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# UNHEARD VOICES: YOUNG PEOPLE'S STORIES OF STRUGGLE, HOPE, AND RESILIENCE IN A COVID-19 AFFECTED ECONOMY



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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**Unheard voices: Young people's stories of struggle,  
hope, and resilience in a COVID-19 affected economy**

**COVID-19 effects on Economic Opportunities and  
Decent Work for Youth (EODWY) in Bangladesh,  
Mozambique, Kenya, and Tanzania – June 2021.**

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The impact of COVID-19 has been felt fiercely around the world. What started as a health crisis quickly turned into an economic one, leaving millions of people out of work. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 114 million jobs were lost in 2020, with a particularly strong economic impact on young workers<sup>1</sup>. Youth tend to be overly represented in sectors that were more impacted by lockdowns, business closures, and economic slowdowns, obstructing their ability to access opportunities for income generation and decent work. Massive school closures and the inability of many students to transition to online or distance learning also raises questions about their educational future. Despite the efforts of governments and international agencies to reverse the impacts of the pandemic, most of the measures taken by these stakeholders neglect to take into account the multi-dimensional challenges the pandemic poses for young people and their specific needs<sup>2</sup>.

Using policy analysis and individual case stories, this study explores the effects of COVID-19 on young people's lives in Bangladesh, Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania, providing an overview of the context and government responses to the COVID-19 crisis by country. It analyses the effects of the pandemic on economic opportunities and decent work for youth, discusses the implications of these effects on young people, and provides recommendations to governments, policymakers, and donors.

For the collection and analysis of stories, youth researchers were engaged as part of the research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. They, in collaboration with ActionAid and local consultants, recruited youth participants for the research study. In total, 82 youth aged 18–35 participated in the interviews.

Special attention was put on the distribution of genders, ages, geographic setting, and economic and educational backgrounds. Interviewees worked in a variety of sectors, including agricultural production; micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs); trading; and services.

The policy analysis section included a desk review of secondary data per country to understand how sensitive policies and pandemic-related government measures were to youth and gender, and what their effects were on economic opportunities for youth. National consultants in each country were responsible for the policy analysis at the local level, producing a national report for each participating country.

## The Policy Response

### Bangladesh

Fast government response was paramount in controlling the pandemic in one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Bangladesh was able to capitalise on its previous experience responding to natural disasters and moved swiftly to try to control the spread of the virus while also providing assistance to poor and vulnerable populations such as food aid and cash relief. The government also put stimulus packages into motion to face the adverse effect of the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Despite the government's rapid response, the country still faced challenges and its previous progress is threatened by the COVID-19 crisis, with some estimates forecasting a doubling of poverty levels and an increase of existing inequalities<sup>4</sup>.

The government has announced stimulus packages to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19<sup>5</sup>.

### Kenya

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Kenyan government announced a raft of measures to be adopted, all of which had two primary areas of concern: the people's health and the economy. Policies were designed to ensure that people were not overly exposed to health risks, and that the economy would not be obliterated by the pandemic. Despite government efforts to contain the COVID-19 virus, containment measures faced several challenges including a lack of compliance with health protocols, curfews,

1) ILO (2021). ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition

2) ILO (2020). Youth & COVID-19: Impact on jobs, education, rights and mental health

3) Bangladesh Bank (2021). Policy Measures of Bangladesh Bank in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

4) Kumar, B. and Pinky, S. (2020) Addressing economic and health challenges of COVID-19 in Bangladesh: Preparation and response

5) Bangladesh Bank (2021) Policy Measures of Bangladesh Bank in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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and lockdowns. Additionally, Kenya's porous borders, especially with Somalia and Tanzania, made it even harder for disease surveillance personnel to conduct appropriate track and tracing monitoring<sup>6</sup>.

## Mozambique

The government's approach to the crisis was aimed at mitigating the effect of the pandemic on people's lives and livelihoods, including suspension of classes, limitations on events, mandatory implementation of preventive measures, and the adoption of tax and monetary policy measures to support the formal private sector in addressing the economic impact of the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis comes at a delicate time for Mozambique and is already negatively impacting economic activity. It is anticipated that Mozambique will experience large external and fiscal financing gaps in 2021 in a context characterized by exposure to external shocks and limited fiscal space<sup>7</sup>.

## Tanzania

Unlike other East African countries, Tanzania (both mainland and Zanzibar) had a unique approach to the COVID-19 crisis. As part of its legal framework, no single law or policy was enacted to guide the management of COVID-19 interventions. The state used existing health and disaster management laws and policies to manage and guide several COVID-19 responses. Unlike other countries, despite a slowdown in the economic growth rate, the country managed to avoid recession<sup>8</sup>. However, key sectors such as tourism and trade, both major contributors to gross domestic product (GDP) growth, have been severely hit.

## Key Findings Policy Response

**Policy responses to the pandemic varied across countries, highlighting the need for context-specific approaches.** While some countries imposed stricter lockdowns, including curfews and cessation of movement heavily enforced by police, other countries implemented less-stringent measures such as limiting unnecessary movement of people from one region to another, banning all public gatherings, and school closures.

**Policies and measures implemented lack a youth lens.** This is particularly troubling since we know young people are disproportionately affected by the pandemic through disruption of education and training, employment and income losses, and greater difficulties in finding a job<sup>9</sup>. Young people participating in the study highlighted the lack of access to social protection systems, emergency support programmes, government funding schemes and tax reliefs.

**Policies and stimulus packages focused mostly on the formal economy and on larger firms, missing opportunities to support key sectors and small businesses, which are critical to the economy and to employment creation for youth.**

COVID-19 has meant significant job losses in sectors like hospitality and tourism, transportation, and MSME, which employ many young workers and women. These sectors have been some of the hardest hit, reporting severe declines in sales or coming to a complete halt with ripple effects to other sectors. Because of the nature and characteristics of businesses operating in these sectors – small-scale, operating informally, usually employing family members, and susceptible to economic shocks – they have

6) British Council (2017). Youth Employment in Kenya

7) World Bank (2020). World Bank Helps Mozambique Mitigate Impact of Covid-19 with a New \$100 Million Grant.

8) World Bank (2021). Tanzania Overview

9) ILO (2020). ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition

10) Ibid.

11) World Bank (2021) Mozambique Economic Update: Setting the Strategy for Recovery

12) World Bank (2020). Tanzania Economic Update, Addressing the impact of COVID-19

not been able to benefit from incentives, cash injections, and tax reliefs. The progress of the stimulus for MSME has also remained slow due to bureaucratic red tapes<sup>10,11,12</sup>.

**Data from our research indicates that funds and assistance are not reaching the appropriate target groups**, with the majority of youth reporting that they had not received any type of assistance from government or civil society organizations. The lack of support faced by youth is concerning considering the challenges they currently face and the long-term implications of the impacts of the pandemic for young people.

## Education

**School closures across countries are expected to have short-, medium-, and long-term effects, particularly for youth.** The evidence from previous crises indicates that vulnerable populations face higher risks of school drop-out and reduced skills development, both of which increase income disparities over time. School closures are predicted to reduce learning-adjusted years of education across developing regions by one-third to one full year. This situation will likely lower future earnings and dent human capital<sup>13</sup>.

**School closures are having a disproportionate impact on girls and young women.** The situation threatens previous progress made in girls' education and gender equality in past years<sup>14</sup>. School closures have exacerbated girls' and young women's care responsibilities, limiting their learning time. Female participants across countries in our study echoed these trends in their interviews, highlighting how household responsibilities have impaired their learning opportunities.

**School closures in developing countries have lasted longer than in developed economies, acutely affecting populations with limited access to infrastructure and technology such as Internet or computers.** This has

resulted in increased inequality not only between countries that can offer remote learning and those that cannot, but also within countries, between children who can access remote learning and those who cannot and is likely to increase the gender digital divide over time<sup>15</sup>.

**The 'earn-to-learn dynamic' has been disrupted, further reducing future opportunities for youth.** The inability of young people to continue their education can have long-term implications in income generation and working opportunities. At the same time, without work, access to education becomes out of reach. A key question for many young people will be how to circumvent this vicious cycle and ensure they have access to economic opportunities in the future.

**Who returns to school, and when, remains a key question, with one priority being that girls and young women return to and stay in school.** Safe openings in the short term and reducing pandemic-related gaps or lags in education in the long term are both important challenges in the educational sector.

## Employment, decent work, livelihoods and income

**Increases in youth unemployment due to income losses and declines in work aggravate the vulnerabilities and challenges that young people face in labour markets.** Young people who experience unemployment for long periods of time encounter fewer career development opportunities, lower wage levels, and poorer prospects for better jobs. Combined with limited access to financial assets, the situation puts young people at increased risk of falling into poverty when there is a sudden stop or decline in income<sup>16</sup>.

**The hardest-hit sectors are those largely employing young people. Workers in these sectors are characterized by being young, urban, informal workers.** Across the four countries in the research, young people tend to be employed in hospitality and tourism, transportation, food services, and in MSME or household enterprises. They tend to work informally, with women representing a higher proportion of informal workers. Economic shocks to these sectors mean urban poverty is likely to increase with a significant impact on women. This

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13) World Bank (2021) Global Economic Prospects

14) UNESCO (2020) Keeping girls in the picture

15) World Bank (2021) Global Economic Prospects

16) OECD (2020), Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience

17) The New York Times (2020) Why Some Women Call This Recession a 'Shecession'

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situation also raises questions about the ability of young people to transition out of poverty. Furthermore, because young people tend to be self-employed or work in MSME, often in the informal sector, they lack access to safety nets and are not able to benefit from support and relief programmes.

**Women across the world and young women across countries in our study are experiencing a ‘shecession,’ which will likely have long-term effects.** This term refers to an economic downturn where job and income losses are disproportionately affecting women more than men<sup>17</sup>. The situation is likely to lead to a decrease of female participation in the labour market and increased vulnerability for women, further reducing opportunities available to them.

**Young people and their households are using different coping mechanisms, often reducing food consumption.** Families also expressed serious concerns about their ability to cover the cost of healthcare in case of sickness (particularly COVID-19). In other cases, young people have also reported that families are having to make difficult decisions, such as which children to send back to school and which ones to keep out of school due to their inability to pay for school fees for the time being.

**Young women and girls disproportionately experience the burden of increased household responsibilities.** Research findings suggest that restrictions and containment measures in place due to the pandemic have led to an increase in young women’s unpaid care work. The increase in unpaid domestic and care work can have adverse consequences for young people’s education, livelihoods, and health.

**Family and personal savings have been decimated and the situation is leaving families in debt.** There are concerns that loans will not be able to be paid due to lack of income and work, exposing young people and their families to further vulnerabilities. Young people are also concerned about their ability to pay for food, education, and healthcare in the future.

**The situation has led to urban-to-rural relocation, putting increased pressure on rural populations.** As income dried up, many young people decided to cut living

costs by returning to their villages and seeking refuge with their families. Rural areas have been less exposed to the spread of the virus and households with agricultural incomes have been able to weather the crisis slightly better. However, questions remain as to how long the situation will remain as such and to what extent these households will be able to absorb and accommodate returning populations.

**To be able to rebuild their livelihoods, young people are demanding access to education and training and the provision of financial assistance.** Young people recognize that finding a job will be harder in the future, so rather than seeking work, they would like to create work. They also mentioned the need for an easier and more-streamlined process to access capital that would allow them to start a business.

## Gender-based violence and reproductive health

**Mirroring global trends, young women have experienced an increase in gender-based and domestic violence.** Young girls are vulnerable to sexual and physical violence due to restrictions on movement, social isolation, and school closures. In several instances, young women reported that the economic impact of the crisis is increasing tensions in the home, leading to physical violence. Young participants also reported feeling unsafe due to a decline in public transportation, forcing them to wait for long hours either in the early morning or late at night.

**Access to reproductive health is a key concern for young women.** Pandemic-related disruptions in trade and supply chains around the world can affect stocks of sexual and reproductive supplies<sup>18</sup>. If this occurs during the COVID-19 pandemic the situation can have significant and devastating consequences for young mothers, putting their health at risk. Some participants also stated that the pandemic has delayed family plans, with women postponing planned pregnancies due to the economic situation.

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<sup>18</sup> Plan International UK (2020) Implications of the COVID-19 crisis on girls and young women

## Mental health

### **Youth are anxious and stressed about their future.**

Young people across countries reported high levels of anxiety and concern about what the future looks like and what opportunities will be available to them. Young people are not only worried about income and work but also about the effects of long periods of isolation on their social relations and on cultural norms.

### **Young people are also worried about how youth are perceived and the potential criminalization of poverty.**

In some regions, there have been reports of youth misconduct and petty crimes, often related to a lack of income and work. The situation can easily lead to a criminalization of youth and poverty, where those desperate to sustain themselves and their families are attacked for doing so.

## Access to Services

**Youth are not getting the support they need.** Due to the nature of youth employment – often self-employed or informal – they are not able to benefit from emergency support programmes, government funding schemes, and tax relief measures.

**Lack of information and bureaucracy act as barriers to access public funds.** Many report not knowing about any programmes from which they could receive assistance. For the few who do know, bureaucracy and red tape act as strong deterrents to requesting support.

## Recommendations

### **Governments and policymakers should:**

- Apply, design, and implement policies with a youth lens.
- Scale up existing social protection programmes and re-purpose them to protect young people.
- Provide access to education and training, ensuring support for the most vulnerable.
- Ensure young people receive financial assistance.

### **Donors should**

- Continue to adjust their strategies while maintaining current programming.
- Provide support to keep building the evidence based on what policy approaches work best for youth.

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