full membership of the research group refers) who gave feedback on the themes – including any angles that needed further exploration. The first draft of the Report, alongside a feedback sheet, was also shared with the participants, the working group, and members of the GCE secretariat who provided written and oral feedback during a working group meeting.

29. The grant is an attempt to acknowledge and support the work that is being done by youth and student movements. About 15 were given to youth and student organisations to facilitate research and policy advocacy.

30. Participants were from Nigeria, Palestine, Honduras, Peru, Colombia, Ghana, USA, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Belgium, Cameroon, Austria, Brazil, South Africa, Philippines, Albania, and Tanzania

31. See the full report of the caucus here.

32. We were also aware that youth and student activists may face harassment and persecution in their countries, therefore all participants were anonymised in this Report and only the researcher has access to raw, non-anonymised data.

Limitations of current research

Considering the breadth and ever-changing nature of youth and student organising, this Report comes with limitations.

While COVID-19 seems to be waning down in many countries, it is still inaccurate to assume that we are on a post-pandemic time. With new variants coming and the unjust global distribution of vaccines remain unresolved, the situation continues to evolve fast. Therefore, a more longitudinal approach to research might be needed to further capture the impact of COVID-19 when considering a longer timeline.

The number of youth and student organisers in the world is massive. Indeed, a sample of 12 and a focus on the GCE youth and student network is indeed too small for generalisation. Additionally, given the small sample size, it was not possible to gain the views of youth and students with disabilities whom we know are affected disproportionately.

However, the aim of this Report is not for statistical generalisation. The intent was to hone in on the experiences, stories, and specific insights of youth and student activities to expand our understanding of how their work transformed during the global pandemic crisis.



2. Claiming, joining, and sharing spaces: conceptualising youth and student engagement from a decolonial lens

What possibility is there for us to recognise and encourage the participation of children and young people's in our contemporary world which is largely determined by adults?
Savyasaachi and Udi Mundel Butler, 2014

Youth participation means and looks different in different contexts. This section outlines the conceptual underpinnings and starting points of this Report.

Youth participation has been commonly viewed as the integration of young people towards developing a 'good society'³³. However, this narrow thinking seems to marginalise the experiences and world-views of 'non-mainstream' youth like street children, child workers, child-headed households, young people from low-income backgrounds, and informal peer-groups³⁴.

In addition, a recent set of studies³⁵ found the existence of 'geopolitical inequalities of knowledge' within youth studies. The field is currently dominated by research on young people in the global North despite the fact that ninety percent of the world's young people live in Africa, Latin America, and developing countries in Asia.

These observations seem to point to how colonial legacies and inequalities continue to penetrate thinking around youth and student organising. The question posed by Savyasaachi and Butler above is a useful starting point in reconceptualising youth and student organising from a decolonial lens – making visible the power relationships that shape these actions.

In exploring how youth and student organising has shifted during the pandemic, it is also important to recognise the inequalities and preconceptions around who young people and students are, and the sort of activism in which they engage.

2.1. Defining youth and student organising.

This Report uses **'youth and student organising' to refer to a broad range of social action led by or chiefly involving young people and/or students coming from a variety of backgrounds to address and advocate for social issues – relevant to their lives and communities.** Including but not limited to protests, social movements, leadership in student governments and councils, awareness-raising, and volunteerism.

This Report recognises that youth and students may have also shifted to what has been termed as 'engaged citizenship' where social participation is embedded in young people's daily lives – as opposed to a 'separate' activity only done in/through organisations³⁶. Whatever the iteration, youth and student organising is seen in this Report not only as an instrumental activity such as project planning or event organising, and a means of claiming spaces, increasing voice, and challenging power relationships.

An important element of our understanding of youth and student organising is **intersectionality**. Branching from black feminist theorisations, intersectionality 'describes the way in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination intersect to create unique dynamics and effects'³⁷. When applied to organising, intersectionality allows for an understanding that youth and student cohorts, although may be experiencing shared issues, are not homogenous groups.

33. Savyasaachi and Butler, 2014

34. Savyasaachi and Butler, 2014

35. Swartz, Cooper, Batan and Kropff Causa, 2021

36. Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017

37. See Center for Intersectional Justice, 'What is intersectionality?' <https://www.intersectionaljustice.org/what-is-intersectionality>

Significant lines of segmentation in terms of race, gender, and socio-economic status impact the way youth and student activism is organised, experienced, and sustained. For instance, it was found that general activist identities often devalue girls' identities and expect them to act 'older' and less feminine^{38,39}. With a feminist lens, this Report is able to make visible the gendered impact and offer a useful starting point. The 'calling for examining the presiding patriarchal order and instead advocate for a system that emphasises gender equality'⁴⁰. In terms of race, young people of colour or those who have an immigrant background, face unique risks like fear of deportation, increased policing or association with increased 'incivility'^{41,42,43}.

Therefore, differentiating between youth and student activism is not always clear. With intersectionality in mind, 'students' could be seen as a subset of the wider youth cohort. Students face specific issues and challenges to being enrolled in an academic institution – like the risk of getting expelled, and juggling curricular and extracurricular activities⁴⁴.

Studentship, like youthhood, is seen as a unique life stage that stimulates group formation, collective action that spurs activism and movements⁴⁵. Drawing from his studies of student protests in South Africa Ndлуvo-Gastheni⁴⁶ describes universities as 'sites of struggles', especially in many African universities where colonial legacies persist. However, students' organising is not always exclusively directed towards universities and educational settings but also other sectors like health, agriculture, democracy, and poverty alleviation.

This expanded and intersectional view of youth and student organising opens up conversations around what these movements can look like, how they may be organised, and the kinds of experiences they facilitate among students and youths. Unlike what other institutions might propose, there is no 'single' way of doing youth and student organising. These initiatives are deeply rooted in individual and shared identities and the everyday realities of the communities where this activism exists.

38. Taft 2006

39. Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017

40. Tong 2001

41. Kwon 2013

42. Negron-Gonzales 2014

43. Fridkin, Kenney and Crittenden 2014

44. Historically, research on youth's participation in social movements began with researchers exploring the role of students in significant upheavals and social movements (see Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017).

45. Klemenčič 2014

46. Ndлуvo-Gastheni 2018



2.2. Claiming, joining, and sharing spaces: a conceptual framework

Conceptually, youth and student organising could be positioned within the discourse of participatory development. Participation was an alternative to top-down, externally-imposed and expert-oriented development approaches by positioning ‘the people’. Especially those who are socially and economically marginalised at the centre of development decisions that affect their own lives^{47,48,49} like youth and students.

While participation is often regarded as a good thing, bringing ‘warm glow to its users and hearers’⁵⁰, it could take many forms and serve many interests – some of which counterintuitively do not favour the interests of the marginalised groups^{51,52}.

With youth participation there remains the danger that ‘adults, national, international, and local institutions fall into patterns of tokenism and fail to be truly inclusive when involving children and young people’⁵³. It has been identified that young people are often dissatisfied in many adult-dominated activist spaces which tend to be dismissive of youth’s concerns⁵⁴. Even in spaces that are thought to be youth-led, there remains ‘the risk of falling into ageist habits that amplify the adults’ voices and opinions at the expense of the youth’⁵⁵.

The risk increases as the voices of youth and students voices are catapulted into global and regional conversations. In those spaces, young people’s local concerns interact with global and regional agenda – a situation where some (often Northern-centric) voices, viewpoints, and perspectives may be more amplified than others.

To what extent are spaces of dialogue – often involving contrasting cultures, ideas, and experiences – genuinely participatory?

Decoloniality might be a useful lens to understand whose voices are represented and to what extent are they heard and taken seriously. **A decolonial lens has been understood as a process that ‘seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought’⁵⁶.**

A decolonial lens is about unpacking whose knowledge and practices are being promoted and whose are being silenced. This is vital especially in the current flow of information where certain forms of knowledge are framed as universal whereas they only represent the ways of doing, dissenting, and thinking of dominantly Global North countries.

Any attempt towards decolonisation needs to critique and analyse power relations in spaces of participation – including questions like *who opens these spaces and for whose benefit?*⁵⁷ Through a decolonial lens, this Report’s conceptual framework unpacks the level and quality of youth and student participation (see Figure 1). Participation can take many forms and serve various agenda – therefore, careful, and critical reflection is needed when engaging youth and students.

47. Cooke and Kothari 2001

48. Mohan 2014

49. Chambers 2005

50. White 1996, p. 7

51. Guijt and Shah 1998

52. Head 2011

53. Savyasaachi and Butler 2014 p. 49

54. Head 2010

55. Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017

56. Walsh C. 2018, p 17.

57. Savyasaachi and Butler 2014

Figure 1. Unpacking the level of youth and student engagement⁵⁸

Claiming Spaces	Joining Spaces	Sharing Spaces
Claiming Power	Joining in Power	Sharing Power
<p>Youths and students demand and claim power in spaces and situations where they are cordoned off – like in authoritative states. This is also applicable in circumstances where young people’s and students’ concerns and agenda are not prioritised or heard, and they therefore create their own spaces</p>	<p>Youths and students are invited, informed, consulted⁵⁹ and involved in social and political spaces with pre-determined agenda set by someone else. Young people are able to share their ideas but the how and to what extent they can shape the agenda, priorities, and approaches is unclear.</p>	<p>Youth and students collaborate with adults and peers to design, implement, and evaluate projects that concern them. This is also applicable in situations where youths and students decide on activities, on their own terms, with adults providing appropriate support.</p>

In the model, three levels and modes and youth and student organising are proposed: claiming spaces, joining spaces, and sharing power. Each model corresponds to youth and students claiming power, joining in power, and sharing power – recognising that these actions tend to challenge dominant political and social norms.

In line with the decolonial lens⁶⁰, listening to the stories, history, and values of the activists is an important feature across the three models. **Decolonial practice encourages us to work with young people and students and enabling them to design and execute their own ‘development’, transferring some degree of power and control to those who previously had no such power⁶¹**, versus only delivering services to them.

Listening to young people’s stories and realities is an important step in a decolonial approach as it ‘appreciates the pluralistic possibilities of participation’ in the world dominated by adults. It recognises the ‘countless of possibilities for children and young people – including students – to participate in and play a significant role in their communities’⁶²

The above proposed model does not aim to be normative. It is meant to be a stimulus for conversation – a tool that can be used to assess where organisations are situated in the framework and where they aspire to be – especially given that activism and movements are often changing and recalibrating⁶³. This Report is also intended to contribute to these discussions by exploring how youth and student organising has changed in the context of the pandemic.

58. This framework draws from existing models of youth participation such as Hart’s ladder of participation, Arnstein’s levels of citizen participation, and the International Association for Public Participation’s levels of public participation and empowerment.

59. A useful way of differentiating between informing, consulting, and involving could be viewed at Head 2011

60. Savyasaachi and Butler 2014

61. c.f. Guijt and Shah 1998

62. Savyasaachi and Butler 2014

63. Kowalewski 2021

3. The impact of COVID-19 on youth and student organising: exploring existing data globally

3.1. Exacerbated persistent issues: Unemployment, Education Inequality and Gender Based Violence

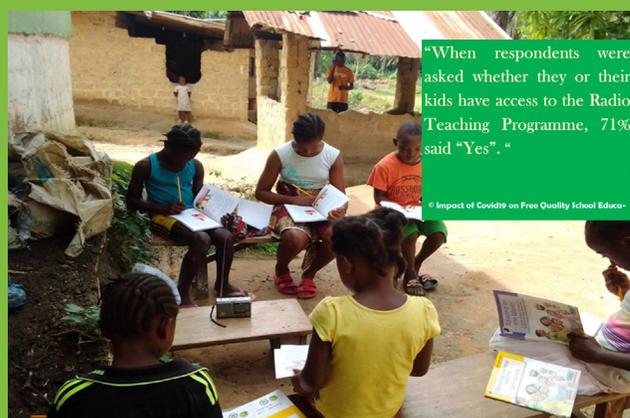
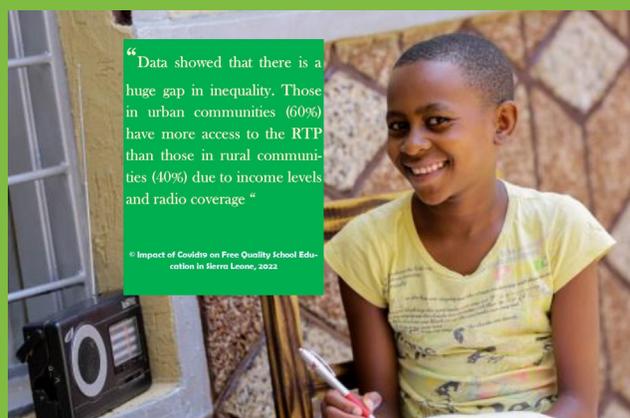
The impact of COVID-19 on student and youth organising is multiple and multi-dimensional. Many reports point to how the pandemic has exacerbated many social issues that young people have been denouncing for years – from youth unemployment and education quality to gender violence and the climate crisis.

On employment – a survey conducted during the early phases of the pandemic during (April-May 2020, revealed that one out of six young people (17.4%) stopped working during this period. An equivalent to 225 million workers' hours were lost across all age jobs.

Young people are also more prone to participating in gig work and part-time, temporary jobs. This situation is seen as almost inescapable for young people living in poverty in low and middle-income countries. 95% of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are informally employed⁶⁴.

Research, beyond this Report, has been inconclusive how youth unemployment has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and the impact thereof on youth and student organising. In some reports, the increasing number of young people working from home have provided them occasional extra time to volunteer online or in their immediate community⁶⁵. However, it is clear that the extent of youth unemployment, exacerbated by the global health crisis, has a significant impact on young people's well-being and mental health⁶⁶, and the knock-on effects later in life⁶⁷.

Education has been severely impacted by the pandemic. By late April 2020, a little over a month after the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic, school and universities began to close⁶⁸. A move that disrupted education for about 1.6 billion learners with a disproportionate impact that affected younger and more marginalised children and youth⁶⁹.



Research Project by the Youth Action for Relentless Development Organization Sierra Leone (YARDO-SL)

64. ILO 2020
65. See ILO 2020
66. Mercy Corps 2020
67. MacQuaid, 2017
68. The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF 2021 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/00131911.2022.2071235?needAccess=true>
69. The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF 2021

Many schools and universities turned to remote and distance learning, however the lack of connectivity and devices widened the digital divide and reduced the quality and experience of online provisions. For instance, a report by the Youth Action for Relentless Development Organization Sierra Leone (YARDO-SL) in collaboration with the GCE, it was found that access to radio-based learning remained challenging for students in rural areas because of poor coverage⁷⁰. Another factor is that young girls listen to radio-based learning programmes less than boys mainly because of their household chores.

The reopening and resumption of face-to-face classes in many schools worsens the impact on the education crisis. It is estimated that in low and middle-income countries, the number of children and youth living in learning poverty increases from 50% pre-pandemic to 70% - a sizeable increase⁷¹. According to a research project between the GCE and the Brain Builders Youth Initiative in Nigeria, learners in the country stopped schooling for five months to nearly a year. For schools and universities that adapted to virtual learning, this has been particularly challenging due to the lack of internet infrastructure, the high costs of data, and limited digital skills⁷².

70. YARDO-SL 2022

71. See press release from the world bank: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/12/06/learning-losses-from-covid-19-could-cost-this-generation-of-students-close-to-17-trillion-in-lifetime-earnings>

72. Brainbuilders Youth Initiative and Global Campaign for Education 2022



Launch of Research Report "Ride To Remote" by Brain Builders Youth Initiative, Nigeria

UN Women has also declared a ‘shadow pandemic’ of violence against women and girls due to the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic. According to the organisation, the pandemic has intensified sexual and/or physical violence for 243 million women and girls who experienced these abuses by an intimate partner prior to the pandemic⁷³. The abuse has been exacerbated by women and girls being isolated with their abusers, living in cramped spaces, and the restriction of movement. Despite this alarming rise, gender based violence is one of the most neglected outcomes of the pandemic with issues like limited services and legal protection for the victims⁷⁴.

3.2. ‘Weaponising’ COVID-19 to stifle student and youth voice

Several reports have identified how student and youth activists face criminalisation, extreme policing, and surveillance – all against the backdrop of already shrinking civil society spaces. In several important policy dialogues, young people have been cordoned off, owing to factors such as the assumption that they lack experience and resources⁷⁵.

Two years into the pandemic, the 2022 CIVICUS Civil Society Monitor noted that many governments used COVID-19 as a means to continually limit people’s rights to expression, peaceful protests and organising⁷⁶. Using COVID-19 as a justification to restrict youth-led protests was a pattern observed globally too^{77,78}. Some governments took advantage of the attention given to the pandemic situation as an opportunity to censor critics and take control of the press⁷⁹.

In Cambodia, for instance, a law on preventing the spread of COVID-19 imposed large fines and long prison terms on those who break quarantine rules. This has been used as a tool to stifle dissent against the government’s pandemic response^{80,81} and to limit people’s organising. Similarly, in the Philippines, overwhelming evidence demonstrates how COVID-19

rules were used to restrain or arrest activists participating in peaceful protests⁸². Young Filipinos who distributed food packets to isolating families were wrongfully red-tagged as members of the armed New People’s Army and arrested. In some cases, in India, the release of student and youth activists have been slowed down by the closure of courts and the postponement of lawyers’ private meetings with those detained^{83,84}.

Youth activists are also often placed in cramped prisons with poor hygiene and sanitation, increasing the risks of them contracting the virus. Therefore, in the context of a pandemic, arbitrary detention could be life-threatening for young people⁸⁵. These examples demonstrate how COVID-19 rules and regulations have been ‘weaponised’ by governments to further restrict youth and student organising – particularly on ‘hot button’ and divisive political and social issues.

3.3. Shifting activism online

As countries implemented social distancing and lockdown measures from 2020, community organising, street protests and gatherings became difficult to organise⁸⁶. In a survey, almost half of the respondents reported that their activist work – including evidence gathering, field research, and documenting human rights violations – slowed down because of COVID-19⁸⁷. Some youth activists and students waited for the ease of lockdown rules to return to the streets.

As early as May 2020, students in Ecuador protested against budget cuts in higher education – a movement that later inspired thousands to demonstrate against the government’s pandemic response and neoliberal policies⁸⁸.

The All-Poland women strike used a variety of methods for protests – from blocking streets to long ‘queue protests’ while still maintaining the required 2-3-metres distance⁸⁹.

73. See UN Women report and advocacy platform on COVID and GBV: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/iSincen-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

74. Mittal and Singh 2020

75. ILO 2020

76. See CIVICUS Monitor: <https://monitor.civicus.org>

77. See report by Perera here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55362461>

78. United Nations 2021

79. Pleyers 2020

80. See report by CIVICUS here: <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/06/24/activists-journalists-continue-face-reprisals-covid-19-law-exacerbates-violations-cambodia/>

81. Business and Human Rights Resource Center 2020: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/cambodia-rights-group-concerns-over-arrests-harassment-of-activists-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic-measures/>

82. Dressler 2021 <https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/jpe/article/2955/galley/3047/view/>

83. See Yasir and Schultz, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/19/world/asia/india-activists-arrests-riots-coronavirus.html>

84. See Human Rights Watch 2020: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/15/india-end-bias-prosecuting-delhi-violence>

85. CIVICUS 2021

86. See The UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth & Amnesty International’s Global Youth Collective (n.d.). <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2020/12/young-human-rights-defenders-adapting-to-covid-19/>

87. UNESCO 2021

88. Pleyers 2020

89. Kowalewski 2021

A ‘crowdsourced’ document gathered over 140 methods of non-violent action including car caravans, online take-overs, empty street performances, and ‘teach-ins’⁹⁰. These adjusting tactics are proof that demonstrations are possible even within the context of pandemic restrictions. A slogan during a Lebanese protest declared, ‘The COVID will not kill the revolution’⁹¹.

Many youths and students shifted to online activism and developing online spaces for discussion, dialogue, and action⁹². The UN’s first publication on young people’s participation in civil society found that several youths saw opportunities in the digital space to continue their work in a manner that is easier, cheaper, faster, and overall more efficient⁹³. For example, young people use social media to raise money for COVID responses, for increasing awareness on transmission prevention, and for debunking fake news. The repertoire for youth online engagement is wide – they use humour, memes, satires, and other acts to engage with popular culture⁹⁴.

The digital approach not only provide new tools for young people to organise, it ushered in new ways to intimidate them like online harassment, trolling, censorship, and surveillance^{95,96}. Issues like misinformation and disinformation have also concerned many young people, especially on having to sift through the multitude of fake news in social media channels⁹⁷.

The shift to online spaces was not and should not be considered as a panacea to address limitations brought by COVID-19. Some young people were also concerned about the use of pre-recorded contributions common in many online conferences and symposia, and the potential of counterintuitively closed versus open discussion and debate⁹⁸.

While the shift opened the space for youth and students to connect, the experience was not universal. In Zimbabwe, for instance, lack of access of devices and internet alongside consistent power cuts have made activism a luxury for many students despite the increasing use of social media platforms of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter as spaces for activism⁹⁹. Other documented barriers to online civic participation include the lack of trust in the internet due to high prevalence of false news and misinformation, the

declining trust in political processes, harassment and trolling, data breaches, and digital surveillance¹⁰⁰.

3.4. Youth and student organising persists

Against the whirlwind of changes and challenges, many examples around the world demonstrate how students and young people remain a powerful force both within and outside the classroom walls. Examples include students criticising their universities’ pandemic response for endangering their health, and for implementing measures that have a knock-on effect to students’ employment.

When students in Pomona College, USA were evicted from their campus residence halls, they launched a ‘crowdfunding’ page and pressured the administration to provide emergency housing for the most vulnerable students¹⁰¹. Dissatisfied by universities online learning provisions, Uzbek students used online platforms to halt the government’s plan to increase tuition fees¹⁰². These sentiments gained media attention, providing young people with even larger platforms to voice out their dissent – platforms like the BBC. Ultimately, the government announced the freezing of increases in tuition fees.

Turning to youth and student participation, a survey by the ILO revealed that young people felt that the pandemic has impacted their rights to participate in public affairs, but they steadily volunteered more over the survey period¹⁰³. This demonstrates that despite limited access to formal spaces of dialogue, many young people responded to the crisis at a personal level – from creating Facebook groups to updating people in Afghanistan on the latest COVID-19 guidelines, and to volunteering in an online counselling for mental health support in Kenya¹⁰⁴.

Youth environmental activists also frame the pandemic within the wider discourse of environmental degradation and the climate crisis. In a study¹⁰⁵ of the experiences of Youth for Climate Cyprus, it was found that youth activists reframed the pandemic as an issue of ‘profit over people’ – a slogan symbolic of the declining environment, and that maintains the visibility of climate emergencies within the current discourse.

90. Amnesty International 2020: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/05/activism-in-times-of-covid-19/>

91. Pleyers 2020

92. Pelter 2020

93. NESCO 2021

94. Cho, Byrne and Pelter 2020

95. Millora and Karunungan 2021

96. Earl, Maher, and Pan 2022

97. UNESCO 2021

98. UNESCO 2021

99. Hove and Dube 2021, p. 4.

100. Cho, Byrne and Pelter 2020

101. See: <https://edtrust.org/resource/in-the-age-of-coronavirus-student-activism-is-more-relevant-than-ever/>

102. Ubaydullaeva 2021

103. The ILO report outlines a number of youths’ rights that have been curtailed during the pandemic: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

104. See ILO 2020 report, especially pp 36-39.

105. Christou, Theodorou and Spyros 2022

4. ‘We have not stopped working’ Key Findings on the shifts and movements in youth and student organising during COVID-19

The message that cuts across the interviews and discussions with youth and students within the GCE network, is encapsulated in a brief statement by a youth activist in Namibia, who replied ‘we have not stopped working’ when asked about the experience of COVID-19.

As lockdown measures put a stop on mobility early in the pandemic, many face-to-face activities conducted by young people had to either be put on hold or needed to be recalibrated to respond to the government restrictions at that time. This section takes a deep dive into the specific changes in the aims, approaches and assumptions around youth and student organising, and how these shifted and moved in the context of a global health crisis.

During the interviews, many youth recalled how their work pivoted and shifted following the fast-paced changes during the pandemic. Pivots and shifts including the emergence of new demands on how youth and students should be engaged in policy and practice dialogues. These shifts could be grouped into six main subthemes:

1. the changes in the tools and modes used for organising
2. how COVID-19 spawned new issues that youth and students advocated for
3. the changing funding and resourcing landscape within the organisations and the wider development sector
4. the increasing demand for genuine and meaningful youth participation
5. the multidimensional impacts of COVID-19 to young people and students and how this has affected their work and life
6. the renewed desire for collaboration across borders.

4.1. Moving across platforms: shifts in tools and modes of organising

A youth activist from Ghana expressed: *student activism is still here; we just changed our strategies.* Indeed, the most common change that youth and students experienced in terms of their organising was in the modes, strategies, and tools they used to set-up their campaigns, deliver their services, and cultivate their organisations.

COVID-19 disrupted activities that were set to be face-to-face. These shifted completely online or to a hybrid format – a move that has presented significant issues especially in contexts with a wide digital divide. Many operational aspects of their work shifted, in some cases *had* to shift, to online spaces – from administrative activities like meetings, general assemblies, using WhatsApp for easier communication, and capacity building via online training programmes and cross-country mentoring schemes. Other related shifts included campaigning using social media platforms, producing small videos for online dissemination, and service delivery like developing an online course on climate action.

4.1.1. Opportunities: reaching more, campaigns gone global

Contrary to the common observation and despite the persistence of the use of technology, not all of these modes required the internet. Vans with speakers were used to reach out to different audiences, and information was disseminated through radio and text messages. For a number of student activists, being able to spread their message through various modes meant reaching wider audiences and having more efficient communication with their constituencies from across their regions.

In some cases, online spaces facilitated new breakthroughs and milestones for the organisations like having a truly expansive general assembly.

The interviewees also shared some examples of how they incorporated technology in their project design and digitisation in some aspects of their programme delivery. Examples included an online learning course on environmental activism developed by a European student network, a training programme on digital activism for young people in the Middle East, and an online platform featuring verified COVID-related information in Nigeria. These projects demonstrate how youth and student organisers were able to tap into

the potential of online and digital tools for designing or redesigning their programme delivery.

A number of student activists also observed that using social media has catapulted national and regional concerns into global attention. This seems to be of particular relevance to young people in contexts of conflict or protracted crisis where organising might be faced with extreme violence and risk. A youth organiser in Palestine shared a quote from a Palestinian journalist who is often asked what people can do to support local protests.

We have been able to mobilise our reach out to more than 5 million Nigerians through social media, text messages, radio, and driving through public markets. — Interviewee 1, 29, male, Nigeria

Having an online General Assembly, was like a big deal for us! Our organisation existed since the 70s and this has never happened before that we can connect with so many of our members for discussion. — Interviewee 9, female, Belgium

Puntlands Youth Associations Network Workshop,
GCE Small Grants Programme



Finding solidarity online became possible as campaigns shifted to virtual spaces. Another example cited by some interviewees was the End SARS movement in Nigeria. The movement called for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the police that has long history of abuse and violent policing of Nigerian citizens. Apart from the powerful protests in the streets of Lagos, many young people also took social media to draw attention to police brutality using the hashtag #EndSARS.

This global solidarity that online spaces helped engender was identified by many others as a significant positive impact for incorporating online forms of activism and campaigning in their work. It facilitated varied kinds of relationships across borders (see a fuller discussion on this on Section 4.6.). The experience of the Ghanaian youth activist above is echoed by many other movements – as observed by a leader of an international NGO (non-governmental organisation).

the cross-border links, and not being able to travel, increased the connectivity across countries, and increased the capacity of for global organising. So, I don't think its coincidence that some of these big movements have happened this time. —

Interviewee 13, male, stakeholder, UK

The examples here show that many youth and student organisers turned to virtual and online spaces to continue and reimagine their activism and organising. It enabled them to reach more audience, maintain connections with existing networks and develop new ones, and to build solidarity with citizens and fellow activists in other countries. However, this shift has also presented some challenges.

4.1.2. Challenges: moving swiftly in a world of digital divides

Many of the interviewees said that the shift to these online and offline platforms have not been easy nor smooth. The deep and entrenched digital divide existing in their communities was cited as the most significant barrier to effectively incorporating online and digital aspects in their work.

We used WhatsApp a lot [in communicating with our constituencies]! Not even Zoom. And I mean there was an increased usage. Of course, we used WhatsApp before but not, you know, not at this rate. For now, we can't live without it! — Interviewee 4, 26, female, Nigeria

We have a membership in ten countries! So, we have virtual meetings with each of them, making sure that we can identify the key issues they face and, for most of them, help them partner with other organisations within their countries, who can help them mobilise virtually —
Interviewee 2, 32, Male, Ghana

Drawing from the participants' views, this digital divide aspects are threefold:

- 1 lack of connectivity, internet infrastructure, and affordable data
- 2 unavailability of gadgets and other digital tools
- 3 limited experience and knowledge in navigating online platforms and technology.



These challenges, as several participants noted, were already existing before the pandemic, but the health crisis has further increased issues. Those who reported these challenges were based in the Asian, African, and Middle Eastern regions. They cited that the disproportion of the divide impacts young people in rural areas and youths from low-income backgrounds. A youth activist based in Namibia said:

The biggest challenge for me was the digital divide and how it has broadened during the pandemic. It has always been there, but COVID made it worse. In our meetings, those who are living in the cities have the means to access a smartphone or a laptop to attend this meeting... but this is not true for everyone, especially those in rural areas. We can also agree that data is very expensive... and it doesn't even end here... it's not only access but also the knowledge on how to even use the laptop, how to use Zoom. Now, we have to organise ourselves to have smaller meetings to teach student activists and student leaders on how to use these different platforms. — Interviewee 3, 27, female, Namibia

The statement shows that aspects of widening digital divide often co-exist in a community which further exacerbate the issues. During the start of the lockdown, young people needed and were expected to adapt to online platforms swiftly, with very little support and guidance. The above Namibian interviewee described this as being able to *act on your toes, and see how you can best address constantly changing challenges.*

...online campaigning gave way to worldwide mobilising. There's a hashtag for what happened in Nigeria, #EndSARS which was so widely spread across the globe. That solidarity from the people across the world also inspired many youth activists here, and pushed the government pay attention to these demands. — Interviewee 2, 32, male, Ghana

The shift did not always happen smoothly or effectively.

We had to navigate the first steps of trying to create this group, online, through Zoom. At the beginning, we were trying to motivate them – it was good at the first couple of meetings, getting to know all the functions and trying different platforms we can use. But with the limited resources and our lack of experience in navigating the group online, we ended up having less and less people joining in our meetings. There was a lot of demotivation that happened — Interviewee 7, 28, female, Palestine

You fix a meeting online; it was crashing with every other thing. So, at a point, I just told them that why don't we take a break for this year? So, we took that break! — Interviewee 4, 26, female, Nigeria

You've got to train your staff to get used to it, internet penetration is poor in Nigeria, so you have to get used to that headache too. I go on Zoom call and for the next 30 minutes, I say 'hello,' 'hello,' 'hello' – it could really be frustrating! — Interviewee 1, 29, male, Nigeria



In addition to issues about the internet and devices, youth and student organisers also experience difficulty in navigating platforms now being used for everyday activities and operations – contrary to the popular belief that young people are ‘tech-savvy’. With some interviewees expressing that some members took a break or stopped participation for a time seems to indicate that the difficulties affected the motivation and participation of some members.

However, others continued their work on a personal basis, often beyond the remit of their organisation. Interviewee 4 (26, female, Nigeria), for example shared that she continued utilising her skills as a researcher to write about COVID-19 experiences of young people and children. In doing so she could contribute to building evidence base research. A youth activist in Peru also observed the rise of more individual forms of activism versus being part of a formalised group.

What I have seen is that we have a lot of individual voluntary movements - volunteers for health issues, environmental issues. But they obviously have limited scope, where they go to one area, deliver food and others. This is different from political activism which has a longer advocacy route. — Interviewee 5, 27, male, Peru

A number of student activists emphasised that they did not get rid of face-to-face interventions altogether. They were able to continue some activities albeit on a much smaller scale while still abiding to in-country restrictions. For example, a youth coalition leader in Nigeria shared how local volunteers were rallied to ensure that communities who do not have access to internet, radio and television learned about life-saving COVID-19 information.

We are also trying to see how we can work with an array of volunteers to educate learners who do not really have privileged access to internet during COVID. And who ordinarily does not have access to radio, television, by empowering community volunteers to teach them instead — Interviewee 1, 29, Male, Nigeria

We are planning to carry out grassroots community involvement them advocate of girl child education. To achieve this, especially for issues around girl child education and education in emergencies, there's a need to gain support of parents, known religious leaders, traditional rules... and these could not be facilitated via Zoom. There's a need to meet them and campaign in communities — Interviewee 2, 32, Male, Ghana

A regional leader in Africa had a similar observation – she explained that on their continent where the digital divide is perhaps wider than other world regions, many young people continue to conduct their work face-to-face, following COVID-19 government protocols.

I have observed that many young people, especially in the rural areas, were able to use other tools like WhatsApp and community radio to reach out to people. Some also conduct door-to-door sensitisation about COVID-19. So, it is clear that they continue to be innovative despite the challenges – but in my opinion, policymakers are aware that the digital divide is still an issue. — Interviewee 18, female, stakeholder

Finally, it is important to highlight that online activism did not completely replace face-to-face organising as many interviewees still recognise the power of meeting in person and the delivery of services to many communities that cannot be reached via the internet. They also recognise the power of conducting activities on an individual basis and not under the auspices of a formal group.



Illustration 1 below depicts a summary of the opportunities and challenges when young people and their members incorporated virtual and online strategies to their organising.

Opportunities and challenges in shifting to online and hybrid modes of organising



4.2. Recalibrating aims and advocacy priorities

As the pandemic exposed the cracks in many governments and institutions – impacting those who are already vulnerable – the interviewees expressed that they were presented with new advocacy problems and/or the need to approach their ‘old’ problems in new ways.

Many of the interviewees work in the education landscape with school and university-related issues like privatisation, increasing tuition fees, lack of access, and gender imbalances. They therefore needed to recalibrate their existing aims and advocacy priorities to be more responsive to the changing issues presented by the pandemic.

To better take stock of the impact of COVID-19 in their context, some youth groups commissioned and conducted research that covered topics from COVID-19 and mental health, the impact of COVID-19 on girls’ education, to entrepreneurial skills of young women at a time of the pandemic. Their assessment collectively echoes what previous research have found – that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in education.

The harsh reality of COVID is that we were not resourced enough to manage this pandemic. So, a lot of people who were marginalised were further marginalised. People lost jobs, people lost opportunities, and one of the most affected groups are the students and children and youth. They were the first one to let go of their jobs and the first one to be affected from not being able to continue their studies or cannot even afford to continue their studies. — Interviewee 7, 28, Palestine

These realities urged young people to recalibrate and shift their aims and advocacy to respond to the realities at the given time. Some shared how their work has shifted to combat fake news and ensure that the life-saving information reach those who need them the most given the digital divide. Others focussed on making the government accountable for their COVID related policies in addressing pandemic issues.

The government introduced the idea of needing to be vaccinated in order to go to universities... Student organisations disseminated important vaccination information because it was a period when there were a lot of misinformation and disinformation. Many students also didn't want to get vaccinated, because they didn't believe that this vaccine was secure! — Interviewee 12, stakeholder, Albania

We put together a website called KnowCovid19.ng which we used to counter fake news in Nigeria. We are also working with the federal ministries in Nigeria to reorientate citizen and help them get vaccinated. — Interviewee 1, 29, male, Nigeria

During the pandemic, a lot of young people were concerned about reporting how badly has our health system been handled by the government. When we did the youth project, we had to link both topic – education and health. We worked with medical students as resource speaker because they have experience on the health component — Interviewee 5, 27, male, Peru

I saw many activists coming forward to speak up and make sure that people were treated fairly. Even if they do things remotely, they seem to have generated more impact. — Interviewee 10, female, Ghana

These are clear examples of how education was used as a 'tool' to respond to COVID-19 rather than solely focusing on shielding education from the impact of the pandemic.

A regional leader in Africa described that the most common shift she observed among young people's work in the region was how they utilised education as a response to the health crisis. She said many youth organisations were concerned on 'how to make sure that people understand that COVID is real and what do to do protect themselves –an issue in certain parts of Africa'. A stakeholder described this as utilising education as a strategy to build resilience.

We saw young people leading campaigns against misinformation. They used their skills to come up with really interesting and clear ways to pass out information for people in their communities and online. We see education as an important tool in mitigating crisis and resilience against crisis. — Interviewee 17, female, stakeholder, USA

Nigerian Youth and Students Participate in Global Action Week for Education 2022



For others, the focus remained on schools and universities with attempts to redress access and inclusion issues that have been enhanced by the pandemic. They turned the spotlight on issues surrounding digital education, bringing girls back to school and the resumption of face-to-face classes. In these campaigns there was strong commitment to working with the government and, in some case, making government accountable for how these issues were being handled.

Because of COVID, e-learning and virtual learning became the order of the day. So, our conversations changed from youth engagement to pushing for the rights of children to access digital learning. We are running a campaign in South Africa to ensure that the cost of data is lowered to an affordable rate. — Interviewee 2, 32, male, Ghana

Because many students are unable to cope with changes in teaching, we swiftly created an academic ease stakeholder solidarity which aims to campaign for academic ease across schools so there is more flexible learning. — Interviewee 6, 22, female, Philippines

There were also some young people whose work traversed new territories like conducting activities and working with a target audience that were completely new to them. For instance, a youth organiser from Namibia shared that they started delivering basic needs to learners whose families had lost livelihood. Another youth activist, from Honduras, described how they were expected to deliver training for youth workers on how to return safely to the workplace in the midst of COVID-19.

At that time, across the [African] continent, many groups also roll out food packages. We can talk about students not attending online and we still might give them data bundles but they will still not concentrate on that phone if they are still hungry. There were way more issues to deal with as opposed to just access. — Interviewee 3, 27, female, Namibia

We were asked to deliver a training on COVID-readiness when returning to the workplace. This was completely new to us but we were decided to help because this is urgent. — Interviewee 9, 28, female, Honduras

The pandemic has also influenced how young people were envisioning the future. Youth and student activists had to reimagine their aspirations and how their work might change in the coming years – especially with the understanding that they have an important role to play in community building post the pandemic.

In 2019, we were talking about African youth engagement. Since 2020, that shifted to building back better with lessons from COVID-19 and building on the political will of young people. The question that we're asking now are about our marginalised groups... marginalised girls and females who are not getting access to school and further excluded because of the pandemic. How do we mobilise and generate campaigns for them and get them back to school? — Interviewee 2, 32, Male, Ghana

There's a phrase that I really don't like: 'the new normal'. Because people who accept this new normal can adapt readily to that normality. Unfortunately, the constituencies and students that we're representing cannot just adapt, readily, to the changes the COVID brought. It made things worse, and it is a challenge to adapt. — Interviewee 3, 27, female, Namibia



These examples show that youth and student organisers can effectively respond to changing social issues over time. They are able to facilitate micro transformations and reimagine their organisations to respond to pressing challenges during the global crisis. This is not to say that they are completely off track from what they did in the past— all have indicated that they stay committed to their organisation’s main ethos.

The examples in this section also demonstrate that young people increasingly see connections between different issues and sectors. An interviewee stakeholder reflected on this and shared, *in the past, you might have had a campaign on education and a campaign on health, and then a campaign on Tax Justice. And now, you think all of these are part of the same campaign... I think that capacity to connect issues has been made more possible by COVID* (Interviewee 13, male, stakeholder, UK). A youth organiser also said:

What has increased is the need to change the focus to go from purely educational issues to issues that can be combined with other sectors – like health and also issues around climate change. — Interviewee 5, 27, male, Peru

Indeed, there seems to be an understanding that COVID-19 is a multi-sectoral issue that impacts on health, education, climate change, poverty, employment, and hunger. Although education is important, it might not always be the priority or the entry point. An example is that of the above youth organiser above distributing food packets to address hunger among school kids. Because of this, the conversation is not only about the impact of COVID-19 on education – it is also about how education *can be a tool* to respond to the pandemic.

4.3. Changing resourcing and funding landscapes

There have also been changes in the use/allocation and re-use/re-allocation of existing resources within the organisations. Young people shared their reflections on the shifting funding schemes and priorities of international NGOs and other grant-giving bodies. On the former, a couple of interviewees who come from groups relatively well-resourced groups even prior to the pandemic noted that they accrued savings from travel, hosting, venue rentals, and other logistical expenses related to conducting face-to-

face meetings and events. These savings were repurposed for a variety of other initiatives like setting up a virtual knowledge exchange programme, research commissioning, and giving grants to their constituents.

Travel expenses were not there but we invested [the money] into different projects like an online course, translation, a voting system. We also had to pay online licenses for online applications. We also gave out grants who needed support or could use the money for something good, for example [paying for] Zoom licenses because those aren’t cheap! — Interviewee 8, 22, female, Austria

The organisations that were able to save money commonly repurposed the budget towards immediate needs, especially data and licenses. However many others with limited funding even prior to the pandemic were unable to do so. The health crisis further lowered in the possibilities of accessing much needed resources.

A number of young people pointed to how the funding priorities seemed to have shifted to supporting COVID-related issues like vaccination, meal provisions, and technological innovation. The reliance on funding for many of the youth and student organisations means that the changing priorities have a significant influence on the organisations’ prioritisations.

Before COVID, everyone was fighting to get the little funds available – and mainly our projects are on youth development or an education project which may not be technologically driven. Then COVID came... you see more donors and funders putting call for applications for projects that tackle education ‘innovatively’ or that are ‘digitally-driven’. So how can I tap into this current reality? If I need to continue to survive, I need to also be willing to adapt to the current ongoing needs. So it’s going to shape your thinking. — Interviewee 4, 26, female, Nigeria

When the COVID came, governments across the world, imagine diverted funding for education and think about education, because that is the space in which we will raise funding were diverted from education to the health sector. — Interviewee 2, 32, male, Ghana

In the context of shrinking resourcing available for youth and student organising, the comments above show how donor and funder agenda have the capacity to shape the priorities of smaller youth and student organisations that need funding to survive. Technology and the digital resources seem to have been framed as standards of innovation which could eclipse initiatives that, while innovative and effective, do not necessarily

require technology. These examples of funding priorities signal the tendency of grant mechanisms that highlight particular agenda which may not be aligned with that of students and young people.

As a response, many of the stakeholders and regional leaders emphasised the importance of appropriate funding and support that are reflective of the realities of young people in different contexts. A regional leader in Africa, expressed that there is a growing appetite by funders to support the work of young people because they are *'the right spokespersons for themselves'* (Interviewee 18, female, stakeholder). While providing youth and students with platforms is important, funding and resourcing should likewise embrace young people's realities.

One of the things happened in our grant-giving programme especially in the beginning was requiring organisations to have certain structures in place and they need to have a certain level of administrative capacity to deal with grants – and that's not always present in youth organisations, especially youth organisations that are newer and younger. So, what we were able to do, is to give grants to coalitions that include or work with youth organisations. So that we can maintain our administrative needs but also not lock out youth organisations who are doing great work — Interviewee 17, stakeholder, female, USA

This section has highlighted that resources within youth and student organising were re-purposed to respond to immediate needs. However, groups that are unable to secure grants, even prior to the pandemic, are faced with a funding landscape that has shifted its focus on pandemic responses and technological approaches to education. A more responsive funding mechanism is needed so as not to 'crowd out' younger, smaller organisations that are doing so much work that impacts positively on their communities.

4.4. Heard but not listened to? Increased demand for genuine and meaningful participation

Many youths and students interviewed, particularly those who are part of coalitions and representative groups, shared their observations of a slight increase in international policy dialogue spaces with representation by youth and students.

One of the stakeholders interviewed commented that this commitment developed because many policymakers and stakeholders recognised the huge

impact that youth and students are already making in their communities. However the question she posed – *'how we can engage them, give them a platform, and surface their work to the decision makers and policymakers'* (Adisa, female, stakeholder, USA) – needs to be addressed by policymakers and stakeholders who have not done so.

At the height of the pandemic, interviewees shared that policy dialogue spaces included talking slots in high level political fora, being a panellist in a region-wide webinar event, and having roles in advisory councils and other knowledge sharing opportunities.

As a result of the pandemic young people suddenly did not need to travel for many hours and spend resources to attend face-to-face sessions often hosted by international organisations and multilateral co-operation groups. Many of these events are livestreamed across different media channels including YouTube and Facebook Live which provide for reaching wider audience. In turn, those platforms are of a participatory nature which is not always the case with in-person sessions.





4.4.1. Pushing back against tokenistic engagements

However, collective sharing from the interviews points to how these spaces seem to be tokenistic and often do not really feel genuine. Young people observed that this tokenistic engagement operates in two ways:

1. the format of the sessions like the use of pre-recorded videos, five-minute speaking slots, short and less interactive Q&A slots limit versus encourage interaction and deep debate
2. there is often no clear indication of how the concerns they shared will be addressed or how the agreed action points from the meeting will be realised – nor how follow up will be monitored.

Young people find this frustrating as they feel that the message/s that they passionately share have already been said in these fora time and time again.

So, why is genuine and meaningful participation for youth and student activists even more vital during the pandemic? Many of the young interviewees noted the need for increased commitment by policymakers to engage youth and students in important decision-making that affect their lives. For instance, youth and student activists from the African region constantly referred to how Africa is mostly composed of young people – hence decisions, especially those relating to the crisis, should be made in dialogue with them.

While the process is not perfect, the appetite towards more inclusive decision making was appreciated by a number of youth activists. But the question still remains – how do we translate intention to action by hearing and listening?

We have seen the intention of policymakers and organisations to build a youth agenda that represent the youth at global levels on education. But they will say to me, 'I want you to send me certain representatives' and that 'certain authorities are going to be present'. So, they just want to have that kind representation. But it's not really thoughtful representation. They don't really invite us to import an agenda. They only invite us to generic events, so they can take their picture and post this say that they have rely on the students. — Interviewee 5, 27 male, Peru

During this crisis, even more attention was given to schools and students because the challenges we face are more obvious than ever. We participate in online meetings, you're talking to high level partners, or high-level decision makers saying 'international solidarity!' or 'nothing about us without us' – we were heard, but I'm not sure that we were really listened to. — Interviewee 8, 22, female, Austria

For a young female activist from Namibia, these commitments have to be transformed into conscientious action. Often the desire to engaging youth and students in these online dialogues is not matched with an understanding of their everyday realities and challenges. Many of the interviewees in the African region, for instance, highlighted that they do not have easy access to internet and digital devices as compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world. In many places, getting internet data is very expensive. Additionally, some students are not readily familiar with online platforms like Zoom and Google Meets.

The experience of youth and young people is that many international organisations seem to be unaware of these issues and work on an assumption that everyone can readily access online spaces. A young female activist shared her specific experience when invited to a board meeting:

I raised the challenge around network around a week earlier because I was on the farm and didn't have the WiFi. I had to get data on my own phone to join the board meeting, which lasted close to the entire morning hours before lunch! If I were economically challenged, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to even join that board meeting. Even international organisations that are very deliberate about inclusivity and giving youth a seat at the table could be turning a blind eye on these things, although sometimes not deliberately. You can't hand out a pen and not give a paper for somebody to write on. At the end of the day, that's useless. — Interviewee 3, 27, female, Namibia

Drawing from the conceptual framework introduced in Part 2, the above shared experience is symbolic of a key concern about sharing spaces and power. Young people now demand that sharing versus only being invited to participate in generic events, processes, and mechanisms that were developed by adults. They now require more thoughtful representation that considers and addresses the challenges that young people face.

4.4.2. Engaging youth and students in decision-making: views from stakeholders and regional leaders

The perspective of some of the stakeholders interviewees is that youth and student voices are increasingly recognised as important elements in key decision-making processes. A stakeholder shared, *our belief has always been that you cannot be talking about education in the absence of its main beneficiaries – young people and students* (Interviewee 14, male, stakeholder, South Africa). A regional leader in Latin America, expressed that adults need to provide space and support for young people to speak, organise, and advocate. Enabling this means listening is at the core of engagement.

I think the great lesson is to learn to listen to them [young people]. If you don't have good questions, you better let them speak first. Learn from them and their own ways of communication that might be different from ours. They have speed, in their thoughts. They are quicker, they are very active. They are able to organize themselves to so let them organise themselves. Young people have to feel that you trust them — Interviewee 15, female, stakeholder, Peru

However, similar to the concerns of the young people, there remains the challenge of how to ensure that these voices are listened to, are taken seriously, and utilised as basis for further action. Reflecting on a number of grants given to young people, a stakeholder shared that young people have innovative and useful ideas that could have a significant effects in their communities (Interviewee 19, female, stakeholder, South Africa). For another stakeholder, any attempt to engage young people in policy and practice dialogues needs to first interrogate what genuine participation entails.

before we even talk of 'genuine' itself, we have to first create equal footing, we have to use the same map. You cannot expect to provide genuine participation if you engage with youth after you have done your workshops or developed documents. When we're talking about genuine participation, we mean young people must be co-authors, co-creators, meaning that they should be part of the process. — Interviewee 14, male, stakeholder, South Africa

The question on who gets to participate in these policy dialogues is also an important one.

...in many global spaces, you had youth ambassadors who had no constituency and no credibility, but were picked by big agencies to represent the youth, but didn't come from any movement. We said that this is fundamentally wrong. We need a youth led organization, genuinely a student movement, not interested in youth voices, that can be randomly co-opted from anywhere. Do they connect with a movement? Do they represent anyone? Do they have the ability or legitimacy? — Interviewee 13, stakeholder, male, UK

In addition, it has also been observed that some youth representative would sometimes read off a script or a prepared message that might have been developed by others. The emphasis on representation in the above sharing was echoed by other stakeholder interviewees.

The non-intentional process of inviting youth and student representation contributes to tokenistic participation. Interviewee 14 (male, stakeholder, South Africa) emphasised that the criteria for selection should be that they lead or represent a community that will make them accountable for the ideas they bring to the decision-making tables. It should not be about who can speak multiple languages or communicate well.

Considerations need to include the social realities of the countries or regions where these young people and students work. A regional leader in MENA (Middle East and Northern Africa), reflected on the situation in their region and how important it is to make sure that those who are most marginalised are represented in dialogues.

In the MENA region, we are living under emergencies. It's important to shed the light on the voices of people who are marginalised, especially who are refugees, disabled people, women, elderly, and young people. Youth is a huge part of the populations of the MENA region – they comprise more than a third of the population and are going to be the future leaders of this region. We need them in existing policy-making structures and domains. — Interviewee 6, female, stakeholder, Jordan

The challenge is to address the issues of representation and tokenism – who gets to participate and how will they be involved/partnered with? A stakeholder of a global coalition on education campaigning and partnership shared that there is also a tendency to ‘tokenise’ young people’s lived experiences. She observed that many global dialogues focus on young people telling their stories that provide local perspective on global issues. While their everyday experiences offer important ‘on the ground’ insights, it is also important to get their ideas on possible solutions to address the problem under discussion from a global perspective. Possible solutions that could extend beyond the discussion topic and landscape.

Young people should not only be invited to talk about youth issues. We should also value their voice on human rights issues, they can speak on financing, budgeting, accountability, many more. Yes, this can speak as these issues relates to youth, but also get their perspective on the broader implications of these issues. — Interviewee 17, stakeholder, female, USA

4.4.3. Shrinking civil society spaces

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some student and youth organisers also point to how civil society spaces have shrunk at the height of the pandemic. Many have provided examples on how pandemic rules like social distancing and quarantine protocols were ‘weaponised’ by authoritarian-style governments to further stifle young people’s voices of dissent. A student leader in the Philippines said that this is partly facilitated by the fact that the government had the ‘upper hand’ to implement strict protocols as a response to the pandemic.

In the Philippines there was the passing of the Antiterrorism Law which I think was instrumental in the intimidation of many youth and student activists and organisers and ‘red-tagging’ them as rebels and members of the New People’s Army. During COVID, the government had a chance to impose more power over people. — Interviewee 6, 22, female, Philippines

Some authoritarian government across the region, they try to shut down dissenting voices. For example, there was a huge movement against complaint against police brutality towards students and youths. So we are battling with a shrinking civil society in Nigeria but of course, you know, youth are still in organizing. — Interviewee 1, 29, Male, Nigeria

...a lot of governments use COVID-19 restrictions for their own good to increase the surveillance on what people can share and not share. on people and having more laws against that, especially trying, I feel they, they have used COVID as an excuse to start ‘cleaning up’ the political scenes — Interviewee 7, 28, female, Palestine

We have had a lot of repression for reporting and critiquing the political situation because we obviously that there sectors that are given budget and there are sectors that are being abandoned. And all of these come to life during the pandemic. And when these youth movements denounce these issues then the answer is violence – where we lose young people! – Interviewee 5, male, Peru

Police brutality and violence, ‘red-tagging’, surveillance, and censorship are only some of the many tactics that governments implement to control and stifle youth and student organising in several countries. It is important to note that in certain cases, youths and students need government approval to conduct activities. A youth activist from Namibia described that prior to some activities they are required to contact the police to be escorted. With the closure of many government institutions, this process had become extremely challenging. Furthermore, it gives government institutions an opportunity to manage the youth/students’ activities.

Finally, there are some governments that turn a deaf ear to the demands of youth and students. A stakeholder interviewee in Albania, referred to these circumstances where everybody loses – an extremely dangerous situation.

...the challenge is when you have a government that doesn’t hear you, that doesn’t reflect your concerns because of their set priorities. Whatever proof you give, whatever effort, if they don’t want to hear you... this is a situation where everybody will lose. — Interviewee 12, female, stakeholder, Albania

It is clear in this section – from the perspective of young people and stakeholders, that engagement must be meaningful and genuinely participatory. While online spaces provide an opportunity for increased connection, there remains many challenges that include the increasingly shrinking civil society spaces in many countries.

4.5. 'Everybody was so consumed with surviving': the multidimensional impact of COVID-19 on youth and student organisers

While a lot of discourse focuses on the impact of the pandemic on youth and student organisers who contribute to communities, many interviewees highlight the innumerable personal challenges and issues that they faced during the pandemic.

Lest we forget, this is a reminder that youth and student organisers are not immune to the physical, mental, and economic impacts of the pandemic. Moreover, the pandemic did not replace the pre-pandemic challenges and issues that they were already facing – like everyday violence experienced by students and young people in contexts of conflict and emergencies.

This sub-section highlights the multi-dimensional impact of the pandemic on youth and student organisers *themselves* – not only that of the activism/ advocacy work they do.

The quote in the above section title was from a student leader and researcher based in Nigeria. She said that there was a time when *everybody was so consumed with, you know, surviving [COVID-19], we didn't have the time to come together to say, okay, let's do something, let's find an innovative way to still continue with our activity* (Interviewee 4, 26, female, Nigeria). It showed the reality that for many youth and students, they needed to prioritise their own physical, mental, and economic well-being and that of their families. Another student activist expressed, *there's a lot more recovery and healing that we have to do* and that she was worried that people are starting to 'normalise' the kinds of violence and struggles that youth activist face as 'part of the job' (Interviewee 8, 22, female, Austria).

The collective message from the interviewees appears to be that being an 'activist' is just one of their identities and that 'activism' is just one of their many operational spaces. Many of them are also students, breadwinners, and workers. They therefore needed to find employment in dire job markets to ensure that there is food in the table. This impassioned quote from a youth activist in Namibia encapsulates the sentiments of many youths and students interviewees.

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It's not like the leadership structures or the boldness or the courage to do things weren't there... they were there! But the main issue was the pressure the pandemic brought, the mental health instability that student activists were going through. Now you're juggling between having lost a grandmother just yesterday to having a friend in ICU because of COVID to now having a child-headed household because two parents just passed to being an activist, fighting for the rights and interests of others – all these brought a lot of burden on us, student activists. How we are doing things obviously was impacted because our mental health was affected. — Interviewee 3, 27, female, Namibia

Her message, alongside others, is a powerful reminder that often students and youth organisers are *themselves* experiencing similar vulnerabilities, trauma, and violence that they are trying to address for others.

Many youth and student organisers shared that they felt overwhelmed and as the pandemic progressed, they felt fatigue. For these young people, it was not only their activism that shifted online, but also other aspects of their lives – classes shifted remotely, birthdays were celebrated virtually, and funerals attended via Zoom. Often their activist work, much of which now shifted online, interspersed with other aspects of their daily lives.

As a young female activist shared, *sometimes it gets hard to differentiate between something that gives me power, or that inspires me or makes my day better and my other work, those requiring hard work and not very fun!* (Interviewee 8, 22, female, Austria). A youth activist in the Philippines, said that mental health issues, increased anxiety and depression became common among her fellow activists because *they cannot do their usual ways of activism* (Interviewee 11, 24, female, Philippines). She continued her sharing with *'you do feel connected and close to people but once you close the Zoom room, you feel suddenly disconnected again'*.

This reality had made it challenging for youth and student leaders to keep their constituents motivated given their many other concerns. In the Philippines, for instance, a youth activist shared that a lot of their student leaders and volunteers had to return to their provinces in rural areas when universities closed in Metro Manila where many of them temporarily resided. As a result thereof they were not as active as they wanted to be. Interestingly, a few student leaders

interviewees have already expressed changing their organisation's practices to better take into account these issues.

It became really clear how the pandemic affected the youth in general, and even myself, included. Students couldn't socialise and go to schools, people's jobs were affected, they couldn't connect with their family, some needed to move abroad. I'm not going to generalise, but I felt that a lot of people were questioning the purpose of some of our causes. — Interviewee 7, 28, female, Palestine

The drop-out rates increased during the pandemic because young people could no longer adapt to this new mode of learning, you need to have gadgets, internet. Sometimes, young people were no longer concerned about wider issues, but how they can survive, what they will eat tomorrow, how will they help their families... — Interviewee 6, 22, female, Philippines

Our volunteers need to put food on the table as well. This is why we changed our volunteer policy to incorporate self-development... we invest heavily in them, sponsor training that will help be marketable, give them an opportunity to gain work experience remotely. We also connect them with interested mentors, so they gain opportunities for paid employments. — Interviewee 1, 29, male, Nigeria



Puntlands Youth Associations Network Workshop,
GCE Small Grants Programme

Despite these challenges, it is clear that youth and students did not stop working during the pandemic. Some did observe a decline in the number of youths and students participating in their activities. However, they shared that they often navigated these issues – like changing internal policies. Interviewee 1's organisation changed its volunteer policy – another interviewee observed that an increasing number of young people are turning to entrepreneurial activities to generate some income.

During the Global Youth Caucus, there was a call for increased attention towards ensuring youth and student organisers' mental health and well-being – further highlighting this issue that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. A youth activist from the Philippines said:

In the mid-2020, we started hearing about people unable to attend our convening call because they had to take care of their mother because they were sick, there was added burden within families. So, there was a need to put 'care' in the center of their work – many student leaders need to step up not only for themselves but for their members who are not able to do so — Interviewee 11, 24, female, Philippines

But the reality seems to be more complicated than being remedied by occasional retreats or mental health breaks. A youth activists based in Palestine has lived through years of violence and conflict and being an activist becomes an inseparable part of her identity. She said, '*literally sometimes just existence, just existing means that you're fighting for something*' (Interviewee 7, 28, female, Palestine).

It is therefore important to interrogate how being activist interacts with young people's identities.

Yes, self-care is very important but sometimes I think – and I'm going to be brutally honest – I think it is coming from a privileged place where one can separate activism from their life. For me? It can't. It is not a separate thing. If I don't fight for my own rights, it is going to directly affect my life. — Interviewee 7, 28, female, Palestine

When we begin to see young people from an intersectional lens, then we understand that their being an activist also intersperses with their other identities and needs. Understanding the context of how their organising has changed, is inseparable from understanding their individual struggles.

4.6. 'Finding solutions together': COVID-19, uncertainty, and borderless solidarity

We didn't know what this was. It was that fear of the unknown. We don't know how to end it and we don't even have solutions. And so, we're having to find solutions together. — Interviewee 2, 32, male, Ghana

For many young people interviewees, COVID-19 was a shared experience that provided a basis for solidarity across borders. The uncertainty of the pandemic, as the interviewee above refers to, inspired many youths and students to work together, whether regionally or internationally, to find solutions to local problems.

Earlier, we discussed how the shift to online methods of campaigning allowed for movements to gain global attention and support. In this section we focus on how COVID-19 somehow facilitated increased solidarity among youth and student organisations.

I feel during the time of COVID, we, as student activist across the world, felt that there was more of a borderless unity, which for me, showed that we are not really defined by the borderlines. We really do belong to a global community where almost everywhere there was something happening. The effects the impact that COVID has had in South Africa is similar with Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Tanzania, for instance. So that gave a broader picture a broader view of how best we could collaborate student leaders across different countries to find a solution on how best to assess students within our specific countries. — Interviewee 3, 27, female, Namibia

Moreover, being able to interact with each other, like via the Global Caucus and other GCE activities, meant greater opportunities to learn from each other's experiences and finding local solutions through learning from global examples. Youth activists from Nigeria and the Philippines who were able to work with a wide variety of organisations and groups during COVID, explained this best.

A positive thing that happened during COVID was that you're able to, to look beyond your local situation or contacts, to reach out to others. You know, see what they're doing, and how you can also adapt it to your own situation. It gives you an avenue to reach out to them to understand what you're doing. Not necessarily imitate them – but see, if there's something you can adapt or learn from. — Interviewee 4, 26, female, Nigeria

The useful side was there were a lot of learning exchanges and sharing of experiences. What was successful in the African region for instance might also be applicable here in South and Southeast Asia. — Interviewee 11, 24, female, Philippines

It is apparent that communicating and working online has had a role and is popular. Some young people expressed that they were able to work with others with whom they had not worked before. Some were introduced to organisations, policymakers, and peers not previously on their radar. This meant an opportunity to build further networks and allies. By working together their voices are amplified and lobbying is strengthened.

Partnering with other organisations leaders to more synergy in youth and students work works. We've seen African student movement, for instance, where they had to work with other institutions to form alliances with the university, some youth empowerment organisations We need a lot more solidarity among youth organisations. One youth organisation cannot influence decisions. But as all the youth organising come together, they form that synergy and their voices become louder. — Interviewee 2, 32, male, Ghana

Learning from the experiences of others also helped young people further understand the many inequalities that exist across borders. While everyone experiences COVID-19, the level of difficulty differs significantly depending on where you are in the world.

if we speak with a lot of organisations, we feel like we're not alone in a struggle – if you have peers in other countries who are fighting for the same struggle... I'm fighting for something bigger than only myself... [problems like the] climate crisis can only be solvable if you work transcontinental and with all around the world. Although you also see that there are some struggles that we don't fully understand, knowing that we live in privilege. So, this exchange is very, very important and necessary. — Interviewee 8, 22, female, Austria

COVID-19 and the increased opportunities that came with it, provided inter-connections for youth and students to find areas of solidarity and empathy that enabled working together and understanding each other.



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5. An Agenda for Action: Policy implications and recommendations

The voices of youth and students and their resilience displayed during the global pandemic, have informed the Global Campaign for Education's proposed agenda for Action for policymakers, development organisations, and the civil society space that prioritises youth and student voices.

Against the backdrop of intersecting and fast-changing issues and challenges posed by the pandemic, this research Report provides strong evidence that youth and students continue to advocate and fight for change in their communities and globally. They have not stopped working for their causes, campaigns, and service delivery – despite the multi-dimensional and intersecting stresses brought about by the pandemic in their work and in their personal lives.

Youth and student organisers interviewed during this research show, time and time again, that young people are no longer only extra feet and hands that implement projects designed by someone else. Youths and students are at the forefront – they are leaders in their organisation and movers in their communities.

This Report has added to the evidence that young people and students need to be engaged in key

decision-making processes. Stakeholders interviewed, alongside declarations from key international organisations, amplify the need to centre young people's voices in important structures and processes. While this *intention* has existed for a long time and it is now amplified by the pandemic, we are still faced with the important question of 'how'.

How do we facilitate *genuine* and *meaningful* participation of young people and students? What lessons are learnt from the challenges they faced and the responses they set-up during the pandemic?

This Report proposes three key principles:

1. decolonised participatory practices
2. intersectional understanding of youth and students
3. situated and global solidarity.

Decolonised participatory practices	Intersectional understanding of youth and students	Situated and global solidarity
<p>Sharing in spaces of dialogue does not mean sharing in power. A decolonial lens to participation encourages policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to support youths and students, and to recognise and address the power relationships and inequalities that exist in adult-dominated development ecosystems.</p>	<p>This research clearly illustrates that in many situations youth and student organisers experience similar challenges, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties as do many of their constituents. This principle encourages stakeholders, policymakers, and practitioners to recognise young people and student organisers' varied identities and the different spaces in which they operate.</p>	<p>In the face of a shared issue, the pandemic has highlighted more than ever the importance of global solidarity among young people and students while remaining aware of local realities. This principle places cross-border learning at the heart of youth engagement.</p>

Underlying these principles, are four key policy recommendations aimed at government, policy makers, international organisations, and civil society organisations.

Define and ensure Genuine and Meaningful Participation in domestic policy and international bodies.

1. For organisations that are steered by a governing board or advisory councils, to ensure that youth and students have a seat and voting powers in these governance bodies.
2. Recognition of informal, ad hoc, and unstructured acts of activism embedded in many youth and student groups rather than valorising and strengthening only those that are conducted in/through groups.
3. Ensuring that young people are involved and that they contribute to shaping agenda by involving them wherever possible in the stages of project development – from design to implementation and assessment.

Build back better by increasing capacity and digital access for youth and student organisers.

1. Governments safeguard spending towards bridging the digital divide in rural areas and in low-income communities.
2. International Organisations raise awareness and recognition of unequal access of digital tools and resources for youth and student organising.
3. International donors direct financing and funding towards inclusive recovery that aims to provide digital access to the most marginalised.

Invest in youth organising, through flexible funding mechanisms, resourcing, and spending for an inclusive and resilient recovery.

1. Resources could also be placed in hiring personnel focussed solely on youth engagement and developing a youth engagement strategy.
2. Stakeholders, policymakers, and development practitioners need to develop funding schemes that are responsive to the changing needs and structures of youth and student organising. Schemes that are flexible versus strict funding mechanisms that exclude certain groups because of bureaucracy and red tape. For instance, funding schemes could have more flexible eligibility criteria that could allow applications by smaller, younger youth organisations.

Invest in mental health and psycho-social support programmes and activities for activists particularly in emergency contexts.

1. Governments investing in more and better protection, mental health and psycho-social support services across all sectors and community services.
2. Governments and relevant national and local services playing an active role in research and the comprehension of the mental health of youth and students activists. This will partly be achieved through meaningfully involving young people in the design and implementation of related policies.

Conclusion

This research has proven that youth and student organisers are innovators and creative-thinkers, unafraid of breaking the mould and challenging the status quo even when faced with limited resources and punitive responses from state and non-state actors.

At a time of fast-paced change, young people do not sit idly. They take matters into their own hands – with ‘nothing about us, without us’ as a rallying battle cry. When given the space to influence policy, young people demand accountability and improvements to policies and programmes that fail them. Policies and programmes particularly in the context of corruption, surveillance, policing, and censorship that has significantly reconfigured power relationships in activist spaces.

Despite the resilience demonstrated, the challenges cited by young people showed that there is a need for strong support and genuine participation from policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders. The support outlined in the above recommendations must take into account the issues on the ground.

As communities emerge from the pandemic, there is an increasing recognition that youth and students have an important role to play in community building towards a post-pandemic future. The resilience, energy, agency and creativity of youths and students are powerful resources in building back better.

The key challenge now is to how transform these commitments into conscientious changing our ways of working and engaging with young people. Now, more than ever, it is vital to transform intention into action. The GCE is committed to globally mobilising and spearheading this change through advocacy and the dissemination of the action agenda – spurred by the voices of youth and students across the world.

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Appendix A: Profile of interviewees

Interviewee 1	29, male, based in Nigeria. He is the executive director of a youth organisation and initiative that advocates for good governance, political participation, and championing the SDGs. His work includes issues like youth leadership, education financing, and educational technology.
Interviewee 2	32, male, based in Ghana. He works in a students' coalition that is composed of student organisations from over 50 countries in Africa. His current role involves capacity building in the organisation and he was previously in charge of research and programmes management.
Interviewee 3	27, female, based in Namibia. She is a student activist and leader within the Southern African Region. Their group's advocacy work encompasses research and development, academic freedom, and issues around accessibility and affordability.
Interviewee 4	26, female, based in Nigeria. She is a student activist, development economist, and early career researcher. She leads and is a member of a number of youth advocacy groups in the area of education, women's advancement, and youth development.
Interviewee 5	27, Male, based in Peru. He is a student leader/officer of an organisation composed of various student leaders in the region. His role currently works towards monitoring and evaluation of their group's projects and making sure these are aligned to national campaigns.
Interviewee 6	22, female, based in the Philippines. She is a youth leader of a local political organisation based in a Philippine university. She is also a member of a group that focusses on education against poverty. She has been instrumental in campaigning towards the passing of free higher education tuition fee in the country.
Interviewee 7	28, female, based in Palestine. She currently works as a psycho-social support facilitator for communities prone to violence. She is also a member of a campaign for education for all in the Arab region where she represents the youth arm of the organisation.
Interviewee 8	22, female, based in Austria. She is a student leader who became an activist at the early age of 15. Currently, she is a board member of the organising bureau of a student union based in Europe that serves as a platform for co-operation between different groups in the region.
Interviewee 9	28, female, based in Honduras. She is a youth leader for education and civil society advocacy and is passionate about the fight for inclusive and equitable education at all levels. She is currently a youth representative in an international organisation for education partnerships.
Interviewee 10	27, female based in Ghana. She is currently a programme officer for a student union in the African region. She is passionate about inclusivity and quality education for all.
Interviewee 11	24, female, based in the Philippines and is co-co-ordinator of a feminist youth-led network. She facilitates the convening of various member groups, and creating linkages to share knowledge and best practices between these groups. Her activist work has long focused on comprehensive sexuality education.
Interviewee 12	Female, Stakeholder, based in Albania. She was a former officer of an education coalition based in Albania and currently works with an international NGO.
Interviewee 13	Male, Stakeholder, based in the UK. He is a long supporter and advocate of youth participation in policy-making and decision-making. He heads a unit on civic participation, tax justice, and public services in a large INGO.
Interviewee 14	Male, stakeholder, based in South Africa. He is the global co-ordinator of an international advocacy group focusing on education, inclusion, and human rights. The organisation has a deep commitment to meaningful youth participation.
Interviewee 15	Female, regional leader, based in Peru. For many years she has been committed to education for all, advocating for promoting young people's participation in education. She was a founding member of a national NGO focused on inclusive educational policies.
Interviewee 16	Female, regional leader, based in Jordan. She is a capacity building and learning manager of a campaign for education based in the Arab region.
Interviewee 17	Female, stakeholder, based in USA. She is part of the global advocacy team of a global partnership and fund dedicated to quality education in lower-income countries.
Interviewee 18	Female, regional leader, based in Togo. She is a capacity building manager for a regional (Africa) network with members from 39 African countries.
Interviewee 19	Female, Stakeholder, based in South Africa. She leads the monitoring and evaluation of an international organisation/campaign that advocates for education.

Appendix B: Topics discussed during interviews

Semi structured interviews - list of topics for students and youths

Note: because interviews are semi-structured, we will make use of a list of topics/themes that will be explored during the discussion (rather than a strict interview schedule). This will allow the participants to also 'steer' the conversation to areas important to them and also make sure that we do not go too much out of topic.

Introductions: recap the research aim, check re consent form if filled out, check if participant has any questions, remind of confidentiality and right to not answer questions and terminate interview.

1. Background: brief introduction of self, name of the organisation/initiative, kinds of activities being conducted, focus/sectors (eg health, agriculture, etc), years working as a youth/student organiser
2. Youth organising before COVID
 - Sectors/Areas that you were working on
 - Challenges and issues you faced before the pandemic
 - Methods/activities/tools you were using in your work (eg social media, community education programmes, etc)
 - Support that you have been receiving from various actors for your work (eg funding, capacity building etc)
3. Youth organising after COVID
 - Any changes/shifts in your priority areas/sectors - what facilitated this change and how did it happen?
 - What kinds of challenges were exacerbated during COVID? Any new challenges and any issues that were resolved during COVID?
 - How have your methods/activities/tools been adapted in light of COVID/pandemic restrictions (eg lockdown, limited mobility, decreased funding)
 - How has the support from various actors changed during the pandemic? How did you respond to such changes?
4. Lessons learned
 - Any strategies and approaches that you implemented to adopt readily to these changes
 - Future: how will this experience (eg shift during the pandemic) shape the future of organising in your own context.
 - Key differences in your organising before and during COVID and what remained the same?
 - Any key lessons you would like to share



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