

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD

The following is a summary of the interventions made by over 100 youth leaders from 46 countries, representing national and regional student unions and grassroots activist networks, during a Youth Leadership Caucus held on 3 November 2020.

Despite holding an equal stake in the fight against COVID-19, there has been a gross lack of genuine youth representation in local, national, and global responses to the pandemic. As a result, our unique understanding of the devastating impact this crisis is having on our generation, especially our most vulnerable peers, is absent.

For example, as schools and universities have locked down, education has largely moved online, which has worsened existing education inequalities. In both high- and low-income countries, consistent segments of the student population lack sufficient technology and internet connection to access virtual education. This marginalisation is felt even more acutely by children and young people living with disabilities and children on the move, whose specific educational needs are not being met by the limited virtual education being offered. Without access to quality education, a whole generation risks being left behind.

Moreover, with the global economic downturn caused by the pandemic, young people are worst-hit by unemployment and job-losses all around the world. As the demographic with typically the least work experience and social capital, and often subject to precarious work even before the pandemic, we are among the first to lose our jobs and risk falling into poverty.

Children are also paying a heavy price for rising unemployment among the poorest communities. With inadequate social protection structures in most countries, families are being pushed into poverty soon after working adults lose their jobs. Without the means to support themselves, care-givers are being forced to make impossible decisions between their children's safety and education, and putting food on the table. As a result, the number of out-of-school children and youth is set to rise alongside the number of children engaged in child labour.

Lockdowns around the world are reducing civil liberties and civic space for young people. Using the excuse of measures to contain the pandemic, authoritarian governments have been clamping down on the rights and safety of marginalised groups, on freedom of expression, on academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. Where students and young people have mobilised against this they have often been met with excessive state-sanctioned violence.

With so much disinformation and discontent being spread within societies during the pandemic, extremist ideologies are also gaining power and influence. COVID-19 has fanned the flames of rising nationalism and racism towards minority groups and some of this hatred and xenophobia has been directed at international students and those from migrant/refugee backgrounds.

Sadly, children and young people are experiencing violence on all fronts during this pandemic. Across the world there was a direct correlation between lockdowns and an increase in domestic violence. With increased time spent within the family home, too many children have been exposed to physical violence from abusive family members. Weakened child protection mechanisms during COVID-19 have also resulted in increased risks of child trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation both online and offline.

The impact of COVID-19 has also intensified existing gender inequalities in every context, with the complexities of race, class and geography exacerbating the situation. For example, when access to healthcare has never been more important, women and girls are being denied access to basic rights including menstrual hygiene. Gender-based violence including child marriage and sexual abuse have all starkly risen during the pandemic, and girls are less likely than boys to return to school.

OUR COLLECTIVE DEMANDS:

WE DEMAND that world leaders deliver an equal, moral, and fair internationalist response to COVID-19 by:

- Demonstrating genuine multilateralism by working together to deliver an economic package that protects the world's most vulnerable communities from the impacts of COVID-19.
- Acknowledging historical injustices perpetrated by many of today's richest countries and their responsibility to provide a greater share of the global economic response in this crisis.
- Cancelling all external debt payments due from the governments of low-income countries in 2021 and 2022 and delivering global tax reform to eliminate tax havens.
- Ensuring any COVID-19 vaccination programme is free and universally accessible, with the scale of production considering the needs of the global population.

WE DEMAND that national governments uphold the fundamental human rights of their citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic by:

- Implementing social protection measures such as a universal basic income that ensures everyone can live in dignity, without fear of hunger or homelessness.
- Prioritising the protection of free, quality, and public education systems, including meaningful support and policies addressing the digital divide that leaves millions of children and young people unable to access online learning.
- Improving healthcare infrastructure and ensuring universal access, including implementing adequate hygiene measures with specific COVID-19 health protocols in schools and universities.
- Recognising the looming mental health crisis facing our generation and implementing preventative support programmes to address this.

WE DEMAND that national governments give special protection for the most vulnerable children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic by:

- Ensuring countries in the Global North open their borders to refugee and migrant children and young people, and as a minimum all countries restart their asylum processing immediately with a fast-track for unaccompanied minors.
- Providing targeted support to refugee and migrant children and young people living in host countries to ensure equal (and non-discriminatory) access to healthcare, education, civic participation, and financial support such as housing during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Fully funding programmes and interventions that support the safety, rights and dignity of children and young people who have experienced child labour, trafficking, violence, or homelessness.
- Communicating all public health messages inclusively, to ensure people living with disabilities, those without access to the internet, non-native speakers and people with limited literacy skills know how to protect themselves and their communities from COVID-19.

WE DEMAND that national and world leaders ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic does not undermine democracy by:

- Mandating that national governments formally consult with and place value on the input of students, young people and their elected representative unions on their COVID-19 response planning.
- Challenging the rise of fear-based, nationalist, far-right, fundamentalist, and other ideologies which espouse human rights abuses and discrimination with public condemnation, not tacit approval.
- Immediately ceasing all criminalisation of peaceful public dissent, such as the arbitrary arrests, abductions, and assassination of protesters, which are contributing to a shrinking civic space and citizen accountability.
- Ensuring national responses to COVID-19 are not generalised but localised and relevant to the needs of each community.
- Providing full transparency on the distribution of funds spent on the COVID-19 response, including ODA, loans, and any fiscal adjustments to the national budget.

SUPPORTED BY:

