

Youth Partnership

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Surviving (and even thriving) during a crisis: the experiences of youth organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic¹

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Most research on young people during the pandemic has explored their invisibility with respect to the crisis, the disproportionate effect that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on youth, the reduction of their social life and its effects, the involvement of young people in social volunteering and solidarity action and the possible medium- and long-term consequences of the pandemic on young people, as a new “lost generation”. The pandemic has also significantly affected young people’s activities within the youth organisations, raising important questions regarding their functioning during the crisis and ability to promote youth participation and engagement during unstable periods.

What can we learn from this pandemic period relating to how youth organisations operate? How can these lessons be harnessed to promote meaningful participation and engagement by youth organisations in the long term, including through periods of crisis and instability?

¹ The case studies and examples in this article are based on an online survey of 87 youth organisations, youth councils and youth wings of political parties in Spain and Italy. The survey was conducted in February 2021 by the authors, Viviane Ogou Corbi and Gianluca Rossino.

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Youth participation and the important role of youth organisations

Young people across Europe are active in political, social and civic issues. In a 2019 Eurobarometer poll,² 72% of young people aged 15-30 said they voted in local, national or European elections, 65% said they follow current events on social media, and 58% said they volunteer or are involved in local community projects. Over four-in-ten (41%) of respondents participate in student or youth organisations.

Volunteering and participation in youth organisations are the third and fourth most popular activities, which may signal that traditional means of participation are being substituted by an increased engagement in organisations and community projects, whether cultural, sportive, social or political. However, the Covid-19 crisis disrupted many of the operations of youth organisations, causing impacts for the organisations themselves and, by extension, the participation of many young people. Despite these disruptions, Covid-19 was also seen to present some opportunities in unexpected ways.

Challenges (and opportunities) faced by youth organisations during Covid-19

The downsides: limiting in-person activities and the quick transition to digital

Prior to the pandemic, most activities of youth organisations were based on face-to-face activities, proving young people will seek opportunities to meet, co-operate, and interact with each other. Most digital youth work and digital communication at that time was secondary or even complementary to the main focus of in-person activities. As a result of the pandemic, however, this “order” switched, as physical distancing and other health regulations throughout Europe meant that traditional contexts and approaches were impossible or impractical. Multiple studies have profiled the challenges of the switch to online and digital approaches, which became the only available method of youth work in the pandemic.

Experiences from Italy and Spain echo this in our survey. During the pandemic, Italian youth organisations faced several obstacles to carrying out their activities, and political participation more broadly. The pandemic imposed strong limitations on face-to-face activities, forcing organisations to transfer online the activities that were previously realised inside youth centres or with local schools. Organisations involved as partners or co-ordinators of European mobility projects were forced to cancel or postpone all in-person mobility besides individual volunteering. In the case of hosting sports and cultural activities, the impossibility of developing them online often led organisations to paralysis.

Almost all organisations surveyed in Spain highlighted the negative impact of digitalisation. Organisations whose objectives centre around cultural activities or free-time education saw their capacity of engagement decreased. Socio-cultural organisations, such as El Corralito from Terrassa (Barcelona), could not share the artistic creations of young people with their

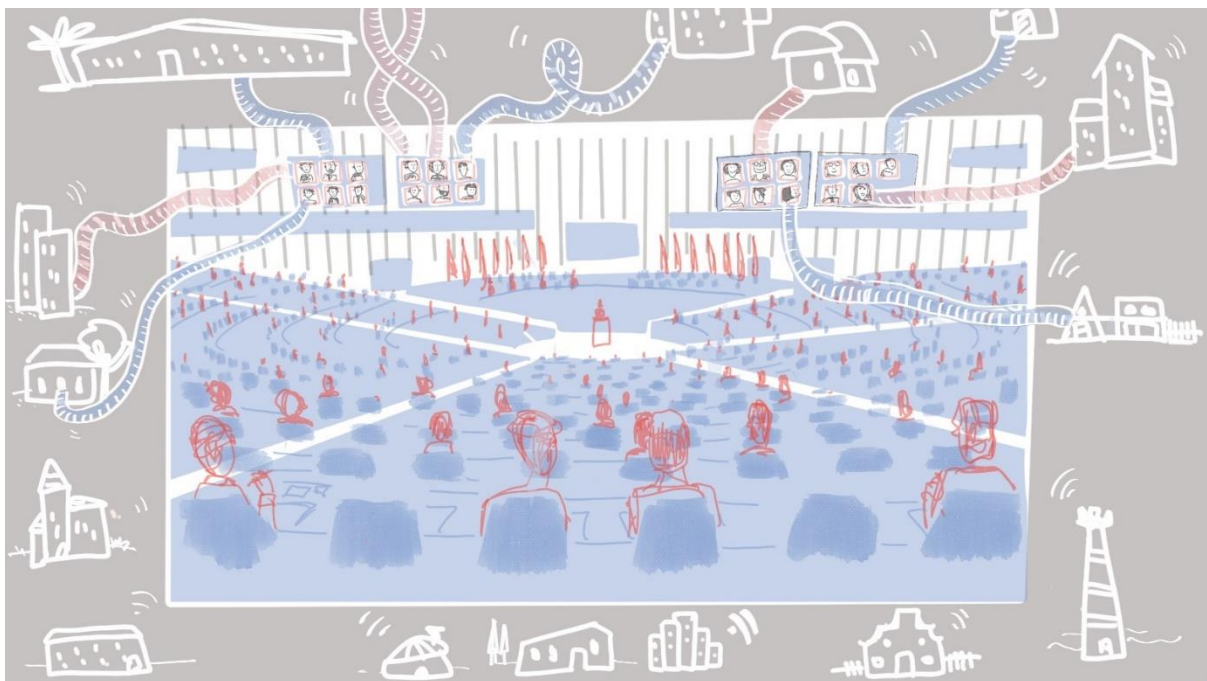
² European Commission (2019) Flash Eurobarometer 478. Report. How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people. Available at: www.kantarpublic.com/download/documents/155/Flash+Eurobarometer+-+Views+of+young+people.pdf, accessed: 15 December 2021.

neighbours, nor make them visible through social media or digital means, as art works were not scalable. Similarly, scout groups, whose action is so local and in-person, found it difficult to maintain the engagement with children and teenagers already exhausted from virtuality from their formal education spaces.

The upsides: an opportunity to grow an online presence and expand reach

In the case of Italy, some youth organisations were able to take advantage of the slowdown to make progress in their activities. The pandemic proved to be a good moment to launch projects, facilitating the spread of their activities and organisational growth in just a few months. One way they progressed was by developing the online space as another medium by which young people could be engaged in the public sphere.

Rete Giovani, an informal alliance between a number of Italian youth organisations, organised an online debate with influential political and academic figures called Stati Generazionali (an inter-generational states) in autumn 2020. Several articles were published on mainstream media reporting their proposals. More recently, two of the organisations of this informal youth network (Officine Italia and Visionary Days) launched the campaign Uno non Basta, addressing the very limited resources that early drafts of the national recovery plan dedicated to young people. This campaign collected over 100 000 support signatures via Change.org and was debated in a meeting called by the then-minister for EU affairs. These activities may not have been possible without the impetus that the lockdowns provided or the focus on online activities.



In Spain, a number of political and social organisations found digitalisation to be an opportunity to increase their impact. A case that illustrates the “positive” side of digitalisation for social organisations is Namu, from the Basque Country. The organisation evolved from the local to the international sphere during the lockdown, possibly due to the scalable nature of

its activities. Here, the move to digital methods helped expand its geographic reach and scale up parts of its work. Moreover, the European Parliament Office in Spain conducted monthly meetings with youth organisations and young individuals, involved young persons in juries, incorporated the opinions of youth in high-level conversations such as the State of the European Union, online. The participation of MPs was virtually facilitated, removing the difficulties that they might have had to travel from Brussels to Madrid for an afternoon activity, for example.

The downsides: loss of resources and lack of policy responses

In a survey by the RAY (Research-based analysis of European youth programmes) Network³ in August 2020 focused on youth work in Europe, more than half of the respondents said that the budget of their youth organisations decreased by more than 33%. Overall, there was a lack of national responses throughout the EU to support youth organisations. The loss of resources and lack of support might signal that youth organisations had not been identified as key providers of services needed in the time of the pandemic. By extension, young people who participate in youth organisations were not seen as a key demographic for policymakers, nor as key stakeholders who may be impacted by pandemic-time policies.

The upsides: the pandemic mobilised young people in advocacy

Despite these challenges, several youth organisations found ways to contribute to efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, complementing the activities of public bodies in countries such as France, Denmark and Romania, by disseminating public health information and providing support to vulnerable groups. In Spain, especially at the local level, local youth organisations received grants or technical support, together with invitations to official meetings intended to co-ordinate the response to the pandemic. This support was higher in cases when youth were providing social services or volunteering for the community.

Youth organisations also took the opportunity to demand more for young people and enhance their advocacy. In Italy, organisations aiming to influence the political debate increased the number of talks and events with the direct involvement of decision makers. Organisations were included in public consultations and their proposals considered in the decision-making process. For example, Rete Giovani's Change.org campaign *Uno non Basta*, which addressed the limited resources dedicated to young people in the national recovery plan, was debated in a meeting called by the then-minister for EU affairs. Several other Italian youth organisations surveyed had met with public authorities during the pandemic, and two were included in decision-making processes, seeing an improvement of their relationship with authorities.

In Spain, the youth organisation *Equipo Europa* had been meeting more frequently with authorities since May 2020, mainly because they had been willing to do more advocacy since

³ RAY Network (2020) Policy Brief. Youth Work and the Corona pandemic in Europe. Available at: www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RAY-COR_Policy-Brief-September_20200915.pdf, accessed 15 December 2021.

the beginning of the pandemic. Meetings were held with Commissioners, MEPs and EU member state representatives to bring forward proposals mostly related to the national resilience plan and countering unemployment. The organisation increased focus on advocacy coincided with an increased reach on social media (over 5 000 followers on Instagram) and an increase in membership, when in September 2020 it quadrupled its membership base during a new round of applications.

Moreover, organisations that were already focusing on advocacy and political engagement even experienced growth since adapting their advocacy to an online format. Similarly, the youth organisation *Puerta de África*, which aims to train, connect and activate young people from Africa and Europe to end racism and co-lead social change, saw its membership increased, and engaged with public authorities and institutions.

Ways forward for youth organisations: how to survive (and maybe even thrive) during a crisis

Youth organisations that appeared to survive best during the pandemic had the following features, which can be instructive to other youth organisations on how to survive during a crisis:

- During the first 12 months of the pandemic, it appeared crucial for youth organisations to develop their internal and external capacities. The process of adaptation for each organisation should follow a concrete strategic plan, with a high degree of participation internally and where the goals in terms of advocacy are clearly defined.
- Youth organisations that had highly organised internal structures, running regular meetings and thematic and functional internal working groups, managed to cope well with the unpredictability of Covid-19.
- The Covid-19 pandemic showed us that the ability of youth organisations to adapt and embrace the opportunities of the digital world is fundamental for their potential growth. Youth organisations that were willing and had the competence to improve social media contents, through focusing on the quality of contents, the personalisation of communication styles, and the capacity to respond to young people's needs for information, transitioned well to the online space during Covid-19.
- Zoom meetings created more possibilities to engage in a direct dialogue with cabinets of ministries and members of parliaments and in virtual roundtables facilitated by institutions like the European Parliament Office in Spain. The online space provides new environments where political debates can take place and in which civil society can find a place to express itself. New social media platforms, like Clubhouse, could open up even more possibilities for political engagement, as they gain more popularity and subscribers every week. Youth organisations should seek out and take advantage of these new channels, where spaces for dialogue are facilitated by reliable institutions.

- Focusing on specific political topics as targets for advocacy, such as resilience plans for the Covid-19 pandemic, national budget laws, or youth unemployment measures, can lead to more concrete results in the policy processes that youth organisations wish to influence. When the focus is put on the current pressing issues, decision makers can take into consideration the real proposals addressing specific legislation, that are directly produced by the target population. In instances where institutions invite dialogue with civil society, youth organisations can bring innovative solutions and shared proposals.

Final thoughts

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed youth workers, youth organisations and decision makers to re-evaluate spaces and opportunities dedicated to young people in today's societies. Challenges, such as limited in-person interaction, the quick transition to digital, and a lack of funding and focus from policy makers, could also be opportunities. Youth organisations adapted, used the digital space to their advantage, grew their membership, and used the pause in everyday life to crystallise their advocacy and demand for inclusion of youth voices in decision making.

The work of youth organisations never stops. They must establish appropriate strategies for tackling and representing the concrete needs of the young population to those in power, using relevant data from their target groups, to guide their strategic development and foster the relevance of their activities. In fact, as the experience with Covid-19 pandemic shows us, the role of youth organisations becomes even more important in times of crisis.

Authors

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