

CONVERSATIONS AND REFLECTIONS OF A NEW GENERATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN MADAGASCAR

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This report captures the reality of youth civil society (CSO) in Madagascar, and how they have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are an integral part of the development sector and play an important role in guaranteeing the successful functioning of any country, by demanding change, conducting research, and providing countless services to communities.

Most of the youth civil society organisations in Madagascar are made up of grassroots organisations and groups of young volunteers established at the local and community level, often not officially registered and with a limited operating budget. We spoke with 10 youth CSOs spread across the two target areas of the Development Alternative programme (Antsirabe and Moramanga) through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions carried out by a young researcher from YMCA Madagascar. The aim is to contribute to the general understanding of COVID-19's impact on youth civil society, existing gaps and ways to ensure the proper functioning of the youth CSO sector in Madagascar.

In this chapter, youth organisations namely reflect on:

- COVID-19's direct impact on their organisation
- The collaboration of youth CSOs with development actors during the COVID-19 pandemic.



"We had to stop all activities by young peer educators, who typically carry out community mobilisations, because we prioritise the health and safety of our members above all."

Head of an association based in Moramanga

As a result of these different questions and based on the conversations we had with youth CSOs, we concluded that:

1. Youth organisations have witnessed a decline in memberships and a significant restriction of their work during the pandemic.

The inability to carry out activities has led many organisations to lose nearly 50 per cent of both their members and the communities they work with. CSOs have also lost a large part of their staff (volunteers), because young people have preferred to find jobs to help their families instead of continuing to do volunteer work. This also applies to heads of organisations and (unpaid) board members. As a result, many youth CSOs were left in a state of inactivity due to competing priorities and the inability to continue working in an increasingly precarious social, health and economic context.

The organisations that have been able to proceed with their field activities are organisations that either already worked or pivoted to deliver public health support and continued to receive donor funding. Some youth CSOs were also able to negotiate a reallocation of their budget to respond to COVID-19, such as the distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), awareness-raising and disinfection of schools. However, only 9 per cent of the activities of youth CSOs consulted continued during the pandemic. Meanwhile, 55 per cent of activities were suspended altogether, without knowing when or how they will be resumed.

The pandemic thus shone a spotlight on the lack of stability and fragility of many youth CSOs in Madagascar. While some youth associations and movements still flourish, they can easily collapse in the face of problems, due to lack and loss of human and financial resources. In turn, this negatively affects youth CSOs' ability and confidence to step into their role in the civil society sector. At the same time, and possibly more dangerously, it perpetuates a negative feedback loop where donors and state agencies do not support or recognise organisations without a long-term track record and a formalised structure. This leaves CSOs with no choice but to depend on volunteers to function, an approach that has proven to be vulnerable and unsustainable.

"We have opted for a regular radio programme for raising awareness, in addition to various training courses in building communication skills. Internet sites and social networks are still difficult to access, especially for our targeted groups, who are young people based in rural areas and in the lower districts of the city."

**Tanora Garan'Teen
Vakinankaratra**


2. Youth CSOs in Madagascar struggled to go digital during the COVID-19 pandemic

Switching to remote work and using video conferencing tools like Zoom was a struggle for most youth CSOs in Madagascar because of the difficulty in accessing the internet for young people. The most popular communication channels are radio and Facebook which are accessible via mobile data. Internet costs are very expensive and feel like a luxury, rather than a necessity, for young people and communities. However, while online engagement and remote working is on the rise, Malagasy participants are left behind due to accessibility challenges, including low degrees of comfort in using digital tools.

Only 27 per cent of the youth CSOs consulted switched to digital ways of working during the pandemic. This trend widens the digital divide between civil society in Madagascar and other countries with accessible and reliable internet connection. Most importantly, youth CSOs in Madagascar miss out on capacity strengthening opportunities, such as MOOCs, and the chance to take part in and have their voice heard at global digital events and conversations. Thus, local youth organisations require support to strengthen their comfort with digital work and use of technology, to ultimately become a strong and influential youth sector at the community level and in the eyes of the government and global actors alike.

3. Youth CSOs should be actively included in dialogue processes with the government

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government conducted workshops and meetings via Zoom to make citizens and the civil society sector aware of the financial management of the fight against COVID-19, including the use of funds allocated by the state, endowments from multi-nationals and aid received from other countries to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on the Malagasy population. However, most youth CSOs were left out of these events, and those who attended the meeting were invited by larger NGOs who had work relationships with them. Even though the government is already taking a big step towards transparency and accountability, efforts must be redoubled to recognise the importance of including the voices and the active representation of the youth civil society in these discussions.



While relations with large NGOs already exist, the Malagasy State should gradually integrate youth CSOs and groups and thus ensure a better civic space and a favorable environment for youth civil society. No one knows what young people are going through better than young people themselves. They often interact directly with communities and other grassroots groups, and have a unique insight that needs to be considered. By engaging with young people via social networks and updating the database of existing CSOs in the country, youth organisations have a better chance of being represented in dialogue processes with the government.

Conclusion

This short spotlight taking a deeper dive into the situation of youth CSOs during the fight against Covid-19 shows that:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragile state of youth civil society in Madagascar. It has especially impacted the work and motivation of members for associations that do not have formalised structures or are not registered officially.
- Dynamic and highly-motivated youth CSOs focus their energy on development actions that affect the life of their community directly. However, there is no strong collaboration between the government and youth civil society. This misses the opportunity to create deeper partnerships with young people who have a unique understanding of what is happening on the ground and direct access to communities. This disconnect further undermines the government's accountability efforts towards the community, for example on the financial management of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Youth CSOs are not confident or clear about their role in the civil society sector. In addition to working on the ground to create social change within communities, they should be recognised as key actors in national and international dialogues to ensure democratisation and demand state accountability. The insufficient exchange of knowledge and resources within and for the sector hinders the effective functioning of youth CSOs and also undermines the confidence of young people to take on these roles. Large-scale collaborations with CSOs could help to understand these different functions and thus enable a new generation of youth civil society made up of strong, well-supported and influential young people.

This spotlight chapter is part of the [State of Youth Civil Society](#) global, youth-led publication.

