

CONSOLIDATED  
RESEARCH STUDY REPORT



Youth-Led Action Research on  
**THE IMPACT OF  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**  
on Marginalised Youth



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# executive SUMMARY

**Spanning geographies**, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives. **Globally, an estimated 147 million people, mainly small traders and migrant wage labourers, have been rendered unemployed** since the initial spread of the pandemic and the imposition of nationwide lockdowns. Stories of migrants undertaking perilous and frantic journeys of hundreds of miles to get home – stuck at bus stops, inside factories, in dilapidated settlements in industrial areas, starving and experiencing a total loss of bearing – have been shared widely in the mainstream media. So have stories of refugees struggling to access fragile health, social welfare, communications and governance systems; and of families coping with the loss of loved ones- all translated into statistics and comparative data sets.

The nationwide lockdowns and the resultant closure of educational institutions and markets have reportedly led to a rise in several shadow pandemics: of digital divides and school dropouts, of unemployment and food insecurity, of domestic violence and child marriages, of fake news and social stigma, and of physical disorders and mental illnesses. Thus, among the most vulnerable, but also further excluded from the mainstream discourse and phases of planning during the pandemic, have been the vulnerable youth, whose everyday lives and future aspirations have taken a serious hit in the ‘new normal’. They continue to face significant disruptions and changes on multiple fronts, at home, their community and the economy. Yet, as this pandemic continues to exacerbate, several youth have also been at the forefront amongst those mobilizing to shape creative forms of resistance, solidarity, and claim-making, particularly for social protection and relief assistance.

Thus, the **‘Youth-led Action Research on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Marginalised Youth’** is a study that is born from and within these undocumented voices of different groups of marginalised youth in the Asia-Pacific region during the COVID-19 pandemic. Anchored in a participatory, action-research framework and fueled by first-hand, ground-up narratives and experiences of the youth, the youth-led study trains the spotlight on the COVID-19 pandemic beyond the paradigm of statistics and data points. The research has documented experiences from nine member countries of ASPBAE from the Asia-Pacific region, including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu. The data for the study was collected between the months of May and August 2020, when the world was in the thick of closure and early disruptions steered by the rapid global health crisis. By centering the community youth as key stakeholders/ leaders in their roles as both researchers and participants, the study provides a fine-grained understanding of individual everyday lives, survival mechanisms, and resistances. The key objectives of the study include: (i.) to understand the situation of marginalised youth amid the COVID-19 crisis, (ii.) to gauge the impact of the pandemic on education, livelihood, health and well-being, (iii.) to document channels of information and access on COVID-19, (iv.) and to document key recommendations from the youth for the government and civil society to improve infrastructure, services and access.

The study, thus, attempts to link the home to the community, and the community to national agendas at large.

# Acknowledgments

*“When we went to undertake interviews, several participants were hesitant at first. At some places we were even chased and attacked by dogs. But we were determined to complete the study. We did not give up.”*

*Young researcher, Mongolia*

**Kudos to all the youth researchers** who braved the pandemic to get in touch with peers in their communities during the pandemic! Your persistence in talking with young people from marginalized communities gave insights on what the youth are experiencing, thinking about and doing themselves to help communities.

This report on Youth-led Action Research on the Impact of COVID 19 Pandemic on Marginalized Youth’s Education and Well-being (YAR COVID 19) is a synthesis of the country research studies conducted in nine countries by members of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE). Reports were compiled, developed, translated and shared by respective teams. ASPBAE would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions from the following members:

1. Campaign for Popular Education, Bangladesh
2. Abhiviyakti Media for Development, India
3. Association for Women in Small Business Enterprise (ASPPUK) and National Education Watch (NEW) Indonesia, Indonesia
4. All for Education, Mongolia
5. National Campaign for Education, Nepal

6. Civil Society Network for Education Reforms, E-Net Philippines, Philippines
7. Coalition for Educational Development, Sri Lanka
8. Civil Society Education Partnership, Timor-Leste
9. Kolisen Blong Leftemap Education, Vanuatu

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# introduction

## THE SOARING CURVE

*“The government of Mongolia couldn’t take the necessary action to assist the marginalised youth to cope with the hardships during the lockdown. Several young people lost their jobs and their incomes, they had to take a loan, surrender their homes. They lived by the day.”*

*Young female participant in Mongolia*

**COVID-19 has created** an unprecedented crisis globally, disrupting the lives of millions of individuals as well as their families, economies and communities. Spanning geographies, the crisis, which was initially considered to be only a health setback, has ever since rapidly progressed into an unprecedented social and economic disaster. News editorials, viral retweets, government announcements and Whatsapp forwards soon began to reveal that at the centre of this burgeoning situation, were those living on the margins, including migrant labourers, racial, ethnic and sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, the homeless, the elderly, and low-income women.

In the Philippines, for instance, the number of young individuals reporting mental health setbacks began to surge ([Malindog-Uy, 2020](#)). The massive loss of livelihoods and incomes, the uncertainty associated with the availability of a vaccine in the market, and the strict lockdown measures enforced as a part of the ‘Enhanced Community Quarantine’, has led to nearly a five-time high in the number of calls received on the national mental health hotline. The island nation already has among the highest rates of depression in the Southeast Asia region. In Nepal, meanwhile, between 1.6 and 2.0 million jobs are likely to have been disrupted amid the pandemic-induced lockdown ([ILO, 2020](#)), either

with complete job loss or reduced working hours and wages. In rural parts of India, with only 4% of households having access to the internet, ([Menon, 2020](#)) dropout rates among school-going children has been on the rise ever since.

Thus, while the observed short-term health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people has appeared to be less severe than for older generations ([Ferguson et al., 2020](#)), they have had to bear severely the economic, social and cultural impacts that the pandemic has had and is continuing to have across sectors and societies. In fact, even before the onset of the crisis, the social and economic integration of young people was an ongoing challenge. According to the 2020 ‘Youth and COVID-19’ report published by the International Labour Organization ([ILO, 2020](#)), for instance, of the young people who were either studying or combining study and work before the onset of the crisis, three-quarters experienced school closures, yet not all were able to transition into online and distance learning. Indeed, COVID-19 left one in eight young people without any access to courses, teaching or training; a situation particularly acute among youth in lower-income countries and one that serves to underline the sharp digital divides that exist between regions. The pandemic is also inflicting a heavy toll on young workers, destroying

their employment and undermining their career prospects. One in six young people who were employed before the outbreak, stopped working altogether, most notably younger workers aged 18-24, and those in clerical support, services, sales, and crafts and related trades.

Meanwhile, in its 'COVID19: A threat to progress against child marriage' report, UNICEF has indicated that over the next decade, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic. The risk of child marriage increases through various pathways, including economic shocks, school closures and interruptions in services. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))

The health pandemic, further compounded by the extreme disruption of learning, working and marriage, has been particularly hard on young women, younger youth and youth in lower-income countries. Thus, Covid-19 is increasing inequalities and exposing the existing vulnerabilities of patriarchal control, racial and caste discrimination and capitalist extraction. Now, unless urgent action is taken, young people are likely to suffer severe and long-lasting impacts from the pandemic.

Steered by this extreme destruction and uncertainty on the one hand, and compelling stories of struggle and survival of the youth on the other, this study reports the **findings from the Youth-led Action Research on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Marginalised Youth** conducted by the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) and its members in nine countries including India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Philippines, Mongolia, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu between May and August 2020. This research was undertaken at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic had rapidly progressed into an economic crisis. The participatory action-research study aims to capture the immediate effects of the pandemic on the lives of marginalised youth with respect to

their employment, education, mental and physical health, and to document their recommendations. Given the ground-up, field action-research model, a large proportion of the voices documented as a part of the study belonged to those youth situated at the fringes, previously unheard and undocumented given the broader socio-economic and digital divides.

History has shown us that a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can have protracted and severe consequences for younger populations, who are already starting to be termed the "lockdown generation" ([ILO Budapest, 2020](#)). To support and amplify youth voices and actions, this study further documents recommendations provided to key institutional stakeholders such as the government and civil society, to call for urgent, targeted and inclusive investments to strengthen the productive potential of an entire generation.

This youth-led study focused on four areas of impacts on young people: namely, education, livelihood, health and well-being. It also brings to focus the various sources of information used by the youth in the nine different countries to stay informed about the unfolding pandemic and its short-term and long-term implications. At a time when fieldwork had to be either halted or postponed due to the stringent lockdown measures, it was the community-based participatory action research framework of the study that enabled the grassroots' youth researchers to unearth an insider's view of the crisis. The study thus provides crucial information on how the pandemic affected the lives of young people in marginalised communities and neighbourhoods from ground zero. The research also documented the volunteer work that young people initiated to help their communities in the time of the pandemic.

This report is organized into four sections. The first section provides an insight into the participatory action research approach adopted by the youth researchers in the study to collect and document



their data. The next section provides an overall synthesis of the findings from the various countries, by addressing the key indicators of education, livelihood, health and well-being, and dissemination of information. The third section will provide fine-grained reports from each of the countries, clearly highlighting the lives and experiences in context. The last section will provide recommendations from the youth to key stakeholders, including the state and civil society. Powerful stories and first-hand accounts of the youth will punctuate the entire narrative report.

As a transnational network, ASPBAE has initiated this process of Youth-led Action-oriented Research to understand the different dimensions of the youth in adversity, and engage them more effectively with the local community through member organisations. By doing so, ASPBAE aims to engage them in its advocacy efforts to influence policy and practice-change discourses.



# making methods

## A NARRATIVE OF TRAJECTORIES

*"I do not know when the pandemic will end. All I know is that if it prolongs, our livelihoods, education, and ultimately, even our futures will be at stake."*

*Joniel Martin Bebedor, 17, Quezon City in Philippines*

### The field data collection for the youth-led action

research study commenced at a time when COVID-19 infections began to spread around the world at a significant scale. Following the initial havoc caused by the stigma, fear and uncertainty associated with the disease, the situation translated into further socio-economic disruption after government borders were sealed, markets were shut, institutions pulled down their shutters, and everyone was strictly asked to 'stay home, stay safe'.

It was during this time that ASPBAE mentored and worked closely with member organisations situated in nine countries, who were already working with and for the local youth. Following close consultations with ASPBAE members, the scope and scale of the research study was laid out. Even as the broader frontiers of the research were common, each of the partner organisations were asked to design their research and instruments as well as identify their own youth action researchers and participants to stay true to their work and contexts. Accordingly, several meetings and capacity-building workshops were facilitated locally for the selected youth action researchers, making use of both, digital and in-person interactions.

Below is a summary table of the various partner organisations who helped steer this research study on the ground:



COUNTRY	MEMBER PARTNER ORGANISATIONS
Bangladesh	<i>Campaign for Popular Education</i>
India	<i>Abhiviyakti Media for Development</i>
Indonesia	<i>ASPPUK and New Indonesia</i>
Mongolia	<i>All for Education</i>
Nepal	<i>National Campaign for Education</i>
Philippines	<i>Civil Society Network for Education Reforms, E-Net Philippines</i>
Sri Lanka	<i>Coalition for Educational Development</i>
Timor-Leste	<i>Civil Society Education Partnership</i>
Vanuatu	<i>Kolisen Blong Leftemap Education</i>

In general, all the organisations interviewed at least 20 youth participants in their regions, but the categories of youth chosen were context dependent. Thus, in India, Abhivyakti Media for Development documented the voices and experiences of the historically marginalised and economically disadvantaged adolescent girls in northern Maharashtra; in Sri Lanka, Coalition for Educational Development worked closely with youth from the plantation, farming and fishing communities, as well as, youth from sexual minority groups and with disabilities. In Indonesia, meanwhile, the youth researchers from NGOs New Indonesia and ASPPUK interviewed groups of students, teaching staff, young entrepreneurs, young mothers, and fisherfolk. The overall geographical scope of the study was left to the partner organisations to decide based on the logistical constraints associated with nationwide lockdowns and strict government crackdowns. Most of the groups adopted ethnographic, semi-informal tools to collect the data, which spanned questions related to their experiences of digital schools, unemployment, access to government services and infrastructure, among others. Considering the youth researchers were also from the communities they were undertaking research with they were also already deeply embedded in the socio-political and economic dynamics of the region. This ensured a relatively free flow of conversations and information exchange. In several cases, it was nearly impossible for the

researchers to conduct in-person interviews due to the restrictions and social distancing norms. Which is why, telephonic and video interviews were facilitated in such cases. In the Philippines, for instance, Civil Society Network for Education Reforms, E-Net Philippines, documented video footage of the interviews and even put social media to use. They organized a Facebook event in collaboration with Lapis Seesaw Channel (KALABAG!). In India, meanwhile, plans to capture the respondents' self-expression through videos and photo essays could not be executed in certain cases owing to the technical and lockdown restrictions. Thus, interviews became the safest and most feasible option for data collection and exchange.

After the completion of the data collection process, the researchers then worked closely as a team to process and analyse the interview transcripts. Accordingly, individual country reports were documented highlighting the impacts of COVID-19 on the education, livelihoods, health and well-being of the youth. Based on the findings documented, the youth action researchers subsequently formulated a set of key recommendations for their governments with the intent to build an inclusive and representative response system to combat the long-term intersecting inequalities brought about by COVID-19 on the lives of vulnerable youth.



# connecting the dots FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE

*"This time of COVID-19 has caused great hardship for us. Markets and transportation were paused. We were out of vegetables, as vegetables are not growing in our village. They are out of basic spices. They have run out of money. Some families have nearly ten members and not all of them have their names on the ration cards. So, they couldn't get the entitled ration. And in the absence of livelihoods, from where are we expected to earn?"*

*Chandrakala Pawar, Boripada, Maharashtra, INDIA*

**In March 2020**, a few days before the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared on national television to announce an overnight 21-day nationwide lockdown, Chandrakala Pawar had returned to her village. With the loss of jobs and closure of markets, in the days that followed, her family struggled to make ends meet. The savings began to deplete, and soon enough, there were no vegetables left to cook and eat. In the Philippines, around the same time, 13-year-old Raiza May had to stop attending school. Her mother's business of selling rice cakes, which May supported, had also been brought to a grinding halt, pushing the single parent-run household to the brink of poverty. "Many small businesses and livelihoods are affected including selling which is our family's only source of income...our present situation has also affected me mentally, being anxious of the future as the virus continues to spread to communities," rued May, a resident of Bagbag in Quezon City.

Separated by geographies, but linked by their shared stories of vulnerability and survival amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Pawar and May are participants in the youth-led action research study conducted by partners of ASPBAE. The study stitches together the first-hand lived experiences and challenges of marginalised youth as they

grappled to come to terms with the pandemic and the ensuing nationwide lockdowns. Drawing from personal narratives documented by youth action researchers in the member organisations in nine countries between March and May 2020, this section connects the local and contextual, to the transnational and global.

## **i. No Schools, No Screens:**

To curb the spread of the pandemic among the youth, early on, most countries called for a complete closure of schools, universities, and other educational institutions. Overnight, physical classrooms gave way to virtual windows on mobile phone and television screens, students were now seated in the confines of their homes, and class notes and homework were shared as Whatsapp messages. The impromptu, sudden shift, thus, rendered several students, particularly from marginalised communities with little to no access to digital devices and network connections, "out of school". In India, for instance, the closure of physical schools not only affected the academic progress of the students but also shut down their access to mid-day meals, sanitary napkins, and safe shelters that students from poorer families relied on. The shutdown of schools also took away the opportunity to socialise and meet peers that are considered to

be integral to the cognitive and social development of students.

The shutdown of schools and colleges has affected millions of poor students, and evidence suggests that for countries with low learning outcomes, a large number of school dropouts, and insufficient infrastructure, the impact will be far more negative. In Bangladesh, for instance, students participating in the YAR study, stated that the closure of educational institutions coupled with inadequate access to information had led to a rise in stress and trauma. In South Sulawesi in Indonesia, too, students said that the closure of schools had an impact on their social activities.

In addition, the youth also gestured towards a crucial problem that had been underestimated while making the switch: the digital divide. Living in remote areas has meant that despite the will to study further, students haven't been able to access their classrooms owing to problems of internet connectivity and electricity. This problem of digital divide is fairly universal across the nine countries studied in this study. For the orphaned youth interviewed in Mongolia, for instance, the transition into televised schools has meant a complete halt to their academic pursuits, since the orphanage did not have a television set.

While the digital divide has existed from before, the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden transition of schools has only further exacerbated the problem. For instance, according to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey report on education, only 24% of Indian households have an internet connection, and more than 36% schools operate without electricity. Thus, for Pooja Pakhane, a student from Boripada in India, the lack of an internet network at home, has meant that she has had to either climb a mountain in her village or scurry around to find corners with limited connectivity. The fear of the impending monsoon has already been drowning her plans and aspirations to study further. "Once it starts raining very heavily, I will be unable to leave my house and search for areas with better range...that will prevent me from studying," said Pakhane, adding that her labour burdens at home as well as on the

agricultural fields had further escalated during the lockdown period.

In fact, the economic and social pressures caused by COVID-19 have placed a disproportionate burden of family and childcare on women and girls. In Asia and the Pacific, 67 percent of parents have reported increases in their daughters' domestic work, compared to 57 percent for their sons ([UN Women, 2020](#)). The increased workload affects available study time and access to remote learning opportunities, even where these are available. The Indonesian youth respondents from the fishing community, for instance, also indicated that the inability to attend schools would mean that they would have to quit the institutions and take up jobs to support their families. Conversely, for girl students, as was reported in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, the closure of schools has also made them more vulnerable to early and child marriages.

Thus, several youth, specifically from marginalised groups, are unlikely to return to schools, and those who were never in schools to begin with will continue to be excluded from learning opportunities even for foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy. The impacts are long-term, far-reaching, and wide.

## **ii. Loss of Labour and Livelihoods:**

Globally, an estimated 147 million people, mainly small traders and migrant wage labourers, have been rendered unemployed ([National Herald, 2020](#)) since the initial spread of the pandemic and the imposition of nationwide lockdowns. Stories of migrant labourers undertaking perilous and frantic journeys of hundreds of miles to get home – stuck at bus stops, inside factories, in dilapidated settlements in industrial areas, starving and experiencing a total loss of bearing – have been shared widely ([Rashid et al., 2020](#)) in the mainstream media in India. In Timor Leste, too, the closure of markets and the subsequent loss of livelihoods has seriously affected families belonging to marginalised communities and neighbourhoods. The youth running small local businesses could not sell their produce in the local markets. "All my brothers and sisters are unemployed, and it has been very

difficult to find jobs due because we have only studied until high school,” said Maria Gonçalves, Youth Action Researcher from Fatisi village from Timor-Leste, adding, “We only sell vegetables and meat that are supplied by our parents from Fatisi village, but during COVID-19, all products have been worthless in the markets.”

Thus, as millions of enterprises face an existential threat, nearly half of the world’s 3.3 billion global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods ([WHO, 2020](#)). Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lack social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. In Bangladesh, for instance, 15-year-old Karima Akhter said that soon after her father, who worked as a daily wage labourer, lost his job, the family had to make adjustments to their everyday consumption. The savings dried up, and thus, the family members have been forced to cut down on their meals. Akhter was also afraid that if any of her family members reported sick, they would have no money left to support their treatment.

The loss of livelihoods during the pandemic also has a significant gendered dimension. In the productive workforce, women and girls held the most precarious and unsecure jobs as helpers and half-workers. Thus, they were among the first few to lose their jobs when companies began to downsize. At the same time, however, their labour burdens in the household, that were unpaid and unrecognized, began to soar. In Barangay Bagbag in Quezon City of the Philippines for instance, 27-year-old single mother, Patria Mai, lost her job as an area supervisor. Mai, a member of the Young Solo Parents Association, is among those Filipinos affected by the no-work-no-pay scheme implemented in the country during the lockdown. Back home, the time she spends on unpaid labour, having to run the household with limited resources and services, has increased.

Another key impact of the loss of livelihoods has been felt by the youth from the larger international migrant-sending countries, including from the

Philippines, Vanuatu, Timor Leste and Sri Lanka. Here, the sudden closure of their work units and factories on the one hand, and the sealing of the international border on the other, left these youth workers stranded, unemployed and vulnerable on international soil. Sri Lankan labourers stranded in Gulf nations sent desperate appeals to the government to ensure their safe return. In India, too, repatriation flights had been launched to bring back Indian citizens employed abroad.

At the same time, the loss of livelihoods coupled with increased economic stress has reportedly led to a rise in criminal activities across the various countries. The youth respondents from Vanuatu pointed to the rise of thefts, drug peddling and fights in their country during this period.

### **iii. Soaring Mental and Physical Stress:**

Along with the resurgence of COVID-19, an insidious and less perceptible pandemic has arisen: one of anxiety, depression and grief. The uncertainty associated with everyday life, whether it is the inability to access virtual classrooms, the sudden loss of jobs, the death of a loved one, or just the unpredictability associated with the virus and no clear vaccine in sight, have led to emotional and mental breakdowns, particularly among the youth. Moreover, the restricted physical mobility and the pressing need to stay indoors without any social interactions and experiences, has further intensified other anxieties. Fifteen-year-old Earl Joshua Santos, a Class 9 student in Barangay Holy Spirit, Philippines, said, “The pandemic has affected me greatly. In terms of physical, I feel weakening of my muscles because our movement has been limited. Mentally, it is stressful.” Santos further added, “Though I find it very hard to just stay at home, I try not to get out of the house because I am also worried that I would be infected with the COVID virus outside. The news on the number of positive cases and deaths are very scary.”

In addition to the looming fear of the virus and the uncertainty, some youth also spoke about how the “home” touted as the “safe space” in almost all conversations centred on the pandemic, was in fact, a place of great distress and trauma. In Nepal, a young female respondent named Rama said that

the extent of domestic violence in her house had increased during the lockdown period. Rama said, "I have seen the family dispute for more than two months because of poverty, and my father always drinks alcohol and quarrels with my mother... When my parents quarrel, they often beat me. It was very difficult for me to stay in such a situation." Rama, thus, has decided to get married. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus, led to the advent of another sinister pandemic: evidence has been showing an alarming increase in all forms of gender-based violence during these unprecedented times, including early and child marriages. In addition, Nepal has also witnessed a perceptible spike in the number of suicide cases among the youth. Similar responses of anxiety and despair were cited by youth from sexual minority groups, where the families were at loggerheads with them, making it difficult for them to stay indoors with them for so long.

Furthermore, the restricted mobility has had a key impact on the physical health of the youth as well. On the one hand, the inability to exercise, cycle, walk, play basketball, etc. has increased their reported levels of lethargy and obesity. On the other hand, the reduction in meals consumed due to the paucity of incomes, has also been affecting their nutrition levels and health. Nineteen-year-old Sohag started a small tea stall in Dhaka's Dhalpur slum after his father's income was slashed. For several weeks during the lockdown, Sohag barely slept and ate too little. "My physical health began to deteriorate because I consumed insufficient food. Mentally, I am stressed about the loans we have to repay," said Sohag.

#### **iv. Battling Fake News:**

Given the rapid spread of the pandemic and the restrictions on everyday social interactions, the study aimed to understand the various media and tools used by the youth to receive news about the situation as it were unravelling. From social media and the television, to Whatsapp forwards and official press notes released by government authorities- the youth across the various countries in the Asia and Pacific region, sought and consumed information on the dynamic situation in myriad ways. In Indonesia, for instance, of the 20 youth

respondents interviewed, 35 percent of them accessed information on the television. This was followed by interactions with other people in their own communities. Others also sought information through the various social media channels including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, besides also reading newspapers. In Mongolia, meanwhile, the youth relied heavily on the daily 11am news report anchored by authorities from the Ministry of Health. The telecast was also available in sign language. In addition, the youth also accessed information on the internet.

One of the grave challenges of accessing "unofficial" information through social media and other internet websites, was the overwhelming presence of fake news reports, both, on the health aspects of the virus as well as other social factors. The youth from Sri Lanka are a case in point. According to some of the respondents, some posts on social media were directly targeting certain ethnic groups for the deliberate spread of the virus. These unverified claims and rumour-mongering led to communal disharmony and exchange. Virtually, the youth from the marginalised groups also were at the receiving end of cyberbullying and harassment online. The fake news stories exchanged on chat messaging applications, in particular, also contributed to the increased stigma surrounding the COVID-19 virus.

Thus, even as the COVID-19 virus initially began as a health concern, it has over time transformed into a serious social, cultural, economic and political issue, affecting the lives of millions of youth, day in and day out. Its implications, although still unraveling, are predicted to be far and wide.



“

In the post-COVID situation, the youth should engage in skills programmes that are focused on income generating activities. They must continue their education despite all challenges.

”

HAMIDA KHATUN, 18,  
BARO-ARIA VILLAGE IN KHULNA



# BANGLADESH

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

**Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)**



## Broad Overview

**As the eighth most populous** country in the world, Bangladesh is considered to be both an inspiration and a challenge for policymakers and practitioners of development. While the country recorded strong performance in income growth and human development, Bangladesh faces daunting challenges with an increased level of vulnerability with about 39 million people still living below the national poverty line ([The World Bank, 2020](#)). In the past few decades, the country has been applauded for its resilience and success in responding to extreme social and political unrest, as well as natural disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has thrown a fresh set of challenges.

In March 2020, when the government imposed a national lockdown in the country, nearly 13 million people found themselves unemployed ([Lata, 2020](#)). Export orders declined, private investments were lowered and jobs were lost. The urban poor were among the most affected; garment workers in particular. As the top garment exporter in the world after China, the garment sector in Bangladesh employed more than four million workers, most of them women ([Hossain, 2020](#)). However, with the closure of markets and freezing of export orders from Europe and the US, several labourers were rendered unemployed overnight.

In response to the economic stress brought about by the lockdown and to recover the subsequent damages, the government announced seven stimulus packages in May 2020 targeting different sectors and communities. Most packages were meant to boost industrial growth, leaving behind scores of marginalised communities living and working in the periphery.

In addition to business and employment, an emergency education response was announced. All educational institutions closed their doors. The government initiated four distance learning programmes through the television, internet, mobile phone and community radio. However, the national bureau of statistics indicates that only 56% of households have access to television, and 0.6% of households have access to the radio, while only 5.6% of households have access to the computer. About 37.6% of the household has access to the internet in different forms, while about 95% of the household has access to mobile phones. Although many households have access to a mobile phone, most phones belong to the adults who work outside, and children/learners have minimal access to those phones. This digital divide projects a potential rise in school dropout rates, as well as, the rise of early and child marriages.

## Scaling the Field

The youth action research was led by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a national coalition for education in Bangladesh. Over the years, CAMPE has been engaged in advocacy on Education in Emergency Programme, and conducted a response survey on 115 NGOs and 11 teachers associations during April-May 2020. The YAR on COVID-19 enriched this survey by providing perspectives and data from marginalised youth.

Following the initial orientation programme, four member organisations were selected based on different criteria, including their exposure to climate change vulnerabilities, concentration of ethnic communities, disadvantaged areas due to high dependency on agriculture and fishery,

and challenges associated with urbanisation. Key attention was also paid to gender and leadership. Accordingly, two female-led organisations participated in the YAR project, namely Ashroy Foundation and Access Toward Livelihood and Welfare organisation (ALWO). In addition, SUROVI and Zabarang Kallyan Samity (ZKS) were chosen for undertaking the research.

Considering most of the field locations were situated in 'red zones' earmarked by the government, the primary tool for data collection were interviews that were facilitated using mobile phones, Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger. Each organisation documented stories from five to seven youth; in all, 20 youth stories were compiled.

## Key Findings

- 1 The closure of educational institutions coupled with inadequate access to information led to a reported rise in stress and trauma among the youth respondents
- 2 Food security, lack of nutrition, and access to healthcare facilities have been observed as common to all.
- 3 There are issues related to physical and mental health associated with the economic vulnerability of the family. In the case of girls, early marriage seems to be the single largest threat in the remote areas.
- 4 With the government resorting to online, radio, mobile and televised means to continue teaching, only half of the respondents reported access. Moreover, even if they had access to the classes, the quality of the courses was an issue reported by them.
- 5 This issue was further stressful for students living in hostels. With the closure of institutions, they were compelled to return to their homes, where they lacked appropriate and adequate living and study areas. They were further concerned about having to drop out of their education, given the need to financially support their families.
- 6 Experiences and challenges related to malnutrition, child labour, and increased household labour repeatedly appeared in the discussions on the impact of COVID-19.

## Key Recommendations

**Reimagine education** and accelerate positive change by **empowering the most vulnerable youths**, and address the barriers to education.

**Reform education policies** to make education more inclusive. The youth living in the most challenging situations have the right to **access online education services**.

Special attention is needed for addressing gender issues and particularly **combating gender-based violence and early marriage**.

The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Youth should work together and **engage more youth in life-skills development** such as information and communication technologies, sexual and reproductive health rights, volunteerism. Attention must also be paid to **developing back to school programmes**.



**Train teachers** to cope with the new normal by developing a blended teaching, learning and assessment system. In addition, to make **provisions for internet devices** and accessibility.

“

I love to learn. But the housework has increased ever since the schools closed. I help with chores at home as well as in the fields.

My parents are working labourers. By the time I'm done with my chores, I have very little time remaining for my studies. I try to finish my other work as soon as possible, so that I can study longer. Sometimes, I even miss my meals or delay them.

”

NEELAM PHOOLDAS RAUT,  
SHODHINI (FEMALE RESEARCHER),  
BORIPADA VILLAGE, MAHARASHTRA

# INDIA

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:**  
**Abhivyakti Media**  
**for Development,**  
**Maharashtra**



## Broad Overview

**As the second-most populated** country in the world, with nearly 100 million internal migrant workers, India suffered a huge setback ([Sanghera, 2020](#)) ever since the initial COVID-19 cases were reported on January 30, 2020. An initial 21-day nationwide lockdown announced in March 2020, had to be further extended given the alarming rise in the number of positive cases. The stringent social distancing norms, closure of transportation and markets led to a massive loss of livelihoods and an exodus of migrant workers who took to the streets to walk thousands of miles back home. Furthermore, the country's education system, which is the world's largest, crumbled during this period ([India Today, 2020](#)). The suspension of physical classes moved teaching, learning and assessment of students to online mode, thereby highlighting the glaring digital divide in education in India. The high dropout rate gradually began to translate into a rise of child marriages, ([Subramanian, 2020](#)) particularly among girls from the historically marginalised communities, as a means to stave off poverty and survive. The western Indian state of Maharashtra, which also houses the headquarters of Abhivyakti Media for Development, tops the list of states for having maximum number of the COVID-19 cases.

### Scaling the Field

Following an initial round of scoping, three villages - namely, Boripada, Hiradi and Rohile in northern Maharashtra- were chosen for undertaking the research. Accordingly, three youth action researchers from the villages, referred to as 'Shodhinis' (meaning female researchers in Marathi), were chosen and trained. The Shodhinis interviewed 20 girls in their villages (between the ages of 16 and 30) in order to understand their particular experiences and challenges faced by them during the pandemic. Given the stringent lockdown measures, some of the interviews had to be conducted telephonically.



# Key Findings



1 A majority of the girls said that the financial situation of their homes had severely deteriorated during the lockdown, making it difficult to purchase even essential and home utilities.

3 The everyday unpaid labour had increased significantly for the girls. They had to do both farm and household chores.

2 Employment opportunities had become unavailable or were diminishing

4 Most information related to COVID-19 and the government's measures were obtained through television programmes, following which social media and chat applications allowed them to remain updated with the events. Very few of the girls had a smartphone of their own.



5 A large number of the participants said that they were very stressed about having to permanently drop out of their schools. In fact, an additional layer of stress was added by the looming possibility of being pushed into marriage.

## Key Recommendations

**Financial assistance** for education and supporting their families

**Provide scientific information,** particularly in the villages, to counter misinformation, fears and superstitions

**FREE higher education** for girls



“

There is no income at all.  
We thought and would like  
to explore alternatives, but  
people are prohibited to  
undertake activities outside  
their homes.

”

FEMALE YOUTH PARTICIPANT  
IN INDONESIA



# INDONESIA

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:**  
**ASPPUK and**  
**New Indonesia**



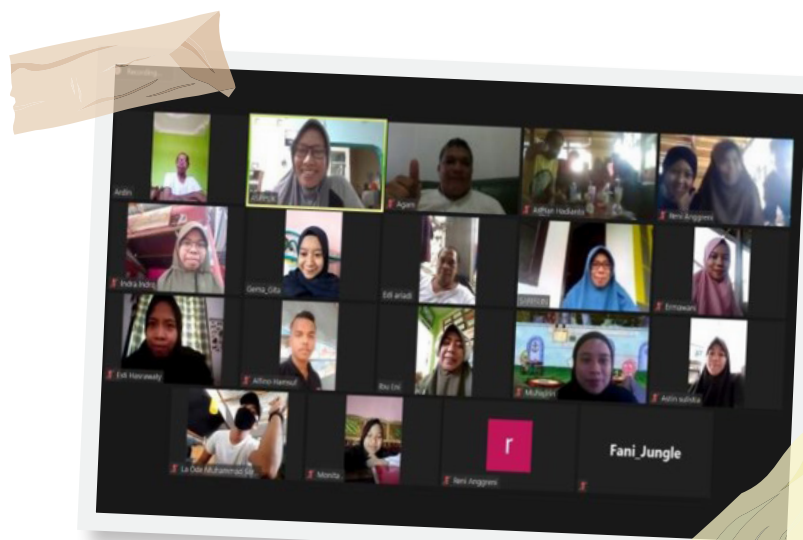
## Broad Overview

**The world's largest archipelago**, Indonesia, experienced a massive setback with the early spread of the novel Coronavirus in March 2020. With the surge in positive cases in Indonesia, the government enacted the *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSBB) Movement to contain the spread. PSBB refers to the large-scale social restrictions implemented by the local governments with the approval of the Ministry of Health. In the days that followed, millions of Indonesians were rendered unemployed on account of the closure of borders and the allied economic pressures. In South Sulawesi province, where one in four are aged between 16 and 30 years, existing inequalities got exacerbated. Following the implementation of the PSBB regulation on April 16, 2020, schools were shut down, dropout rates escalated, and several vulnerable youths were left without adequate resources to survive. The fractured access to the internet and network, particularly in the rural regions of the island, has led to long-term consequences here.

### Scaling the Field

Steered by the participatory action research framework, five native youth researchers were chosen for this ground-up engagement in the marginalised pockets of Barru Regency and Pangkep Regency, as well as, in the peripheral areas of Makassar City (which has reported the highest

number of COVID-19 cases) in South Sulawesi. Following the initial training sessions, fresh criteria were devised to identify and interview participants in these areas. The age group of the 20 young participants, both male and female, was fixed at 15 to 28 years. They included students, young entrepreneurs, honorary teachers, fisherfolk, daily workers and young mothers who had dropped out of school. In addition to facilitating in-person interviews by strictly adhering to health protocols, the youth action researchers also documented audio, photo and video footage during these interactions.



## Key Findings



- 1 For students, apart from being stressed and depressed because of staying at home for too long, which has an impact on their social activities, distance learning (Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh, PJJ) is also a challenge that they faced. The poor internet connectivity further inconvenienced them.
- 2 The young entrepreneurs said that the PSBB regulations had led to large-scale closures and losses in business. They also struggled to procure material for their businesses.
- 3 The honorary teaching staff had particular concerns related to organizing and running their classes due to concerns related to electricity and the internet connections. They also highlighted pay cuts as a key burden during this time.
- 4 The young mothers had to bear the double burden of attending to their children, while at the same time run their households with limited resources. Most of their husbands, who were the key earners, had lost their jobs or incurred pay cuts.
- 5 The fisherfolk, meanwhile, were unable to sell their fish in the market given the closure of the Fish Sales Centre. They ended up incurring big losses by selling their catch for low prices locally.
- 6 In terms of health, however, the participants said that even as they experienced anxiety and fears, they felt healthier physically.
- 7 Most information pertaining to the pandemic and lockdowns were obtained via television programmes and social media.

## Key Recommendations



**Provide learning centres and provide free Internet access in every village .**

Along with the private sector, **help open market opportunities for locally produced goods.**



Allocate village funds for **youth business development.**



“

I don't understand  
anything, I don't have time  
to write, because TV lessons  
are taught so fast.

”

SCHOOL-GOING CHILD,  
MONGOLIA

# MONGOLIA

**PARTNER ORGANIZATION:**  
**All for Education**



## Broad Overview

**In late January**, the National Emergency Commission of Mongolia shut its southern border with China and quickly closed schools and other public places, with officials warning that it did not have the infrastructure to cope with mass infections. The main effects of the pandemic were borne by those living in the country's capital and largest city, Ulaanbaatar, where cases of returning migrants began to be reported. One of the key factors that curbed the spread of infection in the country was its existing sparse population, where livestock outnumber human beings, 22 to one ([Baljmaa, 2020](#)).

Right before the borders were to be shut, university students had paid up their tuition fees and rent deposits, which added up to as much 1000 USD. Unfortunately, the announcement of complete closure until the end of the Lunar New Year meant that they would have to stay home, it became very challenging to reclaim the amount paid. The Ministry of Education called for a refund of dormitory fees in April, but some universities did not refund it. Moreover, Mongolian students living abroad, in parts of China and Russia, had a very difficult time as they struggled to return home. According to reports, 31 students were brought on special flights from Wuhan on January 31. An additional 31 students were brought on special flights from Russia in the last week of March, of which 21 of them had to undergo treatment for COVID-19 infection. With the rising infection cases, all public places including churches, training centres, sports grounds, etc. were suspended. This led to the further deepening of the unemployment

and poverty curve here. According to the Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in March 2020, nearly 33% companies reported job cuts. Meanwhile, the number of domestic violence cases increased by 87.5% ([Asian Development Bank, 2020](#)) compared to the same period of the previous year (as per the Judicial General Council of Mongolia).

### Scaling the Field

With the closure of schools, in early February, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports decided to broadcast school lessons on television for preschool, primary and secondary school-going children. Nearly 900,000 children under the age of 18 had been affected by the lockdown. Thus, given the challenges of access to digital technologies and the push for homeschooling, ASPBAE's member organisation, All for Education, stepped up to document these challenges and experiences first-hand. With its focus on documenting the particular impacts on the education system in the country, as had been redefined by COVID-19, the youth action researchers documented 20 stories from the ground. They facilitated these interactions in two districts of Ulaanbaatar, and three remote neighbourhoods in Sukhbaatar aimag, Uvurkhangai aimag and Tuv aimag. The youth participants stood at the intersection of various inequalities such as sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, single mothers, economically vulnerable, besides those with permanent physical disabilities (such as visual and hearing impairments).

## Key Findings

- 1 Quarantines and curfews in most places in the country have left many youth unemployed and under extreme economic pressure
- 2 The inability to socialise, meet friends and relatives, impacted the overall well-being of the youth interviewed.
- 3 Significant secondary impacts of childcare patterns are being observed, such as protection and safety: physical abuse of children, cases of domestic violence and numbers of child injuries and home accidents have increased.
- 4 The closure of all education facilities has directly affected more than 900,000 children under the age of 18 in 2,200 schools and kindergartens with limited alternative care arrangements for the most vulnerable children. The education system, which had been systematically moved to television, was not an effective alternative to the classroom. Students found it incredibly challenging to keep up with the new system and learn. This change particularly affected youth in the orphanages, who did not have access to the TV set.
- 5 The people who are under the poverty line are at risk of slipping further into poverty, as the number of registered unemployed people rose in the first quarter of 2020. The national poverty rate was 28.4 percent in 2018. A further 15 percent of the total population is clustered just above the national poverty line, and at risk of slipping into poverty in the event of any unanticipated shocks.

## Key Recommendations

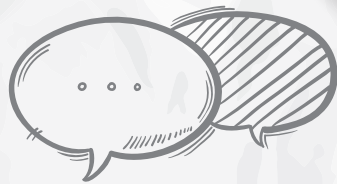


Connect rural herders and youth to the world by **connecting rural areas to the Internet.**

Create a **special place** for young people to spend **time together and productively**

**Improve the quality of tele lessons**, make them understandable, and chart the return to classroom learning as soon as possible

*elle*



“

I have seen my family dispute for more than two months because of poverty. My father always drank alcohol and quarreled with my mother. When my parents quarreled, they would often beat me. It was very difficult for me to remain in such a situation, so I decided to get married.

”

RAMA (NAME CHANGED),  
YOUNG FEMALE PARTICIPANT, NEPAL.



# NEPAL

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

**National Campaign  
for Education**



## Broad Overview

**Situated across the Chinese border**, where the COVID-19 cases were first reported in early December, the Himalayan nation of Nepal recorded its first positive case of COVID-19 a month after ([PTI, 2020](#)). In the weeks ahead, the number of cases gradually began to rapidly increase, compelling the government to announce a nationwide lockdown on March 24. The strict sealing of borders and the closure of markets for a period that extended for four months, led to a financial crisis for this young nation. Moreover, given that international migration has been very crucial to the country's economy (double the global average) ([Shrestha, 2020](#)), it became a grave challenge to bring back stranded migrants to their homes. Within the country, jobs were lost overnight, schools shut down, and there was little scope for the marginalised groups to survive. For those populations engaged in agriculture, the stoppage of local transportation along with closure of markets, led to deep losses.

In addition to the deep economic losses, the country also recorded a growing number of cases of violence and abuse. For instance, during the lockdown period between March and May, there were 176 cases of violence against women and girls in just 18 districts ([Sharma, 2020](#)). Other forms of gendered violence including physical and mental abuse, rape, child marriage and sexual abuse on girls also reportedly increased. In addition, the number of youth dying by suicide also spiralled. According to the report published by the Nepal Police Headquarters, 659 cases of suicides were reported during a two-month

period of the lockdown. Moreover, in many of the communities the girls have been burdened by increased unpaid labour. This has also led to the increase in the child marriage cases. The closure of schools coupled with increased economic stress, it is believed, will lead to a spike in COVID-19 cases in the country ([Grant, 2020](#)).

### Scaling the Field

Anchored in its previous work areas in Dukuchhap, Bungmati and Pyangaau, NCE Nepal steered the objectives and plan for the youth-led action research project. The key focus was to gauge the lived experiences and challenges of the youth from marginalised communities in these selected regions. Accordingly, NCE Nepal in collaboration with its member organisation, Global Action Nepal (GAN) launched the data collection process. Accordingly, the young researchers adopted a mixed methods approach, which was qualitative in nature. They facilitated interviews, conversations, focused group discussions, while also documenting the self-narrated case stories from the youth participants. In addition, the young researchers of Dukuchhap visited houses of Danuwar community members and interviewed the youth, teachers, as well as, the local government representatives. Once the initial trust between the researcher and participants had been established, the latter also began to share photographs and videos with the researchers through email and social media. This access was possible only because the researchers were both young and from the local community.

## Key Findings



- 1 Children of the research community are deprived of the learning and educational activities due to the closure of schools and the virtual/online learning is also not possible due to the low access of the internet facilities and materials needed for the online learning.
- 2 Due to the loss of the job opportunity and hindrance in the regular income, the financial crisis has been raised in the community and economic burden has arisen.
- 3 The dropout rates in schools have been on the rise since children are being pushed into the labour force. In addition, particularly among the female students, the number of child marriages have also been on the rise.
- 4 Some groups of youth have begun to engage with small-scale livelihood opportunities such as making sanitizers and masks, tailoring, agriculture, painting and sculpting, among others.
- 5 The absence of a friends circle, given the strict lockdown measures, pushed several youths to a state of feeling low, anxious and depressed.

## Key Recommendations

**Education is to be linked with the livelihood of the young people** so that they do not opt to choose labor work over education.

**Skills development training of youths** provided by civil society organizations should be linked with the labour market by the organizations.



**Incentives, loans or funds should be provided** for youths who are willing to venture into small scale business.



“

This pandemic has affected me greatly. In terms of physical health, I feel weakening of my muscles because our movement has been limited. Mentally, it is stressful. Though I find it very hard to just stay home, I try not to get out of the house because I am also worried that I would be infected with the COVID virus outside. The news on the number of positive cases and deaths are very scary. I see in the news people anguished not only for the demise of their loved ones but also for not getting proper burial rites. The bereaved did not get the chance to see and embrace the departed for the last time.

”

EARL JOSHUA SANTOS,  
A RESIDENT OF BESSANG PASS STREET,  
BRGY. HOLY SPIRIT, QUEZON CITY,  
PHILIPPINES

# PHILIPPINES

## PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

**Civil Society  
Network for  
Education Reforms,  
E-Net Philippines**



## Broad Overview

**The Philippines is one of the most natural hazard-prone countries** in the world. Its position as an island country on the Pacific Ring of Fire and close to the equator, has led it to suffer from an inexhaustible number of daily typhoons, earthquakes, landslides and volcanic eruptions. Over the years, this has left thousands of people dead and the country's infrastructure and economy in tatters. According to the Annual Poverty Indicator Survey (APIS) published by the Philippines Statistics Authority in 2017, there are 3.6 million Filipinos between the ages of six and 24 years, who are out of school. In addition, 3.2 million Filipinos are children engaged in child labour.

Thus, when the country was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, the community to be most affected were the youth. In March 2020, a National State of Public Health Emergency was declared by President Rodrigo Duterte. Metro Manila and the entire Luzon was placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) between March 16 and May 15. Schools were shut down, strict curfew measures were imposed, and the markets crashed. According to a survey undertaken by Social Weather Stations, nearly half of the country's adult labor force was jobless in July 2020. The estimated number of jobless adults was at 27.3 million in July 2020 compared to 7.9 million in December 2019 ([Esguerra, 2020](#)). The number of children dropping out of schools is estimated

at 2.3 million ([Gotinga, 2020](#)). The pandemic is also exposing and deepening gender inequality. The Philippine Population Commission (PopCom) also said there may be a 9.3 percent surge in teen pregnancies during this period.

### Scaling the Field

The research in the Philippines was anchored by The Civil Society Network for Education Reforms (E-Net Philippines), a network of civil society organisations engaged in policy advocacy and partnerships for education reforms. With its focus on a ground-up, youth action research approach, the data collection was steered by E-Net's local partner organisations including SPPI-Samar in Capul in the province of Northern Samar, Youth for Nationalism and Democracy in Barangay Bagbag, and PINASAMA-Youth in Barangay Commonwealth, Quezon City. Interestingly, a Young Solo Parents Organization was formed as an offshoot of the youth action research project in Barangay Bagbag.

At the very outset of the research, online meetings and training were organised to define the scale and scope of the project. Given its convenience, a chat group was created on Facebook Messenger, to stay connected amid the curfews. The primary mode of data collection was through interviews undertaken by the youth action researchers in each of the three chosen locations. The youth respondents were

in the age group of 13 to 30 years. Following the detailed, first-hand exchange undertaken right in the midst of the pandemic and the lockdown, 25 stories of the youth from marginalised communities and neighbourhoods were documented. These stories were later included in an anthology conceptualised and published by E-Net Philippines. In addition, Youth for Nationalism and Democracy and SPPI Samar compiled a short story book based on 14 stories that had been documented during the

interviews. The youth action research team also compiled a set of video documentaries. In their endeavour to reach out to a wider audience, the youth action researchers also took to Facebook where they shared the research initiative and initial results. And thus, 'KALAMBAG!- Kalampag (To Make Noise) at Ambag (Contribution) ng Kabataan sa Gitna ng COVID', a Facebook Live programme was organised in collaboration with Lapis Seesaw Channel.

## Key Findings

- 1 Restrictions on mobility posed as a key challenge to the youth across the three locations. The lockdown was imposed for several months and a policy that any person over the age of 60 years and under the age of 21 are not allowed to go out was strictly implemented. This inability to step out to exercise, socialise and work has had a serious implication on their mental and physical wellbeing.
- 2 The youth also complained about being unable to keep up with the online education modules due to the lack of gadgets and access to the internet.
- 3 Several youth also said that they had lost their jobs during this time, which led to severe stress to cope with the uncertainty. The COVID crisis aggravated their impoverishment with their family's livelihood source at large also being greatly affected.
- 4 Without family savings and some being children of single parents, both parent and child become partners in finding ways to cope with hunger and meet basic needs. Most of them are hoping for help from the government because jobs have been cut and many families, usually daily wage earners have been affected by the "no-work-no-pay" scheme.
- 5 Yet, the youth participants were devising their own ways to cope. They participated more actively in completing household chores; others contributed to the family income by selling small items such as food. They also engaged in self-help activities like reading books, social media, online games, television, etc. to keep themselves engaged and distracted.
- 6 The main source of information about the pandemic was through social media, which the participants said was also filled with a lot of fake information.





## Key Recommendations

Government's continuous financial and food assistance, **provisions of hygiene kits and job opportunities** for marginalized youth and their families.



Proactive response of **government to prepare and provide educational requirements for children and youth** for continuity of education amid COVID19 such as necessary support needed in blended learning (provision of devices, internet connection, electrification, load support).

**Second chance in education**, employment and **training for young solo parents and young adults** who have dropped out from education.

**Support youth organizations in their community** initiatives and efforts to help in awareness raising and COVID19 responses such as **relief operations and educational activities**.

**Establish and support** the operationalization of **Community Learning Centers**

“

My job is hair dressing. I am working in a saloon. Due to this pandemic according to health instructions we are unable to open the saloon. This is a big problem for youth who get day to day income. We have taken loans. Now we are unable to pay.

”

A YOUTH FROM THE LGBT COMMUNITY,  
SRI LANKA



# SRI LANKA

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

**Coalition for  
Educational  
Development**



## Broad Overview

**On December 26, 2004, the island nation of Sri Lanka** became a victim of the Indian Ocean tsunami. Aside from Indonesia, Sri Lanka likely suffered the most casualties, with the death toll reported at 21,715 ([NASA Earth Observatory, 2004](#)). Despite years of internal conflict and the lasting impact of the 2004 tsunami, Sri Lanka had made gradual progress in improving the status, health and education of women, and had recently become a middle-income country. The youth, however, continue to remain a vulnerable population, contending with issues in the areas of education, employment, health, post-war reconciliation and social integration, and civic engagement and political participation ([UNDP, 2014](#)). Sri Lanka has 4.64 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 years, constituting 23.2 percent of the population. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic that struck the nation first in March, has resulted in additional layers of vulnerability. Tourism and garment exports suffered immensely.

Circular migration, particularly to the Middle East, characterises Sri Lanka's labour markets. Remittances-money sent home by immigrant workers abroad-are hugely beneficial to Sri Lanka. Migrants' remittances have grown dramatically in recent years and were estimated at US\$1.5 billion annually ([Lasagabaster et al., 2012](#)). In fact, the Gulf countries are the most popular destination for female migrant workers from Sri Lanka among the 200,000 who seek work abroad every year. However,

on account of the closure of borders and markets with the rapid spread of COVID-19 in March, these remittances are estimated to have reduced by more than 30% in the first quarter of 2020. With the virus believed to have been spreading due to the entry of returnee migrants, the authorities decided to close the international airports and imposed a travel ban for foreigners. As a result, a large number of Sri Lankan migrants also submitted their desperate pleas to the government demanding their safe return back to the home country.

In addition to the markets, the imposition of the lockdown also severely impacted the everyday life and well-being of school- and college-goers across the country. One of the initiatives to cope with the closure of physical schools was to start a special television channel dedicated to educational programmes. The authorities simultaneously promoted online platforms. However, the prevailing digital divide marked by the lack of unequal access to infrastructure has had a serious impact on the level of education. A recent study conducted by the University of Sri Jayawardanapura to assess the benefit of the online education system for the university students revealed that only 30% of them were able to join these methods effectively. Thus, forced to shift to online platforms due to the coronavirus pandemic, Sri Lankan educators fear that the uneven access to gadgets and internet connection among students might bring new divides in the country's free education system.

## Scaling the Field

The idea behind the research was to document the impact of COVID-19 on different marginalised youth groups in the country. Special attention was paid to capture their experiences and mechanisms to cope. Accordingly, five youth action researchers from the Coalition for Educational Development were trained for the study. With the assistance of the CED member network, relevant case studies were identified: LGBT community youth in Rathnapura, disabled youth in Anuradhapura, rural farmers in Matara and Hambantota, and youth from the urban slum and fishing communities of Colombo and Galle. The idea was to understand the intersections of poverty with existing historical, social, cultural and linguistic marginalisation. The primary

medium of data collection was through interviews. While initially, these interviews were undertaken telephonically, with the gradual lifting of restrictions, some interviews were facilitated in-person. The field researchers also documented video interviews from the youth participants after seeking their informed consent. Seeking consent was a relative challenge as the participants were afraid and apprehensive about being misquoted, as was the case they believed in mainstream media channels. Overall, a total number of 20 youth spanning diverse marginalized groups were interviewed. All of them were between the ages of 16 and 30 years.

## Key Findings

- 1 The youth working in the informal labour force such as construction workers, small-scale farmers and self-employed people suffered a major financial blow during the lockdown. Even though the government had allocated Rs 5,000 as a remedial monthly allowance for low-income families, some respondents said that they had not received their due.
- 2 Some of the school and college-going youth respondents stated that they did not have a suitable environment for their studies outside of their institutions. During most times, they studied at schools and in common spaces such as community centres and libraries. However, the strict lockdown measures meant that their access was fully restricted. This increased their anxiety and distress.
- 3 The participants said that the increased time they spent on social media led to confrontations with their families and elders. In addition, there was also a reported increase in cyberbullying and harassment during this period. Some posts, for instance, deliberately targeted certain ethnic groups for the deliberate spread of the virus. These unverified claims and rumour-mongering led to communal disharmony and tension. The online trolling often transformed into everyday life, where a few respondents said that their neighbours had cornered them, leading to a spike in stress.
- 4 The main challenge to access internet-based education and social media was the lack of adequate infrastructure. The school-goers had to rely on their older siblings or parents to share their phones, which wasn't always feasible.



5 The televised education programming started by the authorities received very mixed responses. While some respondents in the research had not even heard about the televised programmes, some others said that they did not have a proper time schedule provided. They also couldn't seek clarifications from this one-way medium of education. Respondents from the urban slum pockets revealed that with only one television set in the household and all family members wanting to watch their shows on it, it was difficult for them to find access to the system.

6 In the case of youth from the rural communities, however, the levels of mental distress were reportedly lower. The interviews revealed that the youth were busy with sustenance agriculture and gardening, leaving them with little time. Thus, except the lack of adequate motivation and assistance from the formal education system, they remained engaged and supported by their families.

7 When compared with rural communities the pandemic situation has made a big impact on the urban communities. The space of the targeted urban household in this study is extremely limited. However, the interviews revealed that the lack of physical space in the house and common access to toilets had a significant impact on their physical and mental wellbeing.

## Key Recommendations

It is important to **develop infrastructure, supply devices, software and accessibility to the internet in an equitable and all-inclusive manner.**

In order to provide online education to all the students it is important to take necessary action to address the issues of unequal distribution of resources among the school's system.

**Formal training programmes** need to develop to enhance the knowledge of teachers on online education. **Developing education materials** and maintaining a resource pool of trained teacher to cope with emergencies in education.

As a result of inadequate attention and lack of facilities, the community of people with disabilities did not have the opportunity to continue their education in the pandemic situation. **Therefore, special attention should be paid to ensure their education and learning.**

A national-level **survey** needs to be conducted to assess the impact of the pandemic to education. The findings of the study should be shared with the relevant stakeholders to take remedial actions.

“

All my brothers and sisters are unemployed, and it has been very difficult to find jobs because we have only studied until high school. We only sell vegetables and meat that are supplied by our parents from Fatisi village, but due to COVID19 issues all products have been worthless in the markets.

”

MARIA GONÇALVES,  
YOUTH ACTION RESEARCHER FROM FATISI  
VILLAGE, TIMOR-LESTE

# TIMOR-LESTE

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

**Civil Society  
Education  
Partnership**



## Broad Overview

**As the 15th youngest nation in the world, Timor-Leste**, or East Timor is a Southeast Asian nation, with 74% of the population of the country is below the age of 35 years ([UNDP, 2018](#)). Considered to be one of the poorest countries in Asia, the country's Human Development Index value for 2018 is 0.626—positioning it at 131 out of 189 countries and territories. In 2018, the adult literacy rate for Timor-Leste was 68.1% which increased from 37.6% in 2001 ([Knoema, 2020](#)).

Each year Timor-Leste experiences floods, landslides and erosion resulting from a combination of heavy monsoonal rain, steep topography and widespread deforestation. In the decade since **Timor-Leste gained independence, a total of 487 humanitarian crises have been recorded, of which 14 were conflict-related and 473 induced by natural disasters**. The country that is ringed by coral reefs teeming with marine life, is also a high migrant-sending economy. **Since independence in 2002, economic factors have replaced conflict as the main motive for international emigration** from Timor-Leste. Bilateral agreements with Australia and South Korea offer formal labor migration pathways, and Timorese communities are also found in Indonesia, Philippines, Portugal and most significantly, the United Kingdom (UK). The remittances sent in by them is a major source of income that has also helped to cope with rising local unemployment among the youth.

A week after the first COVID-19 positive case was reported in the country, a state of emergency was declared, thereby ordering complete curfews and

closures. Accordingly, schools were shut down, public transport was temporarily stalled, and other non-essential public activities were pushed to stop. Even the international borders were closed, thereby restricting all forms of in-migration and returns. Timor-Leste's strategy relied heavily on early intervention and a mandatory quarantine. In May, when the state of emergency was renewed again, more flexible measures were adopted, thereby allowing school activities and some restricted public movements. However, border control continued to be implemented, particularly along Indonesia.

### Scaling the Field

The youth-led action research in the region was undertaken primarily through a mixed methods approach including surveys and in-person interviews. The study was undertaken in partnership with Civil Society Education Partnership and MAHON NGO. Five youth researchers belonging to marginalised communities and neighbourhoods were chosen to anchor the study. The five young researchers brought with them previous experience



of working on a youth action research project in 2019. After receiving initial training on the research tools, the youth researchers were sent to the field. In all, they interviewed and documented the stories of 20 youth between the ages of 15 and 25 years. These respondents represented the most vulnerable and invisible sections of the country,

including unemployed youth, farmers and small business owners, persons with disabilities, and primary school drop-outs. Following the very in-depth rounds of exchange, the coordinators at CSEP and MAHON NGO worked closely with the youth to analyse the data and compile the report based on rigorous qualitative and situational analysis.

## Key Findings

- 1 One of the key impacts of the pandemic and state emergency has been on the formal and non-formal education sectors. The inadequate access to the internet, absence of infrastructure, and the challenge of engaging with digital platforms, has created a serious dent in the lives of school- and university-goers.
- 2 The closure of markets and the subsequent loss of livelihoods has seriously affected families belonging to marginalised communities and neighbourhoods. The youth running small local businesses involving even horticulture and traditional artisanal work, could not sell their produce in the markets. In the case of those youth working as casual workers in local companies, jobs were lost overnight due to the imposition of the lockdown.
- 3 The reduction in the family incomes has meant that the families have been forced to reduce their food consumption and daily living expenses. Some of the respondents said that they have had to cut down on one meal everyday.
- 4 Some youth have taken to home gardening activities, and they sell extra produce by setting up a stall outside their own houses.
- 5 A few youth also said that they started sewing face masks and distributed it within their church community and neighbourhood.
- 6 The marginalised youth accessed information and updates on the COVID-19 pandemic particularly through national television (Radio Televisaun Timor-Leste – RTTL), the internet and social media, health officers' announcements, and community radio.



## Key Recommendations

To establish **Community Learning Centers (CLCs)** as places for **non-formal education and training opportunities** for those marginalized youth and people with disability at the village-level. These centres can be set up in partnership with the government through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MEYS), along with other development partners and civil society organizations

On the economic side, while the government's short-term approach focused on the demand side, the long-term interventions require an increase in the production capacity at the domestic level. This would imply **an overhaul of the economy**, which is an ambitious but a necessary step ahead.

To provide subsidies to recover their business activities and to **provide free internet access and infrastructure to students unable to learn online**

To distribute COVID-19 prevention kits for communities in the rural areas in order to reduce local transmissions and **provide access to essential commodities including food and sanitary supplies.**

To create **awareness** and provide **health education** for grassroots communities, and **strengthen the health infrastructure** at the local level.

The persons with disability also seek **inclusive education infrastructure** and schools in the municipal levels to ensure equal access to education.



To ensure that the national police maintain and **strengthen security controls** in the border areas to reduce illegal movements and the local transmissions of COVID19 cases in the border areas.



“

One of the biggest things that can change in my life is to change activity. At first, I advocated for disability rights, wherein I attended some training programmes and earned an income. But after the lockdown, I am having to stay at home and have no more work. I must carefully see how talented I am to make something in order to earn money in my community.

”

YOUTH RESPONDENT WITH  
A DISABILITY



# VANUATU

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

**Kolisen blong  
Leftemap Edukesen  
(KoBLE)**



## Broad Overview

**The most at-risk country on earth to natural disasters,** Vanuatu has endured two major volcanic eruptions and two category five cyclones ([McGarry, 2020](#)) in the past half-decade, affecting more than half the population. Through resolute border closures in early March 2020, however, the Pacific archipelago has escaped infection from Covid-19, but the resultant loss of tourism revenues devastated the local economy ([Chanel, 2020](#)). The island nation has been among the very few countries around the world that has managed to keep the pandemic at bay thanks to its total suspension of inbound tourism and other non-essential travel. The country's borders are "effectively closed" until at least the end of 2020, according to the U.S. Embassy in Vanuatu.

Vanuatu, with its population of 300,000 ranks 141 out of 189 on the Human Development Index ([UNDP, 2020](#)). The Primary Net Enrolment Ratio in 2018 was 91.7% and Secondary Net Enrolment Ratio was 42.4% (MoET 2018), demonstrating an alarming dropout rate from primary to secondary level.

The country which has been weighed down by the economic implications of the pandemic, has suffered a major blow in its tourism sector that predominantly engages its youth. In the tourism industry alone, 1,633 workers have been placed on unpaid leave, 462 on paid leave and 300 terminated, according to a joint survey of the Vanuatu Tourism Office (VTO) and the Department of Tourism (DoT). Therefore, the number will increase as a result of staff layoff in tourism on top of the existing high youth unemployment in Vanuatu specifically in Port Vila.

## Scaling the Field

The data for the youth action research project was collected in collaboration with Kolisen blong Leftemap Edukesen (KoBLE), mainly in the Port Vila area. The study was further done with the support of local organisations including Youth Challenge Vanuatu, the Sunflower Association (VSPD) and VIPRIDE. While Youth Challenge Vanuatu works closely with youth on their livelihoods, VSPD engages with girls with disabilities. VIPRIDE, meanwhile, engages closely with youth belonging to sexual minority groups. The diversity in the local groups chosen ensured a more inclusive representation of the youth during these trying times.

Given the strict curfews imposed early on, there were limited face-to-face interactions. The youth action researchers were chosen from the local vulnerable communities, in which they were both, story gatherers and storytellers. Most interviews were administered through mobile phones, and video footage was documented as and where possible.

The main aim of the research was to document diverse voices and experiences of vulnerable communities, who have had to bear heavy financial losses during the lockdown period. This included youth participants running small business, youth interns, girls with disabilities, and youth from the LGBT community. Despite the challenges emerging from the field, the youth researchers successfully documented the stories and life histories of 20 participants. Interviews were conducted in the participants' workspaces, sunflower sowing centres (to interact with girls with disabilities), and areas that were convenient and representative.

## Key Findings

- 1 Several youth reported that their parents had lost their jobs during the lockdown period. This left them with little money to pay their school fees and continue their education. Moreover, with most technical colleges run privately, they said that it was becoming increasingly difficult to pay the exorbitant fees and pursue their studies.
- 2 There was a reported increase in poverty levels with several youth struggling to make both ends meet. The respondents also said that there was a rise in homelessness.
- 3 Persons with disabilities said that they felt further excluded during this period.
- 4 The loss of livelihoods coupled with increased economic stress has led to a rise in criminal activities in the region. The youth respondents pointed at the rise of thefts, drug peddling and fights during this period.
- 5 The lockdown has brought to a standstill access to basic services and utilities. The strict social distancing along with limited infrastructure has increased the burden on healthcare infrastructure. During this period, even costs of accessing healthcare have increased manifold. The respondents indicated that it was too expensive to book transportation services to hospitals even, which was leading to panic among people.



## Key Recommendations

To **sponsor youths** who are interested in their chosen fields of **vocational education and training**.

To **work closely with civil society organisations** in the country to ensure smoother services and utilities.



To **distribute stimulus packages** to those who run businesses.

To **create more job opportunities locally** instead of depending mainly on foreign aid.



# paving the WAY FORWARD

*“Youth are the agents of change. Our young researchers have also proved it. It is now all our responsibility to promote and acknowledge the contribution of the young researchers.”*

*Shradha Koirala, Nepal, Senior Program Coordinator, National Campaign for Education*

As a transnational study that compiled powerful narratives amid the fractured times from the ground-up, the YAR youth groups made an attempt to understand the different dimensions of the youth in adversity, and engage them more effectively to influence policy and practice, and challenge existing discourse. Thus, with their ear to the ground, the YAR youth groups in the nine Asia and Pacific countries closely analysed the interview narratives to cull out and document key concerns. They subsequently chalked out a set of relevant recommendations to be addressed to various key stakeholders, including their respective governments, civil society organisations, and other partners. Their main aim was to address the deep divides and glaring gaps in practice and policy exacerbated by the pandemic in the realm of access to education, loss of livelihoods, and physical health and mental well-being. Based on the key recommendations offered by YAR youth groups in each of the member organisations, the following broader themes and ideas have emerged to pave the way forward:

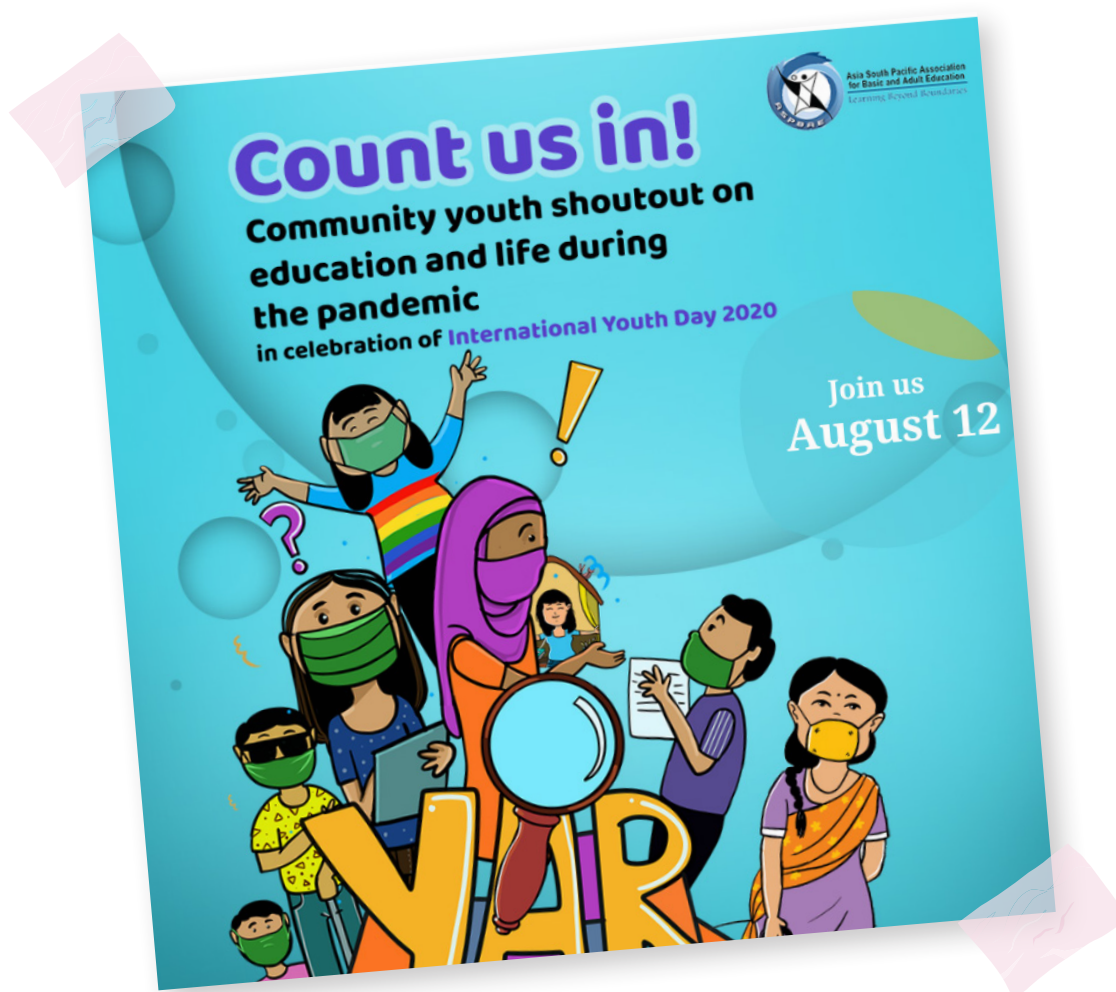
1. Make higher education free and accessible to everyone and safely restart schools, colleges, community learning centres at the earliest, with priority attention to ensuring the health and safety of students and educators, while ensuring that quality second chance education and programs are instituted for learners who cannot go back to school.
2. Governments should implement and promote policies that bridge the digital divide and move countries closer to achieving their Sustainable Development Goals.
3. In collaboration with civil society and other relevant partners, the government should aim to create more local job opportunities by engaging more youth in skills for work and life programmes, including such areas as information and communication technologies, sexual and reproductive health rights, and volunteerism.
4. Government should provide incentives, loans or funds to youths who are willing to venture into small scale business.
5. Government should pay special attention to addressing gender issues and particularly combating gender-based violence and early marriage that has been intensifying during the pandemic and the lockdown.
6. Government to design and build inclusive education infrastructure including community learning centres at the municipal and local levels.

7. Government in collaboration with relevant stakeholders should create safe social spaces for youth to socialise and work together in order to overcome loneliness and anxiety associated with the pandemic
8. Government should keep a check on media channels and portals disseminating information related to the pandemic and related policies and plans. Strict action should be initiated against those media spreading fake news and rumours.

YAR partners are determined to continue these follow-up local actions and inform their policy advocacy work by youth voices from ground realities. Right from the very onset of the pandemic, when borders were closed with little notice, the youth from the various member groups have sprung into action. Spanning different regions, they have solicited and distributed relief goods to help their neighbours and community members to provide timely assistance. Furthermore, now,

in a bid to ensure that their research findings also serve as a means to give back to the vulnerable communities, the youth are currently devising their next steps. In Nepal, for instance, the YAR team is undertaking awareness on the prevention of COVID-19 and exploring ways to provide psycho-social support to communities in need. In the Philippines, meanwhile, the youth teams have planned virtual exchanges and webinars to further these conversations. In Timor-Leste, the teams have firmed up meetings with officials from the Ministry of Education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training institutions to present their research recommendations.

Thus, the study, which was designed and realised in the midst of vulnerable and fractured times by a very brave batch of YAR groups, is in itself quite telling of the power of the youth, their voices, and their stories, from the margins to the centre.



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