Youth Partnership

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Briefing 2: An Introduction to Research on the Impact of Covid-19 on the Youth Sector

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1. What is the aim of this briefing?

The EU- Council of Europe youth partnership runs the [Knowledge HUB: COVID-19 impact on the youth sector](#) with updates on research studies and analysis relevant for the youth sector. This briefing is created by the team of researchers within the framework of this project aiming to conduct meta-analysis of the existing body of research and results of surveys run across Europe, and provide a review of existing results and emerging gaps. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the world socially and economically, resulting in a global recession. The impact of the pandemic has been felt particularly strongly by young people. This briefing explores the initial findings of research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector, with a focus on the following areas: **youth participation, digitalisation and AI, social inclusion and national realities**.

2. The impact of Covid-19 on youth participation

2.1 Key studies on youth participation

In a first search, we will find that at this moment the main reports on youth participation are covered by different organisations, such as, among others, OECD, Eurochild, Salto-Youth, European Union, European Youth Forum and The Lancet. Through their own questionnaires and analysis, these studies focus on how young people participate during this Covid-19 times and what impact it has on them and their context.

Without a doubt, the ones that stand out the most today are: [Building on Rainbows: Supporting Children's Participation in Shaping Responses to COVID-19](#) (Eurochild, 2020), [Student voices: Fighting to be heard during the Covid-19 exam chaos](#) (Salto, 2020), [Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe](#) (EYF, 2020), [Community participation is crucial in a pandemic](#) (Marston, Renedo and Miles, 2020) and [Eastern Partnership Youth Engagement Summit Final Report](#) (EU, 2020).

2.2. Highlights from studies on youth participation

- The Covid-19 has reduced the participation of both youth and youth organisations. Likewise, it is observed that the channels of access to information and participation for youth have been neglected during the pandemic.
- According to the European Youth Forum (2020), one in three youth organisations experience difficulties in accessing information from the government; almost a half of them have difficulties expressing themselves because of fear of retribution from the government; and one in ten is not even able to freely use the internet.
- In this same line, Eurochild (2020) could barely identify a single COVID-19 related children's participation initiative (local or national). At the same time, they expressed that children's participation activities were more provision of information and not any practical governmental action. In this regard, they underscore the importance of generating ways to work directly with children and young people to gather their views about what they need.

At first instance, the main messages are the following:

- One in eight youth organisations experienced difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and two in five of them do not feel certain that their participation will not result in some form of retribution (EYF, 2020).
- One fourth of organisations are not fully capable of engaging in advocacy activities due to their fear of retribution, and experience at least some difficulties in participating in the processes of deliberation and decision-making (EYF, 2020).
- Three out of four organisations are never, or very rarely, invited to participate in the formulation of solutions at local level, and three out of six at the national level (EYF, 2020).
- Community participation is a way for youth to participate, co-create responses to the pandemic, incorporate their voices to the decision-making and build future resilience (Marston, Renedo and Miles, 2020).

2.3 Main gaps from studies on youth participation

- Due to the immediacy of responding to the pandemic consequences, studies have not yet focused on the challenges associated with digital participation, such as digital inclusion, accessibility, surveillance, privacy, and digital literacy.
- At the same time, it is urged that research deepen into the serious obstacles faced by young people in accessing participation spaces (off and online) during this pandemic and their underrepresentation in these spaces.

3. The impact of Covid-19 on digitalisation and AI

3.1 Key studies on digitalisation and AI

Several studies have focused on the transition from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning for students in school at all grades and across countries. Concerning youth sections of the population, school and education has been the field in which digitalisation has had the biggest impact as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study by the OECD (2020a) was already stressing in March challenges and opportunities for "embracing digital learning and online collaboration", even in the long-term. Among the long-term opportunities, it stressed how "the need to explore how students can learn in different places and at different times will help countries better understand the potential of digital learning solutions (...)" such as more autonomy. Concerns, however, were raised over access to broadband connection at home, especially in remote and rural areas; access to devices, a challenge for lower-income households; and lack of basic digital skills among students and teachers, particularly among younger and less experienced students (OECD 2020b). The EU Commission has also pointed out to many of these aspects in its recent strategic action plan for digital education (2021-2027), announcing strategic actions for the deployment of the vast growing array of digital technologies (apps, platforms, software) to improve and extend education and training, and to equip all learners with digital competences.

A second area of inquiry concerns the use of digital technologies and AI to help young people combat COVID-19. An important survey conducted in Germany (2020) in the context of the "Artificial Intelligence for personalized digital mental health promotion and prevention in youth" investigated the associations between social isolation, cognitive preoccupation, worries, and anxiety, objective social risk indicators and psychological distress and mobile health (mHealth) interventions in youth. Major findings stressed how public health measures during pandemics may be associated with poor mental health in youth and digital interventions may help mitigate the negative psychological impact. In this respect, the WHO has released a comprehensive document for "Youth-centred digital health interventions" to promote better digital health among youth and adolescents, based on a framework including a targeted literature review, consultations, interviews,

workshops and inputs from experts and young people. Another [study focusing on LGBTQ youth](#) stressed the importance of synchronous, text-based online platforms "to enable LGBTQ youth to feel safe to seek support while at home", as a consequence of long-term physical distancing, particularly for those youths being isolated with unsupportive families.

Finally, the National Youth Council of Ireland has also published a [guide](#) with important tips to conduct youth work in an online setting. The guide highlights importantly that it is not only media literacy that matters but also issues of safety, consent, confidentiality, and ethics. In this sense, a [study commissioned by the European Union-Council of Europe youth partnership](#) (2020) has pointed to the challenges that state and non-state actors face in responding to young people's needs in the online world. According to the study, education and skills, mental health, employment, information and counselling, online safety constitute the biggest challenges that need to be addressed through "well-designed, evidenced based and tailored made" solutions where digital tools are part of a human-centric approach.

3.2. Highlights from studies on digitalisation and AI

- Strategic actions from different stakeholders should focus on the transition from face-to-face to online learning by providing students and teachers with the necessary digital skills, as well as access to devices, platforms, apps, and Internet connection. Benefits may arise for students through online learning in terms of increased autonomy, flexibility and creativity.
- Digital solutions should be implemented in order to mitigate the negative psychological impact of public health measures on youth (i.e. mHealth, digital health), as a consequence of social isolation and physical distancing.
- Importance of cyber-counseling and other digital solutions (secured chats, digital youth work) to support marginalized youth, especially those living in unsupportive family environments.
- Integrate digital considerations into policies, ethical standards, processes and planning of youth work. Particular attention should be devoted to safety and ethical concerns.

3.3 Main gaps from studies on digitalisation and AI

- Issues related to the digital divide have been acknowledged by many actors, even prior to COVID-19, yet comprehensive studies showing how this may impact young people's experiences, such as students' performances, the building of social capital, youth participation in political and social life more broadly - among others - are still missing. In the current situation, such studies and analyses, inclusive of good practices and recommendations are extremely needed.
- The role played by AI with respect to policies and sectors involving and addressing young people remains unaddressed by current analyses.
- More perspectives from young people should be integrated in future studies in order to gain a better assessment of their role as users, consumers, and individuals in digital technologies.

4. The impact of Covid-19 on social inclusion

4.1. Key studies on social inclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in severe economic and social impacts around the world and shook the world along existing fault lines of exclusion, inequality and disadvantage, revealing deep set gaps in access to essential services and secure livelihoods among social groups in many societies. The studies and briefs collected in this section summarize the socio-economic impacts of

COVID-19 on young people and provide evidence on inequalities around the COVID-19 pandemic reflected through exposure, vulnerabilities and coping capacity. For instance, COVID-19 pandemic has exposed multiple injustices and forms of oppression experienced by the most vulnerable groups, which includes young people experiencing poverty, incarceration, foster care, homelessness, and those with marginalized identities (OECD 2020a, UN DESA). Furthermore, studies highlight how children may be victims of increased levels of poverty, an exacerbation of the learning crisis through schools' closure (including the digital divide), and threats to child survival, health, and safety. Policy briefs furthermore reveal how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected immigrants and their children in terms of health, jobs, education, language training and other integrations measures, and public opinion, and describes (host) countries' policy responses (OECD 2020c). The briefs also identify policy responses and a series of immediate and sustained actions for governments and policymakers, highlighting that this crisis calls for global solutions, intergenerational solidarity and innovative, inclusive policy solutions (UN 2020). Some of them focus on how to ensure that a gender lens is well-integrated through response, recovery and prevention efforts to COVID-19 in development co-operation (OECD 2020b). Importantly, it was pointed out that the Covid-19 response must be done in a way that protects the human rights of all young people that form a key element in an inclusive recovery and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action (UN DESA).

4.2. Highlights from studies on social inclusion

- Young people are particularly vulnerable to the disruptions the pandemic has caused, and many are now at risk of being left behind in education, economic opportunities, and health and wellbeing during a crucial stage of their life development. Young people are more likely to be unemployed or to be in precarious job contracts and working arrangements, and thus, lack adequate social protection.To turn the tide on inequality, countries should: accelerate the setting up of systems to ensure universal provision of quality services such as healthcare, education, sanitation and social protection; identify the differentiated impacts of COVID-19 and empower vulnerable groups through the collection and communication of disaggregated data; invest in jobs and livelihoods in resilient and sustainable sectors; and act through the multilateral system to respond to disparities across countries (UN DESA).
- The response and recovery must support the youth, by providing adequate universal health coverage; maintaining or increasing funding and investments in young people's health, education and skills development, entrepreneurship, and employment opportunities; improve work conditions; and enhance their civic participation. Social protection systems must ensure all young people are covered, including those that are currently not supported.
- To avoid exacerbating intergenerational inequalities and to involve young people in building societal resilience, governments need to anticipate the impact of mitigation and recovery measures across different age groups, by applying effective governance mechanisms and developing policies that reach vulnerable and marginalised youth, including migrants and refugees, youth living in rural areas, adolescent girls and young women, indigenous and ethnic minority youth, young persons with disabilities, young people of different sexual orientations and gender identities, and homeless youth (OECD2020a).

4.3. Main gaps from studies on social inclusion

- Many vulnerable young people such as migrants or homeless youth are in precarious situations. They are the ones who can easily be overlooked if governments do not pay specific attention, as they tend to be already in a situation without even their minimum requirements being met on health, education, employment and well-being.
- Strengthen national capacities to collect, analyse and disseminate data disaggregated by age, gender and other population characteristics, especially for addressing the most marginalized and vulnerable youth groups during and after this pandemic.

- Consult and engage youth in the development of health, economic and social interventions in response to COVID-19 and in its recovery.
- Promote innovation by youth for the prevention and treatment of COVID-19, and the management of its corollary socioeconomic impacts.
- Respect, promote and protect the human rights of young people, including the right to non-discrimination.

5. National Realities

5.1 Key studies on national realities

A number of studies have emerged on the national realities relating to the impact of COVID-19 on the youth sector in European countries. These studies have been conducted by various stakeholders including government departments responsible for the youth sector, national youth councils/agencies, universities and research consortiums. Examples of national studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the youth sector include the UK Youth study on [The impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector](#); YouthLink Scotland, the National Agency for Youth Work, study on [The COVID-19 Crisis: The impact on youth work and young people](#); the National Youth Council of Ireland [Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic](#); and the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) [COVID-19 crisis management in youth field in Estonia](#). Databases bringing together information on good practice and initiatives in the youth sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have also emerged. The Council of Europe [Good Practices Database](#) provides examples of good practice in youth policy and youth work responses to COVID-19 from member states and partners. It also offers guidance for youth workers, trainers, youth organisations and young people to meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictive measures.The European Youth Card Association [Initiatives during the COVID-19 outbreak by EYCA member organisations](#) presents initiatives implemented by different EYCA member organisations to support young people during the Covid-19 outbreak.

5.2 Highlights from studies on national realities

- The impact of COVID-19 on the youth work sector is a common theme in national studies. For example, YouthLink Scotland survey of Youth Work Sector Leaders and their immediate response to the pandemic, [The COVID-19 Crisis: The impact on youth work and young people](#), highlights challenges such as access to immediate funding, digital barriers, mental health and cuts to services. UK Youth study of 235 youth organisations on the [impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector](#) highlights issues such as a reduction in youth workers, reduction in funding and a shift for youth services to engage with young people digitally.
- A number of national studies have highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people. For example, a study by the National Youth Agency in the UK, [Vulnerable Young People: covid-19 Response,](#) analysed the condition of vulnerable youth with emerging needs triggered or caused by COVID-19. Similarly, research conducted by the National Youth Council of Ireland [on the Youth Work Sector Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic](#) found that young people who were already deemed 'most at risk' became the most disconnected from youth services and support as a result of Covid-19.
- Many of the national studies have focused on the impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health. The Emerging Minds Network in the UK [Co-SPACE study](#) is tracking children and young people and their families in the UK, Ireland, Iran, Denmark and the US to see how they are coping with the challenges of COVID-19. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland conducted a [national consultation with young people on mental health and well-being](#) in relation to the impact of Covid-19. A study conducted by the

Universidad Miguel Hernández and Università degli Studi di Perugia investigates the [Immediate psychological effects of the COVID-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain](). Research conducted in Germany on [Social isolation, mental health, and use of digital interventions in youth during the COVID-19 pandemic]() investigates the associations between social isolation, cognitive preoccupation, worries, and anxiety, objective social risk indicators, psychological distress as well as use of, and attitude towards, mobile health interventions in youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.3 Main gaps from studies on national realities

- As the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent occurrence, some countries have not yet had an opportunity to respond to the impact of the pandemic on the youth sector in terms of research. Countries who have responded swiftly are perhaps the countries with the strongest research history in the youth sector and research infrastructure and funding in place.
- Research on the long-term impact of COVID-19 is a gap in studies. It is clear the impact of COVID-19 on the youth sector will not be fully understood for some time as the pandemic is still ongoing.
- Youth policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at a national level is another area where more research studies could be developed.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research examined shows COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all aspects of young people's lives and the youth organisations that support them. In the area of youth participation and youth work, physical restrictions on young people interacting face-to-face has changed the way they engage and interact in these areas. There has been an immediate shift to online engagement in the youth sector. The digitalisation of youth services has many positive aspects but also brings challenges for young people such as unequal digital skills, access to technology and negative impacts on mental health and well-being. However, there is an opportunity to engage with young people online in a meaningful manner. For example, youth mental health services such as counselling can be effectively delivered online to more young people than in a face-to-face context.

This paper also shows that vulnerable and at risk young people such as young people from ethnic minorities, young people experiencing homelessness and LGBTI+ young people have been affected more by COVID-19 than other groups of young people. A gender divide in terms of COVID-19 impacting more on young women than men is also evident from the literature. The vulnerable situation of at risk groups of young people is further impacted by issues such as the rise in youth unemployment due to the pandemic.

Finally, national realities show many European countries are experiencing similar impacts of COVID-19 on young people and their youth sectors. For example in the area of youth work, the impact on vulnerable young people and mental health and well-being. However, as the pandemic is still ongoing, there are many countries who have not yet researched the impact of COVID-19 or are still in the process of conducting research. Therefore, the full picture of the impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector is not yet apparent. The long-term impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector is a key area which will only emerge with time.