

TRANSFORMATION OF THE YOUTH SECTOR DURING THE PANDEMIC CRISIS. ARE WE DOING ENOUGH?

Written by:

Coalition Of Youth Organisations SEGA, Republic Of North Macedonia

SEGA is a national platform of youth organisations in North Macedonia, with over 16 years' experience in lobbying for the needed legislation changes in youth participation, youth policies, employment, and activism. SEGA works on development and implementation of youth policies at local and national level, connects and strengthens youth organisations aiming to activate youth, and improves the conditions for their personal and professional development in the Republic of North Macedonia.

For more information, visit: www.sega.org.mk/en

Challenges posed by COVID-19 in North Macedonia

In 2020 and 2021, the civil society sector in North Macedonia, like the entire world, faced challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented situation affected the regular and everyday work of youth civil society. During 2020, the grassroots youth CSOs and informal youth groups reduced the physical activities and contact with youth, resulting in an immediate change to their regular dynamics. As a result, the young people suffered from lack of social communication, quality education and mental health issues that derived from this situation. The youngsters had reduced opportunities to participate in non-formal activities due to the restrictions in mobility and physical events which reflected in the overall quality of life of youth in the country.

COVID-19 required a shift toward using online platforms in many important aspects of life, but it did not happen equitably. Moving to online education nationally and civil society organisations switching programming to virtual, were two major changes and challenges. Although most of the young people were informed about these (virtual) opportunities, youngsters from urban areas were more interested to participate in online, non-formal activities rather than the rural youth. In addition, the rural women still do not have opportunities for quality participation in the local community life or quality access to education.



“COVID-19 required a shift toward using online platforms in many important aspects of life, but it did not happen equitably.”


Youth civil society adaptations

Resource re-allocation. One of the major difficulties that the civil society sector faced was the transformation of their current funds and resources to address the new situations. Many of them re-allocated funds to provide humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups of children and youth to support their education, which was seriously affected. The international community (donors and international organisations) enabled funds and grants for the CSOs to provide safety and hygiene products to the people living in poverty, vulnerable groups, the Roma population, and families from rural areas. Many of them donated computer equipment to children and youth to have access to education since the 2020/2021 school year was completed fully online. In this process, the CSOs and the international organisations focused mainly on children living in poverty, children from the Roma community and especially on children with disabilities.

Digital capacity. During 2021, based on the limited possibilities for physical activities and events, the civil society in North Macedonia and the youth organisations integrated hybrid methods of functioning, successfully combining online and offline activities. This adaptation process was supported by the international donor community, which required all CSOs to have detailed mitigation strategies and protocols in order to be prepared should specific restrictions occur. Therefore, the planning processes of civil society were improved by taking into consideration alternative ways of thinking and working.

The CSOs quickly adjusted their work using the available digital platforms and tools taking into consideration the digital competences of young people in order to meet their needs at virtual level. These changes were soon embraced by the civic society as a whole. Although it was born out of necessity, the positive aspect of this change was that the civil society learned new tools and methods for organising their work online and demonstrating productivity and success. Civil society organisations learned new digital tools and approaches that will stay with them even when the pandemic is over.

Some youth organisations improved collaboration with the high school and faculties to ensure co-ordination in the non-formal education activities and capacity building of the school staff as well to increase their skills for employing digital tools that would attract young people. Through online education and involvement in other, non-formal online activities, many young people have increased additional digital skills and have become better equipped with knowledge and skills to easily adapt in digital environments.



Certain donors, such as UNICEF, supported young people to develop specific digital tools that encourage young people to freely express themselves. Young people learned how to use a variety of digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and BlueJeans, as well as other platforms that provide interactive learning, including Padlet, Jamboard, and online survey tools. In addition, young people used social media as a platform not only to interact among themselves, but also to engage in certain activities. Civil society organisations as well, including SEGA, were very active in promoting the measures for prevention of COVID-19 on social media as the main channel to reach young people.

Mental health. Mental health has been an emerging issue among young people; it is becoming one of the top priorities of youth organisations and youth workers. The biggest challenge that affected the mental health and behaviours of young people is online education. During the beginning of the school year, based on the Ministry of Education and Science's decision to hold the school year online, new youth groups and movements emerged. Namely, the high school union became a major factor in advocacy and discussion with both the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Health. The union was recognised by the institutions and the civil society and importantly, by the high school students. The union is currently well positioned in the country, collaborating with civil society and the government institutions towards a better enabling environment for student participation. Some of the youth organisations are now integrating mental health support activities in their regular long-term programmes and activities.

“Through online education and involvement in other, non-formal online activities, many young people have increased additional digital skills and have become better equipped with knowledge and skills to easily adapt in digital environments.”

“The government needs to recognise youth groups as partners in specific decisions.”

Recommendations for civil society organisations

During the pandemic, SEGA as a national network of youth organisations, made all necessary changes to perform in a hybrid manner, using both online and offline methods. SEGA supported school staff and students on how to use digital tools to exercise their right to participate in school life. Considering that the pandemic caused higher rates of unemployment and low level of job offers for youth, SEGA provided support to young people to increase their employability skills and matched the young people with the private sector. As part of this process, SEGA actively advocated for improving the governmental employment measures for young people.

SEGA advocated to increase government efforts in connecting young people with employers and preparing them for easier integration in the labor market, through organising events at local and national level to gather the opinions of youth, CSOs and decision makers which resulted with Position Paper with specific recommendations which also emphasised stronger involvement of youth CSOs in such policy making processes. Based on the experiences of SEGA, the following are recommendations to civil society organisations to respond to the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Strengthen digital competences of CSO representatives to improve the programming and implementation processes particularly focused on working with youth. The CSOs should enhance their skills for data visualisation in order to maintain short, simple communication with young people and other stakeholders.
- Empower and encourage young people to exercise their right to opinion via the digital world through constant mentoring and support programmes with targeted youth.
- Increase focus to reach the underprivileged youth coming mainly from the rural areas, minorities, and youth with disabilities.
- Increase the base of constituents of the CSOs and develop volunteering programmes that will attract and involve young people for local community actions.
- Increase efforts for establishing collaboration with the educational institutions, in particular local secondary schools in order to jointly develop and perform educational activities with young people.



“Donors should increase their support to the youth sector to strongly empower young people, enable space for their cultural and democratic development, and to improve their life skills.”

Support needed for youth civil society

Youth organisations, networks, and informal youth groups need to be further recognised and promoted by the government at both local and national levels. The local institutions should be coordinated and act in partnership with the civic sector, particularly in strengthening the education, social services, and psycho-social support. The government needs to recognise youth groups as partners in specific decisions and needs to demonstrate this through supporting and promoting youth participation mechanisms that would function at all levels on a regular basis. This is to address the lack of government engagement with youth during the pandemic and consultation of youth on decisions being taken by local authorities. If young people feel that they are really part of the solutions, they will increase their trust in the institutions and the system as a whole. This will improve critical thinking and behavior of young people and support them to grow into leaders that can make significant changes. This will also increase the youth perspectives in the country and hopefully reduce the increasing youth migration.

Additionally, donors should increase their support to the youth sector to strongly empower young people, enable space for their cultural and democratic development, and to improve their life skills. This is very important, since the young people were the group that was most affected by the pandemic and they are still facing the consequences. Furthermore, CSO staff and youth group’s members should receive continuous capacity building on usage of digital tools in order to be able to regularly use them on an everyday basis and to be digitally competent to respond to youth needs. This particularly refers to the transfer of knowledge and skills to the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group of young people, as a support that could be provided from the youth sector. The CSOs also need technical resources such as technical equipment that will enable stable usage of the new digital tools.

This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.

