IT'S OUR FUTURE

Building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world.

Acknowledgments.

Foreword.

During the Youth at Heart virtual forum on the 2nd of November, 2020, Sigrid Kaag, our Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, said: *"We need to get into the habit of structurally listening to what youth have to say."*

I think this quote brings home the essence of what brought Restless Development and our Ministry together in the framework of the Youth at Heart Virtual Forum: the very idea that young people should be able to have a say on policies and matters that affect them!

With the Youth at Heart Strategy and the subsequent Virtual Forum, the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs increasingly put the challenges and opportunities of young people at the heart of our development cooperation and international dialogue.

Restless Development was asked to conduct a youth-led research, assembling the specific challenges and opportunities of young people. This report provides interesting and relevant insights on the perceptions of young people about their lives and the way COVID-19 has affected them. Their observations about the importance of matching the skills that young people learn with the jobs that are available are relevant.

Even more now, with the COVID-19 pandemic hitting the prospects of young people hard. Meanwhile the research also highlights the positive role young people play in their societies in the response. The report convincingly mentions the importance of meaningful youth participation in decision-making and supporting youth-led organisations.

The findings of this report form the foundation of the Youth at Heart Principles which were presented during the Youth at Heart Virtual Forum and that called on international players to put the youth at heart of their work. To mention just a few, Mari Pangestu shared that the World Bank is committed to be part of the Youth at Heart movement. *"Hopefully we can work with all of you and not just show you the door, but give you the keys."* Alan Jope, CEO of UNILEVER: *"I welcome the YaH Principles. The climate crisis will rob millions of young people of their future unless we take action now."*

Let me express my appreciation to Restless Development for diligently and competently coordinating this youth-led research. Let me also thank the youth researchers that executed the research: Aya-Maria Rouhana, John Youhanes Magok, Tsion Mengitsu Ademe, Hadia Ali Daoud, Mahmoud Salah, Ebrima Ceesay, Kevin Lunzalu, Taibat Hussain, Nashwa Mohammed, Aimé Sawadogo, Wiem Chamsi and Maram Tebini. Thank you very much for informing and inspiring us! And finally, thank you to all the young people that have shared their ideas, views, needs, concerns and insights with the researchers – and therefore, with all international partners that are part of the Youth at Heart movement.

Our cooperation has displayed that there is enormous merit in meaningful engagement with young people. Let's keep learning from each other and let's keep the youth at heart.

Tijmen Rooseboom
Ambassador for Youth, Education and Work
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Foreword.

Discussions among international donors, governments and development agencies about how to build back better following the COVID-19 pandemic are increasingly focused on how to engage and include young people at the heart of decisions, governance and policy making. This stems from the realization, now heightened by the pandemic, that young people are indeed agents of change and their development is a necessity for sustainable development.

To improve decision-maker's understanding of challenges and opportunities facing young people and facilitate meaningful youth engagement, this research was carried by 12 young people from the Sahel, MENA and East and Horn of Africa to understand and capture insights on education, future of work, skill-building, youth voice in society, and young people's resilience through the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report presents the voices of more than 1,000 young people from different backgrounds and genders who we engaged. Our findings show that young people viewed education, skills acquisitions and decent work as key to their development, and they want to share their voice and be heard. This report reflects youth voices and needs, and provides principles that can be adopted by decisions-makers.

One of the main highlights of this research is its youth-led approach. We cannot continue to make decisions that shape young people's future, without consulting young people themselves. For us the researchers, this research enabled us to better understand key issues faced by young people across the world, while allowing us to become active contributors to principles that could shape young people's narrative. And for the young people that we engaged, it renewed their hope that their voice does matter in decision-making.

It is our hope that this research will not end as a mere document, rather its principles will be mainstreamed into programmes, policies and implementations of governments, multilateral organisation, civil society organisations and decision-makers across the globe.

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Introduction.

The Covid-19 pandemic is changing our world. This crisis will have long-term impacts not only on health systems, but also on how we learn, how we earn a decent living, and how we engage in our societies to make change.

In the wake of the pandemic, the process of rebuilding and regeneration is an opportunity to pave the way towards more inclusive, more just, and more sustainable communities. It is an opportunity to address global challenges like climate change, gender equality and access to digital technology, and to embed meaningful youth engagement in decision making at all levels. It is an opportunity that we must not miss.

In 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: an ambitious set of 17 goals that aim to transform our world and ensure peace, prosperity and justice for all. The Global Goals include clear targets on increasing access to high quality education, including technical and vocational training; improving young people's skills to prepare them for the job market; ensuring young people have access to decent and fulfilling work; and ensuring participatory decision making at all levels. However, we are off track to achieve these targets, and the Covid-19 pandemic threatens to further hinder our progress.

Across the globe we know that young people are stepping up to engage in local and national response efforts to Covid-19: tackling misinformation, raising awareness, and supporting their communities to recover. However, we also know that young people are being underestimated as key players in the fight against Covid-19 and in building communities' resilience.

This report presents the findings of a youth-led research project that explored the impacts of Covid-19 on young people's access to education and work, how their voices are heard in society, and their crucial role in building a fairer and more equal world. It also makes recommendations for how governments, development partners, private sector and civil society organisations can take action to ensure a just, sustainable future for all young people.

Methodology.

This research was led by 12 youth researchers from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Sahel, and the East and Horn of Africa regions, supported by Restless Development.

Grounded in Restless Development's participatory youth-led research approach,[1] the team used an online survey, virtual focus group discussions, and audio and video clips to hear from young people aged 18–30 on three related topics:

1. Education and Work:
How has the pandemic affected young people's access to good education and decent work? How has young people's education prepared them with the skills and knowledge that they need to find work? How can we better support youth entrepreneurship?

2. Resilience to Covid-19:
How can we "build back better", and what is the role of youth leadership in doing so? What are the biggest barriers to young people engaging in rebuilding efforts, and what can we do about these barriers?

3. Voice in Society: *How can young people's voice in their societies be strengthened? Has Covid-19 impacted how young people's voices are heard? How can we ensure youth engagement in decision making?*

These three themes are at the core of Youth at Heart, the new development strategy of the Government of the Netherlands,[2] and were the focus of the Youth at Heart Virtual Forum hosted by the Government of the Netherlands in November 2020. Quality education, productive work, civic engagement and meaningful participation are vital for young people to build stable futures for themselves and their communities, and are key to achieving the Global Goals.

Through this research we heard from over 1,000 young people across the three regions. The sample was fairly balanced across region and gender, although the sample from MENA skewed more female, while the sample from the East and Horn of Africa skewed more male. This may have been due to the gender of the researchers in those regions and their own networks. Researcher training covered the importance of ensuring inclusivity, and throughout the process the researchers intentionally targeted those hardest to reach, in order to ensure a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. The mix of an online survey, focus groups and video and audio clips aimed to allow participation of any young person in the target regions. Throughout analysis, researchers applied a gender lens, exploring how young women and men had been differently impacted.[3]

This data collection was complemented by a rapid evidence review of literature from across the development sector about how young people are adapting to Covid-19 and contributing to response and rebuilding efforts; how the pandemic has affected young people's education and work; and how it has impacted how their voices are represented in society.[4]
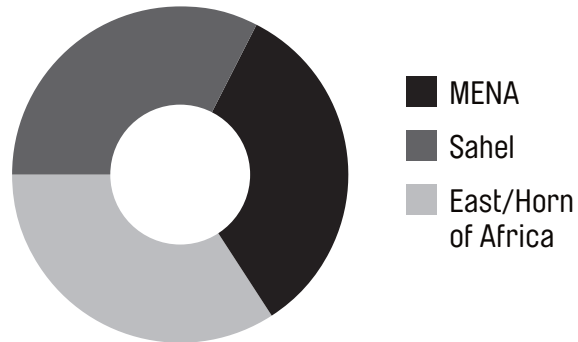
[1] Restless Development (2020).
[2] Government of the Netherlands (2020).
[3] For more information about the research methodology, please see Annex 1.
[4] To read the full evidence review, please see Annex 2.

Research at a glance.

RESPONDENTS BY REGION

- MENA
- Sahel
- East/Horn of Africa

RESPONDENTS BY GENDER

- Female
- Male
- Other/not specified

THE RESEARCHERS (SEE MAP)

For biographies of the researchers, visit
www.restlessdevelopment.org/projects/
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Somalia

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Education and Work.

1. The pandemic has impacted young people's access to secure, fulfilling work that is relevant to their skills and experience.

2. There is a significant gap between skills acquired during education and skills needed in the job market.

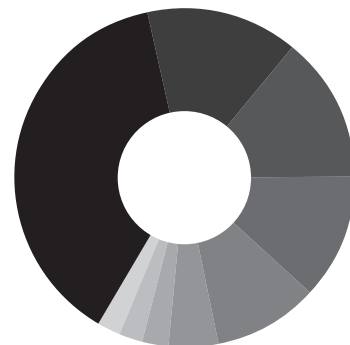3. The "digital divide" is leaving some young people behind – improving access to technology is important to ensure equal access to education, skills, and work.

4. There is an opportunity to develop young people's entrepreneurship skills and support youth-led start ups.

Access to inclusive, high-quality education and productive, decent work are basic human rights and cornerstones of sustainable development – helping to tackle inequalities, support economic growth, and provide young people with the skills and knowledge they need to participate in their communities and earn a decent living. Even before Covid-19, global progress was too slow in these areas, and the impact of the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities. **Around 90% of young students have had their education disrupted,** potentially reversing years of progress, and we are on the brink of the most severe recession in recent memory. With the disruptions caused by the pandemic, we are in danger of missing our targets. Target 8.6, which seeks to significantly reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training by 2020, will almost certainly not be achieved. [5]

Young researchers asked their peers how their access to education and work had been impacted by Covid-19, and what they feel needs to be prioritised as we start to rebuild our communities, to ensure that we can get back on track with these global targets.

Where has COVID – and the related restrictions put in place to manage it – had the biggest impact on your life?

- On my education (38%)
- On my family or my social life (14%)
- On my work (14%)
- On my freedom of movement (12%)
- On my mental health and well-being (10%)
- On my business (5%)
- On my access to decision-making spaces in my community or my country (3%)
- On my access to healthcare or sexual and reproductive health services (2%)
- On something else (2%)

[5] International Labour Organisation (2019).

1. The pandemic has impacted young people's access to secure, fulfilling work that is relevant to their skills and experience.

Across all regions, young people told us that they are finding it more difficult to get jobs during the Covid-19 crisis. Many young people are not working in a field relevant to what they studied, and in some cases are doing work that they are significantly overqualified for, because of the immediate need for financial security and the limited jobs available. It was also highlighted that increasing numbers of young people are migrating to capital cities and even internationally in search of work and education, due to lack of opportunities in their communities. Some participants noted that unless they already had connections within a company, it was impossible to find jobs – which reinforces inequalities. This is disheartening for many young people, especially those who have completed higher education and who have not been able to secure relevant roles.

Across all regions there was a concern that the difficult job market was forcing young people to prioritise income and stability over exploring their own passions and creativity, and was potentially stifling young people's innovation and ideas. The jobs that are most available – for example in the service industry, agriculture or administration – often do not provide long-term career paths for young people to grow and develop themselves. Many participants talked about taking these lower-paid, less challenging roles, or doing temporary or freelance work, and the impact that this has had on their long-term career sustainability.

"We need to prioritise education as a means of social justice. Education relieves poverty, increases social justice, empowers youth and women. It helps each person to reach their full potential and brings significant economic returns in the country."

– Hadia, Somaliland

2. There is a significant gap between skills acquired during education and skills needed in the job market.

Formal education has not provided young people in these regions the soft skills required to find work or engage in active citizenship. Participants across all three regions mentioned this "skills mismatch" between the skills learned in secondary and tertiary education, and the skills needed to find jobs. For example, communication skills, teamwork and leadership skills, and business and entrepreneurial skills are often not taught in formal education settings, but are vital for young people to transition into the labour market and find fulfilling work. It is harder to learn these experiential skills remotely or online, as practical experience and on-the-job training is required, and this contributes to a cycle: young people cannot get jobs because they don't have the right skills, but they can't gain these skills without having a job.

In some regions, it was highlighted that the entire education system needs overhaul to be more focussed on life skills and preparation for the job market. "Imported" curricula from the Global North are not sufficient to prepare young people across these regions for the realities of living and working there. This is backed up by our survey, in which **just 39% felt that their education had prepared them "well" or "very well" for the jobs available in their context**. Some participants emphasised the need for more extracurricular opportunities at schools and universities (such as clubs and societies), as this is where many young people gain these key skills, not in the classroom.

"One of the key principles emerging from our research is to ensure that the education system responds to changes in job market demand, by providing opportunities to train young people in key skills to ensure young people's employability."

– Taibat, Nigeria

3. The "digital divide" is leaving some young people behind – improving access to technology is important to ensure equal access to education, skills, and work.

As education and training has shifted online, there has been a split between more literate, urban and connected young people who are able to access online learning, and those who cannot (due to lack of internet infrastructure, cost of data, lack of IT skills, low literacy, lack of hardware, or other reasons). This "digital divide" is leaving behind young women, who have more domestic and care responsibilities outside of school, rural young people without the hardware or connectivity required to access the internet, and many other underserved groups. For almost all of these young people, their access to education has decreased; for some, it has stopped completely. Even where young people can access the internet, the quality of this education is variable, as many educators are not trained to provide teaching online and therefore the learning is not effective.

There is a sense that there are more opportunities available for young people who are active in the digital space, but that these are limited to more urban, more connected youth. It was noted that

this divide is exacerbating inequalities, as those who are already more marginalised are the least likely to have reliable access to the internet and therefore more vulnerable to being left behind. Participants highlighted that IT skills should be integrated into formal education to ensure that all young people are comfortable accessing the internet and online spaces, as well as more advanced skills that open up possibilities for career progression such as software development and web design. **Our survey showed that only 29% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that their education supported them to harness technology for their future career path,** indicating that there is a lot of room for growth in this area. Respondents felt that governments need to invest in embracing technology and consider subsidising internet access to ensure more connected societies. This will also prepare young people for jobs in the technology sector, which is an emerging field in these regions.

"The job market is constantly growing and the digital skills and soft skills are becoming an asset for recruiters. The education young people get should provide them with the necessary skills that make them more employable."
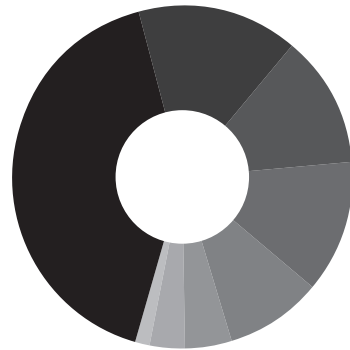
– Maram, Tunisia

4. There is an opportunity to develop young people's entrepreneurship skills and support youth-led start ups.

Some young people have responded to job losses by starting their own enterprises. Respondents highlighted the need to provide young people with opportunities to lead projects and grow their skills, and the importance of being supported throughout this process. Investing in youth entrepreneurship has the potential to strengthen the labour market, create jobs, and provide more sustainable income for young people. Young people need skill-building, resources and mentorship to start businesses, as well as networking spaces to meet other like-minded young people and share ideas and experiences.

Our survey found that, in an ideal world, 41.6% of young people would want to run their own businesses - and that the biggest barriers to youth entrepreneurship are lack of access to capital, and lack of training on business and finance. The majority of survey respondents felt that current opportunities in the job market do not align with what young people want to do, which may contribute to the high numbers of young people who want to start their own enterprises to achieve their goals.

If you had the choice – and there were no barriers – which of the following would you rather be doing with your time?

- Running my own business (42%)
- Focussing on studies and research (15%)
- Working for/running my own organisation (13%)
- Having a formal job (12%)
- Representing my peers in local/national/regional government (9%)
- Doing gig or consultancy work (4%)
- Something else (3%)
- Focussing on my family (1%)

"We must create opportunities to partner with young entrepreneurs, to provide mentorship, capital, facilitate peer-to-peer learning, and support the creation of decent jobs."

– Nashwa, Sudan

"Young people have been able to identify the systematic gaps widened by the pandemic in terms of health care, education, the environment, the economy, financial services and technology. They have a fresh vision towards solving these challenges – and all they need to achieve that is trust and support."

– Aya-Maria, Lebanon

Building Back Better.

1. While the Covid-19 pandemic has presented challenges for many young people, it is also an opportunity for youth leadership.

2. Investment in health services, including mental health services, will be key.

3. Building back better needs to prioritise technology and internet access.

4. When rebuilding communities, we need to ensure that we address structural inequalities, including gender inequality.

5. Whole-community approaches and cross-sector collaboration is crucial.

The Global Goals are grounded in the idea of resilience: building strong, safe, healthy and connected societies means that they are better able to overcome challenges, collaborate effectively, and adapt to a changing world. This theme cuts across several Goals, including poverty eradication, good health and wellbeing, sustainable cities, and reduced inequality. As we have seen – and experienced first-hand – the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing weaknesses in our communities, and has widened inequalities. As we build back after a crisis like Covid-19, it is an opportunity to address broader challenges facing our societies, like climate change and gender equality, and make sure that we are leaving no one behind.

Through our research, we wanted to explore how young people are already participating in efforts to rebuild their communities after Covid-19, understand young people's priorities and needs for their future, and highlight opportunities for young people to further engage in rebuilding and resilience activities.

Build back better… or build differently?

The phrase "build back better" is often used to describe efforts to rebuild communities after a crisis. It refers to the ways in which communities can use crisis response and recovery activities as an opportunity to strengthen their resilience and preparedness for future challenges. What became clear in our research is that young people do not just want to build "back" the same systems that were there before. They do not want to replicate and strengthen systems and structures that uphold inequality, keep their voices unheard, and leave marginalised groups behind. They want to build differently, making sure that governments and development partners are using this opportunity to tackle injustice, promote resilience and inclusivity, and to address major global challenges like gender equality and climate change.
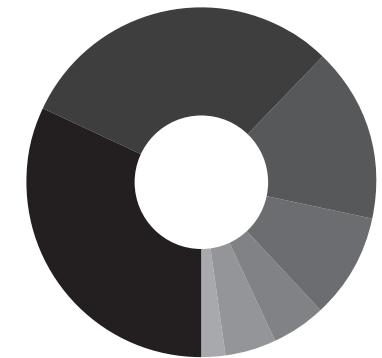
1. While the Covid-19 pandemic has presented challenges for many young people, it is also an opportunity for youth leadership.

Overwhelmingly, young people recognised their role in responding to the pandemic and contributing to rebuilding. Across the regions, young people were already involved in response efforts, and were ready and willing to take action. There was a strong focus on the need for youth civil society to play a leading role in rebuilding communities that are more just and resilient.

41.1% of surveyed respondents said they felt young people were involved in the immediate response to Covid-19, but only 32.8% felt that young people were supporting efforts to build back better. This highlights that while young people are somewhat engaged as crisis responders and on a short-term basis, there is significant opportunity for them to participate in longer-term community resilience and rebuilding efforts. The most common roles young people feel they can play in building back better are by sharing creative and innovative ideas with other partners, and spreading awareness and information. The research found that many young people are using the creative arts – radio, music and images – to raise awareness about Covid-19 and reach out to their peers.

Some participants also saw more personal opportunities offered by the pandemic, as they had been able to use this time to reevaluate their priorities and goals, spend more time with family, and invest in their hobbies. **A huge 87% of survey respondents said that their experience with Covid-19 has changed their perceptions of what is important in society, showing that the realities of young people during the pandemic – positive and negative –could change how they engage in society in the long-term.**

Which of the following roles do you think most closely captures the role you think young people can – and should – play in building back better?

- Coming up with innovations/ideas around how to 'build back better' to share with governments/NGOs/other stakeholders (32%)
- Spreading awareness and information (30%)
- Being involved in conversations with decision-makers on local, regional, or or national policies and action plans (16%)
- Mobilising their communities to take action (10%)
- Holding their governments and duty-bearers to account (5%)
- Distributing essential services and PPE (5%)
- Something else (2%)

2. Investment in health services, including mental health services, will be key.

Young people report that they have struggled with their mental health during the Covid-19 crisis, due to uncertainty about their education and work, and due to social isolation. Some participants reported that they had moved back to their family homes which contributed to stress, loss of independence, and feelings of failure. Mental wellbeing was a common trend across all three regions, and **our survey showed that 19% of people felt that this [mental wellbeing] was the most important factor to address post-pandemic – second only to job creation and economic growth.**

Some participants mentioned the lack of online support systems for mental health, which became extra important during lockdowns when access to physical services was impacted. There is also stigma around mental health, which can prevent young people from talking openly about it and seeking support. Many participants were impacted by weak health systems that were heavily overburdened by the pandemic, and resources that were diverted away from other health needs to support the Covid-19 response. Investing in health system strengthening will contribute to community resilience and ensure that we are better able to cope with future challenges.

"We should recognise the negative impact Covid-19 has had on young people's wellbeing and mental health, especially girls and young women."

– Aimé, Burkina Faso

3. Building back better needs to prioritise technology and internet access.

Participants from all three regions discussed the opportunities and challenges presented by online technologies and social media. For those who have reliable internet access, they were able to maintain connections with others and participate in relief and response efforts, as well as access online education. However, young people without reliable internet access struggled to engage in the same way. There is a need to invest in stronger infrastructure and increase connectivity so that a greater diversity of young people can engage in online spaces and contribute to rebuilding communities.

Many respondents in focus groups and video clips emphasised the importance of harnessing technology and digital innovation as a way to build stronger and more connected communities. They mentioned that this could – among other things – improve equal access to education, build digital skills that are useful for the job market, and support inclusive and meaningful participation of young people. They also mentioned that governments and other partners have been slow to invest in technological innovation, making it harder to participate in response efforts remotely.

4. When rebuilding communities, we need to ensure that we address structural inequalities, including gender inequality.

Young people report that inequality has worsened during the pandemic. Women were more likely to be impacted by job losses, and across the regions there were concerns about an increase in gender-based violence due to women being in lockdown with abusive partners and unable to access support services. For those in education, the shift to online learning excluded those with lower literacy levels and no access to the internet. When looking at how we build back better, we need to do this in an inclusive and intersectional way, so as to reduce historic inequalities, including gender inequality, income inequality, and the rural-urban divide.

Participants felt an opportunity here to use Covid-19 response and rebuilding efforts to address these systemic issues and work towards justice and equality. Several participants also highlighted the need to build back in an environmentally conscious way, and invest more in preventing and mitigating the effects of global climate change.

5. Whole-community approaches and cross-sector collaboration is crucial.

In all regions, the importance of establishing sustainable partnerships for building back better was clear. Participants highlighted the need for intergenerational initiatives, bringing together the experience and knowledge of older generations with the energy and creativity of youth movements. Creating these spaces for learning and sharing might also increase trust in young people's ability to lead. Participants felt strongly that governments have a key role in taking the initiative to engage young people and other stakeholders in setting policies and leading response efforts.

In some places, young people felt that their governments were one of the biggest barriers to their engagement in building back better, and highlighted civil society organisations and NGOs as a potential bridge between young people and government bodies. In order to harness youth leadership in rebuilding communities, young people said that they need access to training and skill building. Participants highlighted the role of governments, the private sector and civil society in training and supporting young leaders to contribute to post-pandemic recovery and rebuilding, and ensuring that this information is not only reaching more educated youth in large urban areas but also rural and underrepresented communities at the grassroots.

"Policy should be shaped in a way that will address all issues young people have, regardless of their differences. National strategies should be contextualised to the realities of the target audience – and from conceptualisation to formulation to implementation, young people must be allowed to take the lead."

– Ebrima, The Gambia

"In order to build back better after Covid-19 we need to ensure that young people are being consulted to inform the response and recovery efforts at all levels. Their insights and knowledge should inform the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their communities."

– Mahmoud, Egypt

Having a Voice.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. There is a negative perception of young people, and a lack of trust in their expertise, which makes it hard for them to be heard.

2. Young people are using social media much more for their activism and engagement, but there are questions about its effectiveness.

3. Greater efforts are needed to ensure that the voices of underrepresented young people, including young women, young migrants and refugees, and young people with disabilities, are heard.

4. Governments, private sector, and civil society organisations have a role to resource and support youth voices and young people's political participation.

Young people have the right to have their say on decisions that impact their lives – and to have their voice listened to and respected. The world is currently home to the biggest generation of young people that we've ever seen – and will ever see. They are key players in development and are crucial to achieving the Global Goals. But young people are too often seen as beneficiaries of sustainable development, rather than active partners and leaders. Policy frameworks do not speak to their lived realities.

Systems of exclusion keep young people out of decision-making spaces, especially marginalised young people including young women and girls, young people with disabilities, and young migrants and refugees. Researchers wanted to explore how young people's voice had been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and how it had impacted youth activism and organising. They also wanted to understand how to strengthen meaningful engagement of diverse youth voices at all levels of decision making.

"It's our future, and we are the leaders of today and tomorrow, it's our call to be part of it. We need to be at the decision making table."
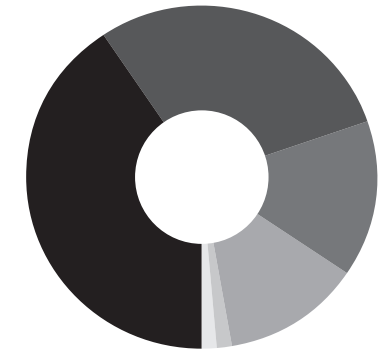
– Wiem, Tunisia

1. There is a negative perception of young people, and a lack of trust in their expertise, which makes it hard for them to be heard.

Respondents mentioned a lack of trust from governments, community members, traditional elders and other stakeholders which mean that it is hard for them to be recognised as experts. Their opinions are discredited and they are often excluded from decision making spaces or engaged only tokenistically. There is a perception of young people as reckless, naive and rebellious which means they are not engaged as equal partners and their potential is underestimated. Respondents called for building the capacity of young people to engage with high-level decision makers, and for sustainable partnerships between young people and decision making bodies. Youth parliaments were identified as a way to ensure youth voices are heard and to increase the legitimacy and formality of meaningful youth engagement.

In some places, this distrust flowed both ways. Young people were hesitant to engage with governments due to their historic exclusion and fears that they would not be taken seriously or that they would not be given credit for their ideas and solutions. There is also a need for decision makers to show young people that they are valued and will be trusted and supported to co-create change.

Survey results supported this finding. **40.8% of respondents stated that the biggest barrier to young people having their voices heard were that adults don't listen to them, or that they don't act on what they hear.** Other common barriers are a lack of opportunities for young people to organise together to be heard, and lack of information to support forming and expressing their opinions.

In your opinion, what is the biggest barrier for young people to have their voice heard in their societies?

- Adults won't listen/Adults listen but they don't act upon what young people ask (41%)
- Young people don't have opportunities to get organized/decide how to voice their ideas (29%)
- Young people do not have enough information to form and express an opinion (15%)
- Opportunities to discuss with adults are not available (13%)
- Adults do listen and act upon young people's asks (1%)
- Other (1%)

2. Young people are using social media much more for their activism and engagement, but there are questions about its effectiveness.

Young activists found themselves needing to use social media much more than they had before, to engage virtually in decision making spaces and connect with others. However, it was noted that engagement was not always effective, due to lack of training for young people on how to use social media for campaigns; prevalence of false information; focus on performative activism and prioritising content and photo opportunities over impact; and the fact that many key decision makers are not active in these spaces, preferring traditional and offline advocacy spaces. Participants also highlighted the mental health impacts of spending too much time online.

Our survey shows that the majority of people (85%) feel that social media activism is at least somewhat effective in creating positive change in their community. **45% feel that social media has created more opportunities for young people to have their voice heard – but interestingly, another 35% felt that it created both opportunities and challenges.**

Some participants were hesitant to engage in social media advocacy because of its reputation as aggressive or antagonistic. Examples of citizen uprisings and protests being organised on social media have contributed to a negative perception of these spaces and a fear of engaging with them. However, there were also many examples of positive and empowering interactions on social media, and the benefits of mobilising this way for social change. Some participants mentioned the need for specific platforms and youth-only spaces to connect and learn from one another while others emphasised the importance of intergenerational spaces for co-leadership and co-creation of decisions.

3. Greater efforts are needed to ensure that the voices of underrepresented young people, including young women, young migrants and refugees, and young people with disabilities, are heard.

Just 14.3% of respondents feel that young people's voices are represented in their societies – but **45.3% feel that Covid–19 has increased the opportunities available for young people to be heard and engage in decision making.** Our research highlights the importance of using these new opportunities to increase the diversity of youth participation and to elevate a greater range of youth voices, and to ensure that post-Covid-19 recovery efforts are led by those underserved groups who had been most impacted by the pandemic.

Social media presents opportunities for young people to make their voices heard, and can increase the diversity of participation, especially from those who might be at risk in physical advocacy spaces. However many online advocacy spaces are dominated by educated, urban youth, and often by young men. Participants highlighted the need to leverage the possibilities of new online forms of political engagement to tackle inequality and ensure that underrepresented groups have a platform to make their voices heard. This will also prepare young people for jobs in the technology sector, which is an emerging field in these regions.

"We need to create platforms and safe spaces – both digital and physical – for young people to inform policies and programmes that impact their lives – especially marginalised and vulnerable youth, including girls and young women, young people with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced, and young people living in rural areas, slums and informal settlements."

– John, South Sudan

4. Governments, private sector, and civil society organisations have a role to resource and support youth voices and young people's political participation.

Ensuring that young people's voices are represented in society in all their diversity requires deliberate and coordinated effort from a range of stakeholders. Governments and other partners need to create sustainable platforms for youth participation that are valuable to young people themselves and that are funded if appropriate. NGOs should continue to provide skill building initiatives that empower young people and provide them with the knowledge and skills to engage effectively in political processes. Some participants highlighted the role of civil society organisations in preparing young leaders for the future and supporting them to grow and develop as active citizens.

There is also a need to invest in elevating youth voices at all levels of decision making. Young people are eager to engage with governments on policies and major decisions that impact them, but also mentioned the importance of engaging with local governments and local councils. **Our survey showed that half of young people are most passionate about creating change at the more micro level – among their peers and within institutions such as schools and workplaces.** 22% of respondents want to engage in local and national government, while around 16% want to participate in regional and international spaces. Young people recognise that they are the decision makers of the future, and acknowledge the importance of political participation to grow their skills and abilities.

"Young people want to be involved in all stages of policy making. They want participatory monitoring and accountability approaches that will ensure sustainable development and policies that are accessible and work for us all."

– Kevin, Kenya

"There is nothing more inspirational and hopeful than seeing young people getting involved, making their own decisions and being responsible."

– Tsion, Ethiopia

Conclusions and Recommendations.

This research aims to be action oriented, and to inspire new ways of working and collaboration that put youth at the centre. From our findings and our data from over 1,000 young people, young researchers co-developed a set of three Youth Principles, which were launched at the Youth at Heart Virtual Forum hosted by the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs in November 2020.

These principles are a call to action for governments, civil society, private and public sector, bi- and multilaterals and knowledge institutions to invest in the prospects of young people so that they can build a better, more resilient world and to work in partnership with young people. These principles call upon organisations to recognise and invest in an inclusive manner and specifically in the opportunities of vulnerable youth- recognising the unique challenges they face and ensuring that no-one is left behind.

PRINCIPLE 1

Build a more relevant, sustainable and effective enabling environment for education and work systems for young people, that recognise their rights and will.

1. Prioritise inclusive access to education as a means of and to social justice, enabling the participation of young people in society and the exercising of their rights.

2. Ensure education systems respond to changing job markets and demand, providing young people with the key skills that will ensure their employability such as soft skills, critical thinking and adaptability.

3. Invest in and create inclusive access to digital tools and learning systems that will support the education and skills development of young people, ensuring that they will not get further left behind by advancements in technologies.

4. Private sector and governments should take responsibility for the creation of decent work for young people by creating opportunities such as; paid traineeships and mentoring, and access to finance for all young entrepreneurs.

PRINCIPLE 2

Involve young people at all levels in decision making processes that will affect their lives.

1. Partner with young people as leaders and experts at all stages of policy making, including the follow up and review of policy implementation to ensure accountability.

2. Create inclusive platforms and shared safe spaces (both digital and physical) for young people to inform policies and programmes that impact their lives.

3. Address structural and legal barriers, and negative perceptions of young people that prevent the participation of young people in decision making processes, ensuring opportunities to engage young people are widely accessible and adapted to their specific needs.

4. Invest in youth-led initiatives and programmes that are working to promote and ensure more accountable, responsive and inclusive governance at local and national levels.

PRINCIPLE 3

Partner with young people to build a better, more resilient world for all generations.

1. Ensure young people's knowledge and insight inform crises response and recovery efforts at all levels.

2. Partner with and trust young people to participate and lead response and rebuilding efforts, providing adequate resourcing and support to strengthen their capacities and the impact of their work.

3. Invest in youth-led initiatives that are the forefront of responding to Covid-19 and particularly those organisations that provide support to the most marginalised and vulnerable youth.

4. Recognise the negative impact Covid-19 has on young people's wellbeing and mental health and provide ongoing psychosocial support to young people through formal interventions and programmes.

Annex 1: Research Methodology.

This research was led by 12 youth researchers from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Sahel, and the East and Horn of Africa regions, supported by Restless Development.

Researcher recruitment was an open process for any young person aged 18–30 living in MENA, the Sahel, and the East and Horn of Africa. Over 1,000 young people applied to be part of this process – highlighting the importance and timeliness of this research. Seven young women and five young men from 11 countries were selected to lead this work. Rather than requiring extensive research experience, young people with good connections to youth civil society, an interest in education and work, and experience in digital mobilisation and engagement were prioritised. Researchers received full training in research methods from Restless Development.

Through Restless Development's youth-led research methodology,[6] the research team used qualitative and quantitative methods to explore three related topics:

1. Education and Work: How has the pandemic affected young people's access to good education and decent work? How has young people's education prepared them with the skills and knowledge that they need to find work? How can we better support youth entrepreneurship?

2. Resilience to Covid-19: How can we "build back better", and what is the role of youth leadership in doing so? What are the biggest barriers to young people engaging in rebuilding efforts, and what can we do about these barriers?

3. Voice in Society: How can young people's voice in their societies be strengthened? Has Covid-19 impacted how young people's voices are heard? How can we ensure youth engagement in decision making?

Online **focus group discussions** put young people in conversation with one another to build on each other's ideas and generate new knowledge and understandings of the impact of Covid-19 on young people's lives. Researchers were trained in facilitation skills to ensure they were able to set a safe space for the conversation, manage the flow of discussion, and ensure equal participation. 241 young people participated in the online focus groups.

Short **video and audio clips** collected from young people in the three regions provided greater insight into the current realities of young people and enabled more young people to participate, even without the reliable connectivity required to engage in a focus group discussion. Participants were asked to directly discuss young people's education, work, voice in society, and their role in "building back better". A total of 370 young people were engaged through sharing audio and video clips.

Finally, an **online survey** aimed to gather broad insights from a diverse range of young people, and provide a quantitative basis for the findings. The survey consisted of only closed-ended (i.e. multiple-choice) questions to allow for simpler comparison. The survey was available only in English. A total of 579 young people aged 18–30 from the target regions completed the survey.

This research was conducted in a short time period, with primary data collection taking place over three weeks. When conducting and analysing this research, the team applied a **gender lens** and explored specifically the different ways that young women, young men, and young people of other genders have been impacted by this pandemic. We also kept inclusion at the forefront.

Respondents by region and breakdown

	MENA				Sahel				East & Horn of Africa				
	F	M	O	Total	F	M	O	Total	F	M	O	Total	TOTAL
Survey	125	68	8	201	102	68	5	175	79	119	5	203	579
Focus groups	43	35	0	78	37	44	0	81	40	42	0	82	241
Video & audio	53	58	0	111	53	86	0	139	64	56	0	120	370

Researchers were selected based on their connections and knowledge of different communities; training covered the importance of hearing from a wide range of young people; and the mix of methods – survey, focus groups, and video and audio clips – aimed to allow participation from any young person in the focus regions, regardless of their understanding and background knowledge about the research topics and about sustainable development in general.

Limitations of this research

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, this research project was conducted almost entirely online, from researcher recruitment and training, to primary data collection, to analysis and compilation. While this allowed us to think outside the box and expand our outreach, it also potentially skews towards urban, better educated and better connected participants (connected to the internet, but also to other young people working on sustainable development issues). Additionally, the survey was only available in English, which may have favoured more educated respondents. However, focus group discussions and video submissions were welcome in local languages and sought to engage a more diverse audience including those with lower literacy, English ability and connectivity. While we had a good spread across all three regions, more participants were from the countries researchers were based in – for example, 91.7% of survey respondents were from the researchers' countries.

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[6] Restless Development (2020).

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Annex 2: Evidence Review.

To ensure that this research built on and contributed to the existing evidence available, a rapid evidence review looked at literature from across the development sector, including from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Decent Jobs for Youth, The World Bank, Plan International, UNESCO, and more. We specifically looked for information about how young people are adapting to Covid-19 and contributing to response and rebuilding efforts; how the pandemic has affected young people's education and jobs; and how it has impacted how their voices are represented in society. We applied a gender lens to this review, and sought to understand the differences in how young men and women have been affected.

We found significantly more existing evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on young people's education and work than on their voice in society or on their role in building back better. This may be because current research has focussed more on the immediate needs of education and employment, or because the pandemic is still reaching its peak in some places, meaning that rebuilding and response efforts are not yet well developed.

KEY THEMES FROM THE EVIDENCE REVIEW

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted **young people's access to work**. Young workers in employment before the onset of the pandemic have reported job losses and reductions in working hours, leading to loss of vital income.[7] Research from the ILO and Asian Development Bank has shown that young people in Asia and the Pacific have been more impacted than adults by a reduction in work,[8] and as around three-quarters of youth worldwide work in informal jobs, they have less access to employment protections.[9] Data also shows that in most countries, women are more significantly impacted by a reduction in work than men.[10] Job losses and reduction in hours have been more prevalent in the private sector than in the public sector, likely due to closures of businesses.[11]

For those seeking new work, **getting into the labour market** is now more difficult. Young people find themselves competing with older and more experienced people for limited jobs, and their ability to gain new skills is impacted by disruptions to traditional and vocational learning. The World Bank has estimated that of the 1 billion young people predicted to enter the job market by 2030, only 40% of them will be able to find work.[12] This pandemic is likely to hinder progress towards the job creation efforts needed to ensure young people can earn a decent living.

Young entrepreneurs and business-owners have also struggled during the pandemic. An assessment by UNDP and the Citi Foundation found that 86% of young entrepreneurs in Asia and the Pacific had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, due to issues including reduced customer demand and disrupted supply chains, with a quarter of those forced to close their enterprises entirely.[13] This has further impacted young people's income and contributes to uncertainty about their future.

For young people in education **school closures** have been an issue. By April 2020, over 160 countries had implemented country-wide closures of their education systems, affecting over 1.5 billion students (around 90% of all learners) and potentially reversing years of progress.[14] While countries have gradually reopened their schools, students have faced ongoing disruptions to their education: 65% of young people reported that they have learned less since the start of the pandemic, with half believing that this will delay the progress of their education and 9% stating that they do not expect to graduate or complete their studies.[15] While some learning has moved online, many young people, especially those with lower incomes and in more rural areas, cannot access digital learning.[16] The closure of schools also has broader impacts for some students who rely on other services provided there, such as nutrition programmes and health care. In some places it has led to increased isolation as students are cut off from their peers and support networks.[17]

Young people are also losing access to **technical and vocational learning**. In a recent survey of vocational training providers by the ILO, UNESCO and the World Bank, over 90% of respondents reported complete closure of vocational schools and training centres.[18] This kind of practical training is often difficult or impossible to provide online or remotely, and often more difficult for businesses to provide when they are facing their own financial uncertainty. Young people in low income countries report greater disruption to their education and training during Covid-19 (44%) compared to lower-middle income countries (20%) and high income countries (4%).[19] This has the potential to cause long-term effects on young people's education and skills, and therefore their economic opportunities.

Current research shows a greater **impact on young women and girls.** They are more likely to leave school due to domestic and caring responsibilities and are less likely to return, potentially leading to a long-term increase in the education gender gap and impacting their future opportunities. Young women are also more likely to work in the informal sector, leaving them vulnerable to loss of work and income and unable to access social protection and benefits. When girls are out of school, their risk of early and forced marriage and early pregnancy increases, as does the risk of physical and sexual abuse and gender-based violence.[20] Data from past crises indicate that there may be increased numbers of young women turning to transactional sex to meet their basic needs due to loss of income.[21] This is further compounded by the fact that if schools are closed, young people cannot access the comprehensive sexuality education they need to keep themselves safe and healthy, and that in some cases, resources are being diverted away from sexual and reproductive health care to support Covid-19 efforts.[22]

There is a need to focus on **young people's mental wellbeing**. 17% of young people have experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression since the start of the pandemic, and this is particularly heightened in those who have lost access to their education or their income.[23] In humanitarian and conflict settings, the combined effects of job losses, social isolation and conflict have been extremely damaging.[24] Young women are more likely to report mental health impacts of the pandemic.

Lockdowns and travel restrictions put in place during the pandemic have impacted **young people's ability to mobilise**, participate in decision-making, and express themselves freely.[25] However, there has been a surge in online mobilisation and young people using technology to promote public health messages and engage with others. This presents exciting opportunities for young people to lead the way in rebuilding communities post-pandemic.[26]

[7] Decent Jobs for Youth (2020).
[8] Asian Development Bank and the International Labour Organisation (2020).
[9] United Nations Youth Flash (2020).
[10] International Labour Organisation (2020).
[11] Decent Jobs for Youth (2020).
[12] The World Bank (2015).
[13] UNDP and Citi Foundation (2020).

[14] UNESCO (2020).
[15] Decent Jobs for Youth (2020).
[16] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2020).
[17] Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action (2020).
[18] International Labour Organisation, UNESCO, and the World Bank (2020).
[19] Decent Jobs for Youth (2020).
[20] Plan International UK (2020).

[21] UNAIDS (2020).
[22] UNAIDS (2020).
[23] Decent Jobs for Youth (2020).
[24] Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action (2020).
[25] Decent Jobs for Youth (2020).
[26] Search for Common Ground (2020).

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