Youth Insights

The impact of COVID-19 on young people & their participation in the response. September 2020.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease 2019

GBV: Gender-based violence

ICS: International Citizen Service – a development programme that brings together young people from the UK and developing countries to volunteer in communities in Africa and Asia. More than 35,000 young people have volunteered across the world in the past 10 years.

MSME: Micro, small & medium enterprise

SGBV: Sexual and gender-based violence

STD: Sexually transmitted disease

SRHS: Sexual and reproductive health services

VSO: Voluntary Service Overseas

UNFPA: The United Nations Population Fund

PPE: Personal protective equipment

1. Executive summary

VSO conducted research over April – July 2020, gathering stories from nearly 300 young people on how they and other marginalised and vulnerable young people in their communities have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research explored:

- How are young people being affected?
- What actions are they taking in response to COVID-19? And what challenges are they facing in this regard?
- What suggestions do young people have for governments, organisations, young people and communities to be more prepared for a future pandemic?

Stories were gathered from young people in 19 different countries across VSO's three regional hubs[1], mainly through an online tool, supplemented by some phone interviews and hard copy distribution. Slightly more young men participated than young women with just over 40% from an urban area, 32% from a semi-urban area and 35% rural. Four out of ten of the 262 stories that were analysed were submitted by young people who were unemployed, around one in four were studying or engaged in development work and a third employed.

How are young people being affected?

Young people across all regions of the world where VSO works have been badly affected by COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed to reduce transmission of the virus. Nearly half of the young people surveyed referenced the loss of income and the disruption of their means of earning a living. The pandemic has also interrupted development work and the education of nearly a third of the young people (30%).

There is lot of uncertainty reflected in the young people's stories of how the pandemic is affecting them – resulting in stress and worry about their future. Young people who are vulnerable or marginalised are disproportionately impacted as they are more likely to have fragile livelihoods, be daily wage earners, and have fewer resources and at their disposal.

The main effects reflected in the stories are described as:

- Disruption of livelihoods and loss of income.
- Interruption of education, training or development work.
- Disruption to social relations – for some, not being able to see family and friends was a major sacrifice. For others, the challenges of lockdown were tensions in the family home and increased sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) affecting young women and girls.
- Negative impacts on health and wellbeing – with the stresses and strains of trying to cope negatively affecting young people's emotional health. For others with special needs, the restrictions had made it difficult to access healthcare facilities and services.

The stories illustrate how these challenges are interlinked. For example, young people talked about how anxious they felt about getting money to eat when their business had been closed or they had been laid off and the uncertainty of what is going to happen next.

The stories shine a powerful spotlight on how the restrictions impact on young people's daily lives, particularly on those who are poor or marginalised.

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[1] VSO manages the geographical delivery of its global portfolio through regions which were previously referred to as hubs. The hubs defined areas of operations that constituted a number of clustered countries: Nairobi hub, Asia Pacific hub and Pretoria hub.
Nairobi hub: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Nigeria
Pretoria hub: Zimbabwe, Zambia, Sierra Leonne, Lesotho, Eswatini, South Africa and Malawi
Bangkok hub: Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia

What actions are they taking in response to COVID-19? And what challenges are they facing?

Young people reflected on the activities they were engaging in to counter the impact of the pandemic. Most young people (80%) described how they were participating or supporting COVID responses and actions in their communities and, in a few cases, nationally through online and offline platforms. The two main clusters of activities that young people are participating are around:

Sensitisation and awareness raising about COVID-19. The activities here that young people are undertaking often through their youth networks include: online information campaigns, radio broadcasts and the distribution of information (face-to-face). These address fake news and make sure that those who are most vulnerable understand how the virus spreads and how best to protect themselves. Around two-thirds of the young people participating from the Nairobi and Bangkok hub areas are engaged in sensitisation and awareness raising activities about COVID-19. And 76% of those in Pretoria – this was the most common activity that young people were engaged in although these sorts of activities were more popular with young men than young women.

Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 restrictions. The activities here are focused on distributing food to those who need it, as well as personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, hand sanitiser and other hygiene products. Young people are making sure the vulnerable have supplies – using their local knowledge to identify and monitor the most marginalised populations and supporting those most in need to access emergency provision and essential social and healthcare services. In some countries they are raising funds to support the most vulnerable and providing psycho-social support to people in their communities who have been particularly badly affected by the virus and the restrictions. Forty percent of the young people who shared their stories on response actions, are engaged in these sorts of activities. It is a particularly popular type of activity for young men and women in the Bangkok region and for young women in the Nairobi region.

In addition, a few young people spoke of the **advocacy** they are involved in. These activities include lobbying and advocating for the needs of the most marginalised populations and evidence generation on the impact of COVID-19 to strengthen social accountability

Not all young people were participating, and some were not doing as much as they would like. Young people related stories of the barriers and challenges they face, including lack of appreciation or recognition of their roles by key stakeholders, lack of resources and a lack of opportunities – some young people suggested that they were not welcomed by official responders. Other reasons they gave included: fear of contracting the virus with no PPE or safety measures provided, restrictions of movement, lack of transportation, curfews and family responsibilities.

What suggestions do young people have for governments, organisations, young people and communities to be more prepared for a future pandemic?

The final question young people were asked was about their suggestions for the future. Young people had a wealth of ideas and proposals for the future and their engagement on pandemic response:

The **overall approach** young people were calling for can best be described as a **disaster preparedness plan** with governments, supportive organisations, young people and communities each playing their part. Providing resources and, most importantly, resourcing the disaster preparedness plan was seen as the governments' responsibility. Supportive organisations were asked to liaise with governments to ensure (and perhaps co-ordinate) provision of each of three elements as they affect the most vulnerable and support young people's involvement in the planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the plan. Young people had a wealth of ideas and suggestions to inform future planning and many are highly motivated to contribute. For example, by volunteering to help those in need, researching need and community mapping, raising awareness and empowering and supporting the most vulnerable young people in their communities.

As well as calling on government to devise a preparedness plan, a few young people referenced the need to **strengthen accountability**. To monitor service provision and implementation of the pandemic response plans reach out to the most marginalised, tackle corruption and establish improved standards of governance.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research has highlighted how young people and those who are most marginalised in their neighbourhoods and communities have been adversely affected by COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus. But it also highlights the enormous contributions young people have been making, engaging in the local responses to COVID-19 despite the challenges they themselves are facing.

Their efforts are helping to raise awareness and sensitise the most vulnerable, educating them on safe practices and empowering them to take steps to avoid catching the virus. Young people often supported by VSO and other non-governmental organisations, are also playing a vital role in supplying food, PPE and other necessary provisions to those who have lost their livelihoods and are in a precarious position. They are also gathering information on the impact of the pandemic, communicating stories on how the vulnerable have been affected and speaking out to highlight the responsibilities of government and community leaders to ensure that responses are inclusive.

The findings suggest messages for governments and duty bearers about the importance of stakeholders recognising, valuing and facilitating the roles that young people can meaningfully play during any future pandemic. The report concludes with recommendations for VSO to consider including:

- Playing a convening role by facilitating a new COVID-19 aware dialogue with governmental agencies and community leaders and young people.
- Piloting youth networks focused initiatives, to explore and support their creativity to lead sustainable community responses.
- Reflecting on what programming opportunities exist within VSO's portfolio to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on highly vulnerable communities.
- Adopting a more integrated and holistic approach to its programming, especially in fragile settings.
- Following up all community volunteers that ended their placements while lockdown restrictions were in place and offering some short-term support.
- Building clear accountability and monitoring mechanisms at different levels and for governments to put in place social protection policies and inclusive practices, including access to digital technology.
- Continuing support for youth networks formation and strengthening and promoting youth participation and leadership in future preparedness planning.
- Promote and enhance youth volunteering through the networks as a pathway for personal development, youth voice and civic engagement.

2.   Introduction

This report shares the findings from research conducted by VSO with young people aged 18-35 in 19 countries across Africa and Asia Pacific. The aims of the study were to:

- Learn and document how COVID-19 has impacted young people's lives.
- Understand how young people are participating in the response and the actions they are taking.
- Capture young people's views on where future interventions should focus and inform VSO's programming and leadership work.

The research used a story-gathering approach to gather individual experiences, VSO's country level youth networks acted as platforms to promote and share disseminate the survey questionnaire. Stories were collected from nearly 300 young people through an online tool and directly by staff and volunteers between April-July 2020. Over this period significant outbreaks of COVID-19 were reported, and all 19 countries implemented restriction measures to limit the spread of the virus including full lockdowns in some countries. This larger-scale research complements a piece of rapid research examining how VSO's country level youth networks are responding to COVID-19 in three countries (Kenya, the Philippines and Sierra Leone)[2].

The accounts from young people confirm the disastrous repercussions for people's livelihoods, health and education. Restriction measures have most adversely affected those working in the informal economy. The lockdown in India, for example, led to the estimated loss of 122 million jobs with the unemployment rate approaching 27%[3]. As countries' health systems have pivoted to deal with COVID-19, other health needs are being ignored – as well as other economic, education and social needs. A UNFPA briefing on the situation in the Philippines draws attention to the impact on women and girls' access to SRH services as well as increases in SGBV during quarantine measures[4]. Education has also been impacted, with UNESCO estimating that 1.2 billion students across 165 countries are affected by school and university closures[5], with concerns about the most vulnerable students' access to remote learning approaches.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of VSO's programming and there are grave concerns about how communities will be affected – both in terms of the immediate risk of infection, and the broader consequences of the containment measures on all aspects of people's lives. Questions have been raised about how people can stay at home and practice social physical distancing when living in densely populated and insecure housing and when reliant upon daily incomes to survive. VSO has rapidly pivoted its programming towards COVID-19 response through four pillars: supporting health systems; continued access to education; supporting micro, small & medium enterprises (MSMEs) for livelihoods and business continuity; and emergency coordination systems strengthening. Within the final pillar there is a commitment to supporting and expanding volunteer platforms especially for youth volunteers, engaging them to think creatively about potential ways to engage in COVID-19 response and recovery.

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[2] Rapid Research: Youth Networks Response to COVID-19, June 2020, VSO International
[3] BBC May 2020
[4] UNFPA 2020
[5] UNESCO Global Education Coalition 2020

www.vsointernational.org

3.   Research approach

This story-gathering research seeks to understand how young people within VSO's youth networks and their surrounding communities have been affected by COVID-19 pandemic and especially how marginalised and vulnerable young people have been impacted. It gathers evidence on how young people are participating in the response to the pandemic and some of the challenges they are facing. The approach reflects VSO's development focus on empowering the most marginalised populations as the study examined how these populations are affected by COVID-19, the barriers they face and the support and advocacy opportunities that VSO can respond to. The findings will guide programming, leadership and policy and advocacy to support resilience building for a changing world. Additionally, the study captures evidence for VSO's youth engagement value proposition around the role youth volunteering and leadership plays in fighting poverty and supporting the most vulnerable. This provides learning for VSO country offices and informs VSO's approach to supporting and strengthening the unique and important role that youth networks can play in development and crisis response – both during the current pandemic and as communities recover. Figure 1 set outs the research questions.

Figure 1: Research questions

Research questions

- IMPACT: How are young people, their families and their communities being affected by COVID-19?

- ACTION: How are young people responding to the COVID-19 pandemic? What action are they taking? What challenges are they facing in this regard?

- SUGGESTIONS: What suggestions do young people have for governments, organisations, young people and communities to be more prepared for a future pandemic?

The youth insights and story-gathering process targeted all VSO countries. An initial call was conducted by the Global Youth Engagement team for all the countries youth engagement focal persons to share the plans as well as the tool for their feedback and thoughts on the process and support needs. The online and Word version of the tool were shared with all the country focal persons for them to share with the youth networks/platforms and support the process of stories and insights gathering.

Stories were gathered from young people within VSO's youth platforms/networks mainly through an online tool. The tool is included in Annex 1 of this report and is available online here. To enhance access to the most marginalised youth, VSO staff in countries printed the questionnaire and distributed it to the youth and where necessary, such as in Malawi, Zambia, and Pakistan, translated the questions into local languages and/or conducted telephone interviews such as in Thailand, Ethiopia and Kenya.

Nearly 300 stories were collected, and the data analysed using Excel and Word. Some stories were excluded from the final analysis because of a lack of overt consent, the age of the respondent or the limitations of the response. A total of 262 stories were anonymised and comprised the final sample. The stories were analysed thematically according to gender, age, country/region, living circumstances (rural, semi-urban, urban) and employment status (unemployed, employed, studying). The analysis used a framework developed in a rapid research VSO undertook with VSO youth networks in Kenya, the Philippines and in Sierra Leone[6]. The framework was adapted as required to reflect the themes emerging from young people's stories.

Staff worked to gather stories through the youth networks from a representative sample – taking into account age, location (country), living circumstances and gender. Young people were also asked to relay stories of other young people in their communities who were particularly badly affected by the pandemic and the imposed restrictions.

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[6] Rapid Research: Youth Networks Response to COVID-19, June 2020, VSO International

There were a number of limitations to the study to note. Because of the restrictions on travel and movement and social distancing requirements, the stories were collected mainly through online or digital means which limited access to only those with the technology and resources. In some countries staff were able to mitigate this to some extent by reaching out in person to young people in rural areas or those with limited access to the internet, to conduct phone interviews. Other factors that limited the breadth of the research include the following:

- Language barrier in some contexts.
- Limited human resources to support interviewing the youth.
- Loss/misinterpretation of information through translation process.
- Limited access to young people with disabilities.
- Limited access to technology amongst the youth.

The sample

This section of the report sets out information on the 262 young people who provided stories – where they live, age, gender, employment status, living circumstances, and any self-defined disability.

Location

Stories were gathered from young people in 19 countries. However, two countries – India and Bangladesh – only returned one story each. Chart 1 illustrates the numbers of stories by country in the other 17 countries. Stories from five countries – Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Thailand and Cambodia – made up 56% of the sample.

Chart 1: Country
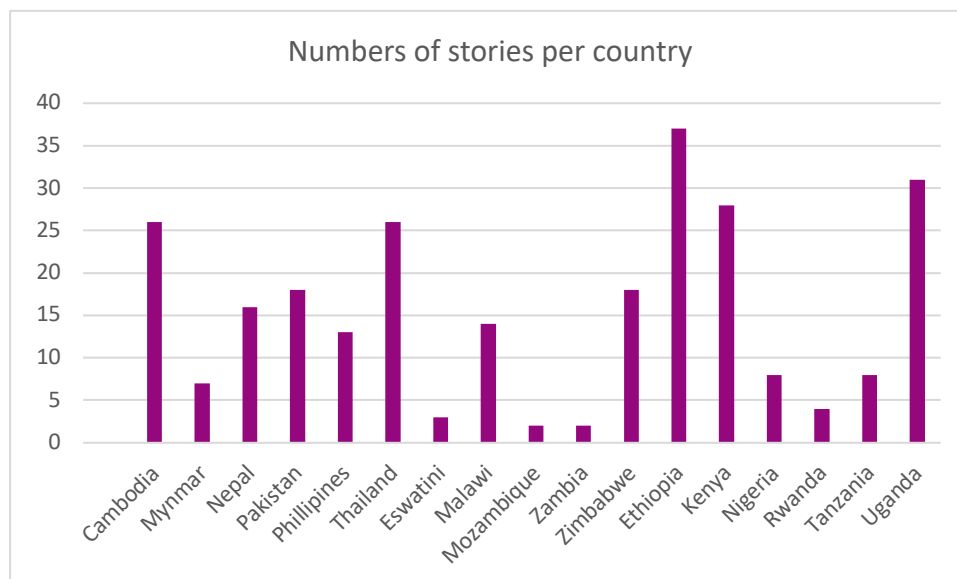
The sample included stories from all three regions where VSO is programming and actively supporting youth engagement work. These relate to VSO's regions of operations previously referred to as Nairobi, Pretoria and Bangkok hubs . Nearly three times as many stories came from the Bangkok and Nairobi hubs compared with the Pretoria hub as illustrated in Chart 2.

Chart 2: VSO hubs

VSO Regions

Pretoria 15%
Bangkok 41%
Nairobi 44%

- Bangkok
- Nairobi
- Pretoria
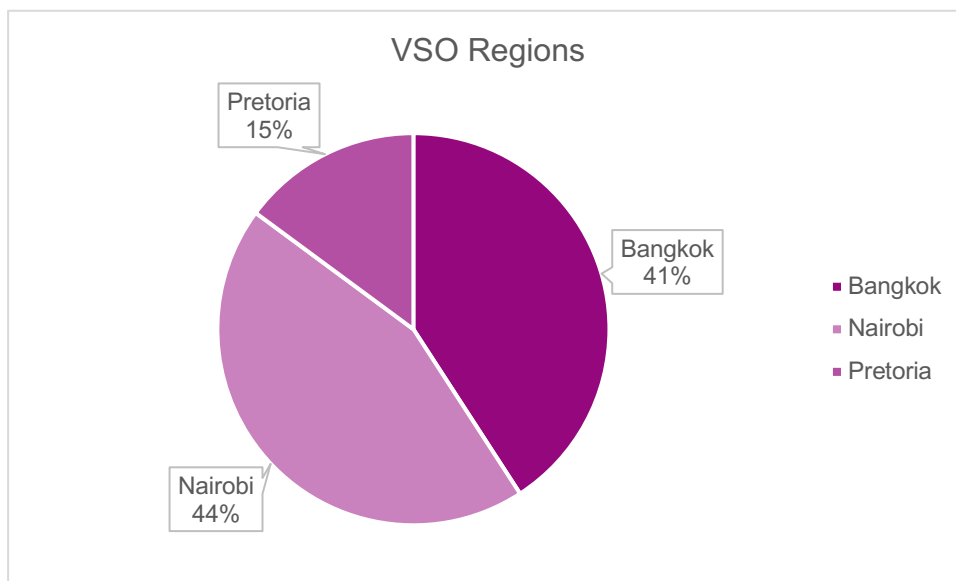
Gender

Chart 3 illustrates that there were slightly more young men than young women in the sample. Three young people identified as 'other' but didn't elaborate. Across the hubs, the gender split was as across the whole sample in Pretoria (54% male and 46% female) but in Bangkok there were a few more young women than young men (47% male and 53% female) and in Nairobi there were many more stories from young men than young women in the sample (61% male and 39% female). In the analysis of the data from the Nairobi hub, steps were taken to privilege the stories of young women to ensure their voices were visible.

Chart 3: Gender

Gender

Other 1%
Female 46%
Male 53%

- Female
- Male
- Other
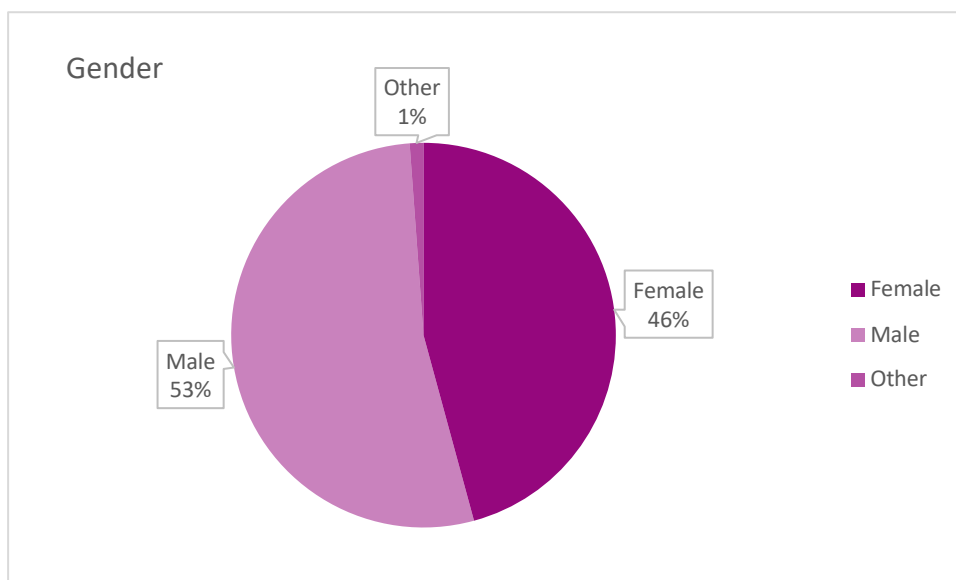
Age

The recorded age of the young storytellers ranged from 18-34 years. Just over half (55%) were aged 18-24 and 45% aged 25-35. However only 10 young people (4% of the whole sample) were between 30 and 35 years of age at the time they narrated their stories.

Disability

Young people were asked if they had a disability. Only four young people said they did. When exploring the stories young people narrated about the impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions on young people worse off than themselves – 6% of those stories made broad reference to the experiences of young people who were disabled or who had a family member who was disabled.
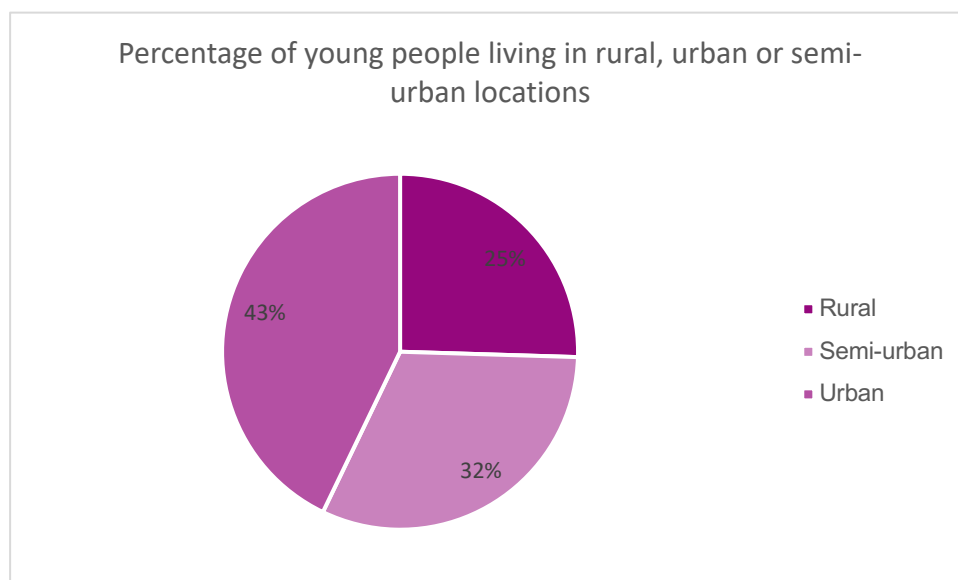
Living circumstances

Young people were asked to indicate whether they lived in an urban, semi-urban or rural area. Chart 5 shows the numbers of young people in each of the different categories. Forty three percent of young people were from an urban area, 32% from a semi-urban area and 25% from a rural area. Across the three hubs, Bangkok was most successful in engaging young people living in rural communities with 42% of their 107 stories gathered from rural youth compared with Nairobi, where only 5% of their 116 stories were from young people living in rural areas. A quarter of the young people who engaged in the study in the Pretoria hub area were from rural communities.

Chart 5: Living Circumstances

Percentage of young people living in rural, urban or semi-urban locations

- Rural
- Semi-urban
- Urban

Employment status

Finally, in terms of understanding the circumstances of the storytellers at the time of the lockdowns and their engagement in the study, young people were asked whether they were employed, studying or unemployed or a combination. Chart 6 illustrates the numbers and percentages for the total sample where known (n= 254) with four out of ten of the storytellers unemployed and around a third in employment or self-employed. Please note, there is an option in the tool to indicate more than one employment status, for example, unemployed or employed and studying – six respondents gave a second status – all indicated they were studying as well as being employed or unemployed.

Chart 6: Employment status of the storytellers

Employment status

- Unemployed ■ Employed ■ Studying
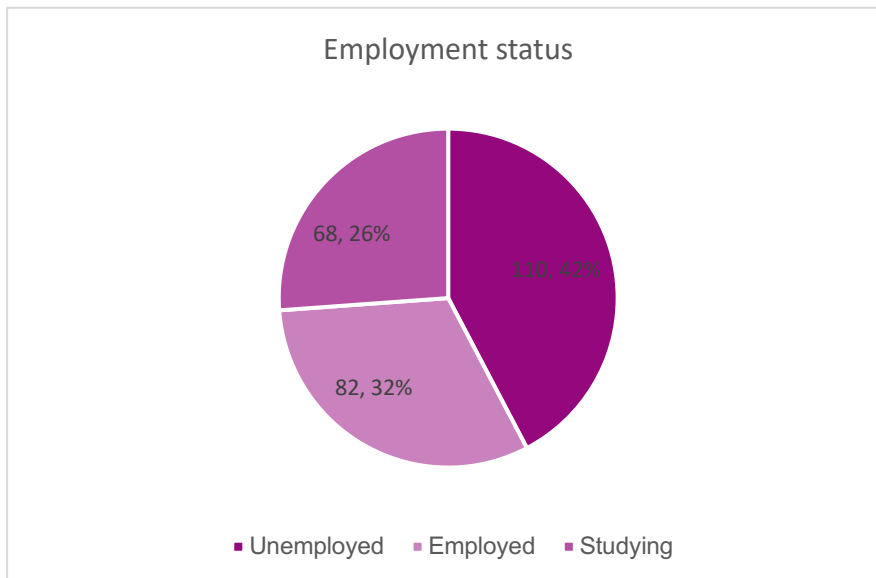
There was some variation across the regions with storytellers in Bangkok more likely to be employed than those in Pretoria and Nairobi. In the Bangkok region over half (51%) of young people were employed compared to 31% in Pretoria and 23% in Nairobi. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting these figures as the differences may well just reflect the different contexts in which VSO International and its youth engagement networks operate

Chart 7: Employment status by VSO hub

hub

■ Unemployed ■ Employed ■ Studying
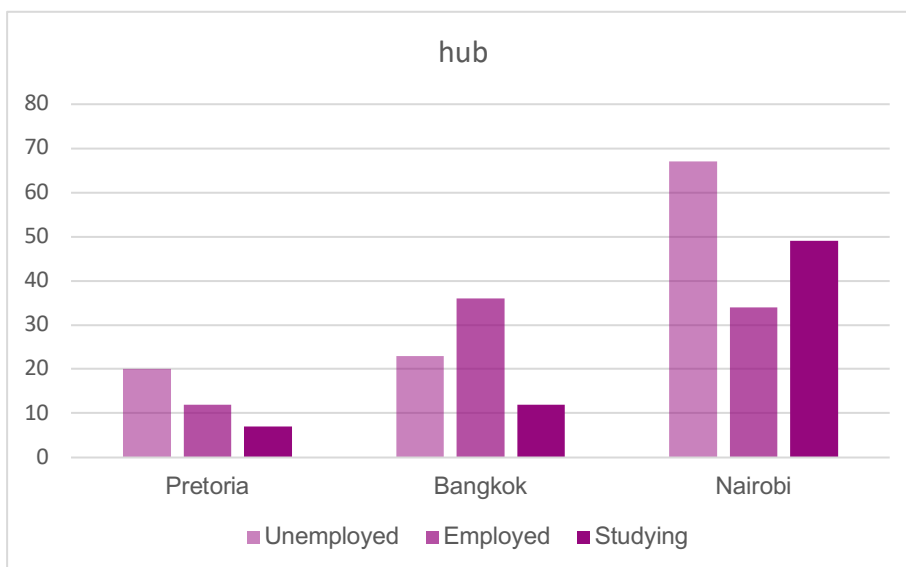
Further analysis indicated that as one might expect a higher proportion of young people living in urban or semi-urban areas were employed. Once again caution should be exercised in interpreting this data as it will likely to largely reflect the differences in the types of programmes and youth engagement strategies operating in each country.

Chart 8: Employment status by living circumstances

Employment status by living circumstances
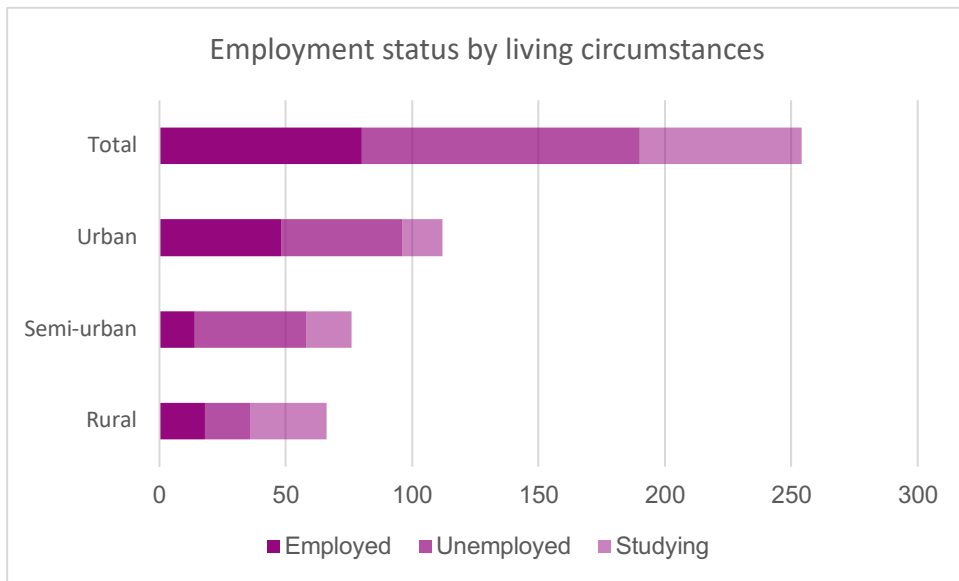
4.   The findings

The findings are presented in three sections which consider each of the research questions in turn, as follows:

IMPACT: How young people and their families and communities are being affected by COVID-19?

ACTION: How young people are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The action they are taking and the challenges they are facing in this regard?

SUGGESTIONS: What suggestions do young people have for governments, organisations, young people and communities to be more prepared for a future pandemic?

These are similar to the questions explored in the initial rapid research conducted with VSO's country level youth networks but here the data reveals more about the individual experiences of young people and their families and communities.

IMPACT: How are young people and their communities being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Young people across all three regions of the world where VSO works are badly impacted by COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed to stop transmission of the virus. Nearly half of the young people surveyed referenced the loss of income and the disruption of their means of earning a living. The pandemic has also interrupted development work and the education of nearly a third of the young people (30%). The development work that some of the young people have been involved in, including volunteering, research and training, had to be halted and many of their plans have been put on hold. There is lot of uncertainty reflected in the young people's stories of how the pandemic is affecting them – resulting in stress and worry about their future.

Around one in four young people spoke of the impact of the pandemic and the restrictions on their emotional wellbeing and mental health with young people spending much of time alone and sometimes a long way from their family and friends. The young people also narrated stories of how other young people in their community have been affected by COVID-19 highlighting how women and girls, youths with disabilities and those reliant on a daily income have been particularly badly affected.

The main impacts that young people describe in their stories are around:

> The disruption of livelihoods, loss of income leading to eviction, hunger and despair
> The interruption of their education, training or development work. There were many accounts, particularly from young people living in Africa, of having to suspend volunteering and community-based activities – losing income and significant opportunities.
> The disruption to social relations. For some, not being able to see family and friends was a major sacrifice, for others, the challenges of lockdown were tensions in the family home and increased sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) affecting young women and girls. At community level, a few young people in both Africa and in the Asia Pacific regions mentioned police brutality especially targeted to youth and daily income earners.
> How the stresses and strains of the restrictions and the fear of the virus are negatively affecting young people's health and wellbeing. Some young people described how their mental and emotional health was badly affected by the restrictions imposed – feelings of hopelessness and depression were not uncommon. It was interesting to note that volunteering in the community and engagement with youth networks was a protective factor. For others with special needs, for example those who are HIV positive, the restrictions had made it difficult to access to healthcare facilities to obtain services such as medication or counselling.

The stories illustrate how these challenges are interlinked. Emile's story highlights the pressures the pandemic is placing on young peoples on their livelihoods and relationships with their friends and family:

I am badly affected by this pandemic because lack of movement has really cost me a lot – it has affected the little hustling I do for myself and my siblings. The lockdown met me in Lagos and for about two months now have been living a solo life that is very uncomfortable for me. I spent all my money on a hotel before moving to a friend's apartment who is now tired of my presence in his house due to my long stay. I am praying for the lockdown to be relaxed so that I can go back to my base and rearrange my life back. (Nigeria, male).

The stories shine a powerful spotlight on how the restrictions impact on young people's daily lives, particularly on those who are poor or marginalised. Chart 9 illustrates the number of stories where young people mention being affected in the four main ways identified. Please note, over a third of young people referenced at least two of the different impacts in our thematic typology. Loss of livelihood was the most common impact referenced in the stories – this affected nearly half of the young people (46%). Nearly one in four young people narrated stories which illustrated how the pandemic and the restrictions are adversely affecting their emotional health and wellbeing and/or their social relations.

Chart 9: Number of stories referencing the different impacts of COVID-19
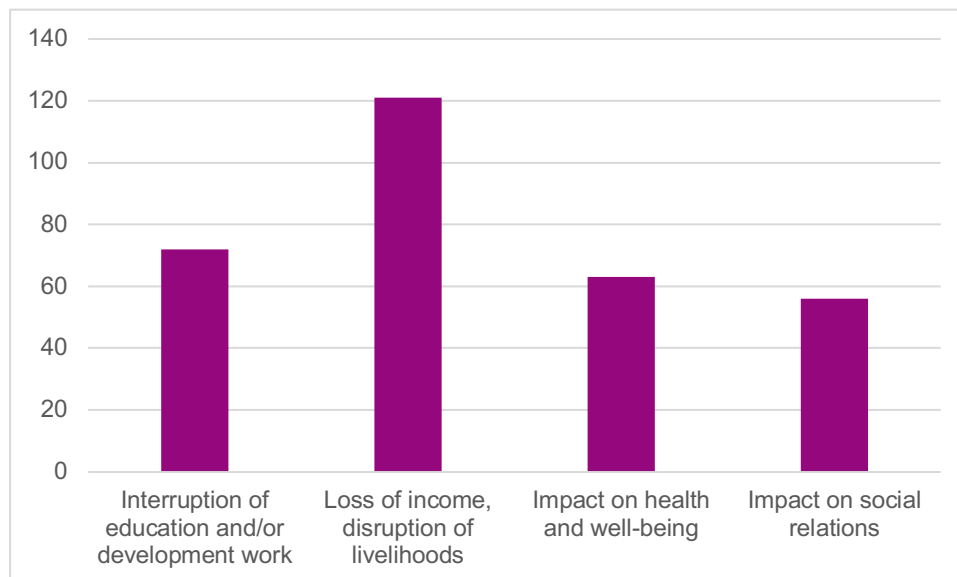
How have young people living in the different regions/VSO hubs been affected?

These four main impacts were felt across all regions (Chart 10), but young people living in Africa were slightly more likely to cite loss of income and disruption of livelihoods for themselves and those around them (40% of young people, compared to 34% living in Asia Pacific region) Young people living in Asia Pacific were more likely than their counterparts in Africa to reference the interruption of their studies, education or development work (30% compared with 18%). Impacts on health – both emotional health and access to healthcare – were cited by around one fifth of young people across all VSO hubs. The impact on social relations featured slightly more in Pretoria hub (22%) than Bangkok or Nairobi (17%). Consideration of these findings indicate the need for an integrated programming response.

Chart 10: Impact of COVID-19 by hubs
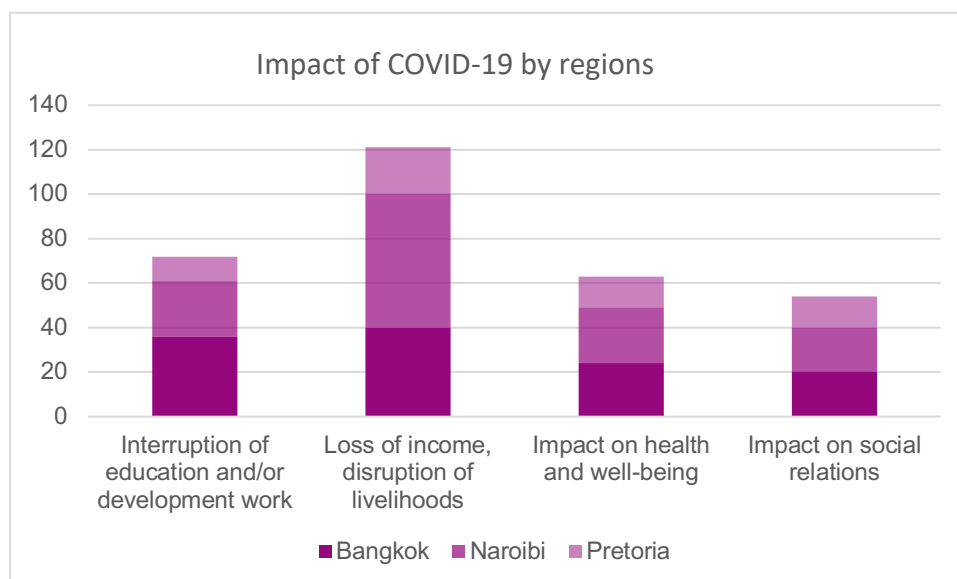
How have young women been affected compared with young men?

There were some differences in how young women and young men described how they had been affected by the pandemic with gender differences across the regions. In Asia and Pretoria, young women were twice as likely as the young men to reference the interruption of their education. However, in the Nairobi sample, there were no significant differences between the numbers of men and women affected in this way especially when including the interruption of development work. Caution should be exercised, however, as the Nairobi sample included a larger number of VSO volunteers both male and female, whose contracts had been interrupted. Across the whole sample young women were more likely than young men to emphasise the social aspects, referencing the challenges they face by not being able to meet up with friends and family.

How has age influenced the situation?

The differences in the stories from young people aged 18-24 compared with those aged 25-35 seemed to solely reflect the different life stages, with the older group more likely to be losing their livelihood and to have dependents, and the younger group more likely to be in education. The following sections of the report explore in more detail the main impacts young people described on themselves, whilst the analysis considers each of the four main impacts identified. It is important to remember that many young people referenced the links between the different impacts, for example how the disruption to their education or their volunteering programme was affecting their social interaction and their sense of wellbeing.

Loss of livelihoods

As the restrictions came into force, the impact on young people was immediate; when these stories were gathered in April-July 2020, restrictions on movement and social distancing were just being imposed. Young people's stories of how those reliant on casual work had become immediately destitute along with any of their dependants.

I worked as a waitress. I was the provider in my family and now I lost my job and at the moment my situation is very depressing because I was caught by this situation unaware, so I had to spend all of my savings. (Lila, Kenya, Female)

Life was a bit good before the pandemic because I would work and earn some money for survival. But unfortunately, in this period, no source of income and even the litter savings are no more. Thus, there is a reduction of meals in a day for survival. (Miremba, Uganda, female).

For VSO, it is important to note that young people volunteering with the organisation and supported in their work by youth networks have had their income and training interrupted, which has left some in extremely precarious situations. Their access to temporary employment as trainers and facilitators at

VSO, as well as income-generating opportunities with other NGOs, ended abruptly. One young woman from Cambodia tells her story:

I was volunteering with VSO's ICS when the pandemic came. It has affected our program and we ended earlier than what we were supposed to. The COVID-19 outbreak kind of stressed me out for a while as I've had to come back home unemployed with no income and my business has also stopped. I own an apartment which I rent on Airbnb and with no tourist visiting Phnom Penh because of what's going on this has affected me a lot as I have a family to support. (Alexa, Cambodia, female).

Another young person from Malawi told his story about how his income and his education had been disrupted as he was dependant on work with community-based organisations:

I'm a university graduate who is not yet fully employed. Before COVID-19 I was depending on piece works/part time jobs (field work) with different organisations implementing different projects in my district for my daily living and survival. Now, with the coming of COVID-19, most organisations went for a lockdown and they are no longer operating. Now it's very hard for me to provide myself with enough daily basic needs. Further, I was fortunate to be among the four selected students who were given a chance to pursue a master's degree. The programme (course) is a weekend programme and before COVID-19, I was able to source some money during the weekdays through part time jobs and use the money for my school fees and transport. Now with COVID, I can't afford the money for my school fees and I have failed to write the end of semester exams due to the school fees balance that is there. (Arnold, Malawi, male).

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Alisha's story

I belong to the deserted area of Tharparkar where socio economic conditions are worst and there is no any other opportunity for the youth. This COVID-19 has left a bad impact on our lives especially to the newly joined employees. Due to COVID-19 pandemic I lost a great opportunity of my life (Youth Co: lab Springboard Programme 2020) I was selected among 15 social entrepreneur from Pakistan for this programme, after completing this Springboard Programme top 4 would be selected for a trip to Malaysia and to get many chances to start bossiness, but due to this COVID-19 I had to return to my village where it was not possible for me to participate actively in this springboard programme which is very big loss in my life, I also left job due to this pandemic. Also this COVID-19 has totally disturbed our youth organisation scheduled programme and activities. (Pakistan, Female)

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Some of the storytellers explained how their small businesses had closed or been put on hold and described the financial and mental stress caused by the uncertainty of knowing how things would be after the lockdown was lifted. For Emmanuel, this set back came at a time when his business was just getting going:

Before COVID- 19 I was running up a bakery, which I started up immediately after finishing my ICS programme in 2019 to make use of the skills I acquired. It had started picking up, but after COVID-19 came up, I have back-slid because I stopped working. After the lockdown was put in place, people reduced consumption of bakery products, transport became a problem and shops providing raw materials closed up which left me with no option but closing up. Right now, I have spent everything I have but am not earning which makes me worry about where I will get more capital to invest in the business. (Uganda, male)

Jaali's story highlights how much more difficult it is if you face additional challenges due to a disability, and how the loss of his livelihood and the social restrictions were affecting his emotional health:

I am a person with disability so I haven't been lucky enough to get employed to any sector even though I am qualified. I decided to get into a business and I started supplying little products /services to the government but now since the pandemic, the business has gone down due to the directives in place on movements. I feel depressed and lonely. (Kenya, male)

On a positive note some young people had been able to create new earning opportunities when they lost their job, like Taiwo who was laid off by a hotel in Lagos when visitor numbers declined:

We [casual staff] were relieved of our jobs with no pay even before the total lockdown because the hotel was recording low sales. It's now over two months down the line, but I have remained positive, presently I make and deliver homemade meals, so I can foot my bills and stay alive while exploring other options to boost my business. I also volunteer with non-governmental organisations, providing relief to vulnerable people in communities. It is my belief that this pandemic shall pass. (Nigeria, female)

Interruption of education, training or development work

Around a third of all respondents cited the disruption to their education and/or their engagement in development work. Those living in the Asia Pacific region (Bangkok hub) or the southern African region (Pretoria hub) were most likely to prioritise this as a significant impact on their lives. In those regions, around a third of the young people spoke of this (34% and 31% respectively), whereas in the Nairobi hub it was around one in five (22%) of young people.

Also notable was the linkage between education interruption, family support and technology. In some cases for the advantaged youth, technology played a key role as an enabler to continue education, but for the disadvantaged, as a barrier to accessing education.

The stories illustrate how the pandemic is impacting the hopes and aspirations that young people have been working to realise for many years. The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly difficult for some who have had to overcome particular challenges to access education later in life. Kiran has been able to use his time at home productively taking advantage of his access to technology and support from the parents:

After missing so many years of my life due to some personal reasons, I was finally able to enrol in college and feel like I'm doing something with my life. I was happy and content. Due to COVID-19, I haven't been able to attend classes like millions of students around the world.

On a positive note, I have course books at home, and I had asked my dad to get some more books for me from the college library before the lockdown started, so I have been able to study at home. Of course, I'd have loved to go to college and attend classes and lectures. But that's all right – staying at home and researching on course-related topics on the internet and gaining more information and knowledge has been accomplished. (Nepal, male)

However, other young people whose education was disrupted did not have access to books or the internet or devices. They are effectively excluded, as Jaya and Somsak describe in their stories:

Due to COVID-19, I have been finding it hard to learn through online platforms, as I do not have data and the necessary gadgets needed for me to participate in the online classes and writing assignments. (Jaya, Zimbabwe, female)

The main impact from COVID-19 for me is the postponement of the academic semester and the online examination as the result of it. I live in a rural area and my family is not rich, so it is difficult for me to access online classes. (Somsak, Thailand, male)

For many young people, the interruption of their education meant they had to leave and return to their family home. Esther's story illustrates the multiple challenges young people in rural areas are facing as a result of the pandemic that render them more vulnerable. But on the other hand, young people are finding positive opportunities to help their peers – even when they themselves are in such difficult circumstances.

Disruption to social relations

Young people shared stories that evidenced disruption of social relations at family, community and even at national levels. Young people spoke of the loneliness and isolation they were feeling as a result of the restrictions imposed. For some, it was the inability to see their friends and fellow volunteers that really upset them. For others who were stuck in lockdown away from their families it was missing and worrying about their families. Some young people spoke of the positive effects of being able to spend so much more time with their family because of lockdown.

Interestingly a few of the stories from Ethiopia suggested that the restrictions on seeing family and friends was particularly difficult there because of the value put on socialising in Ethiopian society. Neela's story below emphasises this aspect.

For many young people the interruption of their education meant they had to leave and return to their family home. Nadeem's story describes the bad reception he got when he returned to his village due to varied perceptions about COVID-19, traditions and myths in the community and how this affected his social relations:

Negative impact on young people's health and wellbeing

Stories here highlighted two main ways in which young people's health and wellbeing was being negatively affected by the pandemic and associated restrictions. One was through the direct effects of the disruptions and loss of livelihoods on young people's mental and emotional health, and the second was the negative effect of having limited or no access to healthcare services. The analysis explores each of these aspects in turn.

The **mental, emotional and psychological effects** of the restrictions and disruptions and a fear of catching the virus impacted a whole range of young people with a disproportionate impact on those who are vulnerable and marginalised and who had limited access to support networks. Some young people talked of the succour and comfort they got for their distress from their religious affiliation or their supportive family or peer group. The incidence of suicide amongst those reliant on a daily wage was referred to as well as their own psychological distress. Maya described how she was scared on several levels.

I graduated from college in 2019, and live with my family. Since then I have spent each second searching for a job and reading vacancies. Now after the pandemic, I almost stop searching or reading vacancies and that made me depressed for days. I'm scared about not being able to live the life I had planned, I'm scared for death, and I'm scared for losing someone from my family and friends scared for not being a mother. (Ethiopia, female)

Another health issue highlighted in young people's stories was the interruption of **access to healthcare and social services**. The absence of these services at a time of increased risk of SGBV was of concern to Lucas:

On service provision, Youth Friendly Health Services (YFHS) and other essential services for young people like me and even marginalised groups is compromised simply because the efforts in these essential sectors are being diverted towards the fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic. The compromising of the services essential for young people has greater negative impact to be seen sooner than later in the communities (e.g. the rise in teenage pregnancies and sexual and gender-based violence cases). (Malawi, male)

A few young people referenced difficulties accessing healthcare facilities during lockdowns. Ogun, from Zimbabwe, explained how he was denied access to sexual reproductive health services (SHRS) by the police*, 'as they were following the statutory requirement by the government of Zimbabwe that people should stay home all the time'.*

Before exploring the impact of the pandemic on other young people worse off than the storytellers, this part of the analysis concludes with some stories of hope. These stories illustrated some more positive aspects of the restrictions alongside the negative impacts. The most common cited was extra time to

spend with family. Having narrated the negative impacts of the pandemic on economic life, Elsa sets out the more positive aspects for her:

However, the positive aspects that have emerged during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic is getting to finally balance family life. I get to be around my family and appreciate them a lot even amidst any challenges. Even though I have not fellowshipped with believers from church, I have created more time in studying the Word of God, praying and developing other ways to feed my faith. Lastly, I have received the opportunity to do research work, research into different fields of activity I would like to venture into, get in-depth information on areas of interest, thus improving my expertise in fields such as SRH and HIV. (Zimbabwe, female)

Many of the young people's stories illustrate how, despite all these adverse effects, they are finding ways to reach out help others. Namazzi's story illustrates the immediate negative impact of the restrictions on her health and how she came to find comfort in writing and blogging to help others with similar feelings.

Namazzi's story

Since I left VSO on March 18, I have been at home. I have been unable to get any new kind of employment since there is a reduction in jobs and even youth related opportunities. Socially, this means, that I have to stay at home – only left to interact with the world via technological platforms – not being able to meet my friends and even family remains one of the mind-draining experiences. Economically, having no other source of income means that we have to try surviving in other means, food and shelter remain the basic items to enjoy right now.

This pandemic has caused some of the most draining emotional experiences I have seen, Personally, I have experienced and still experiencing anxiety attacks every now and then but trying as much as I can to 'keep it together' by doing other things that interest me.

Previously, I was leading a team of 12 young volunteers to support the youth livelihoods programme. Each day we planned activities to enhance the entrepreneurship skills of marginalised groups, and I always looked forward to our meetings. During our free time, especially on weekends, we would have team-building outings in town and do shopping too.

It was a life we were accustomed to. Having review meetings, planning activities, meeting the communities, having lunches as a team, taking so many selfies and pictures, to mention but a few. My host family loved me so much, and my favourite moment was watching mama milk the cow as I conversed with her every evening. I had made it a point to learn how to milk! I was looking forward to the Mid Phrase Review meeting at Kidepo National Park. We had planned a team magazine. Then suddenly placement was called off. We did not have time to bid farewell to the community. My host family was shocked by the news and I was given an African attire for farewell. The biggest challenge I am facing now is being unemployed since my contract ended on 21 April 2020. I currently do not work, yet I have a dependant.

Despite this, I have made a number of online job applications for vacancies I come across. I have become mentally healthier, unlike the first days of the pandemic when I felt so depressed. I was like a walking robot and each day I struggled to get out of bed to go about the daily chores. I thought to myself, "I need to do something to redeem myself." After talking to a friend, I came up with the idea of blogging. I always keep journals and love writing, so blogging has been an interesting way of giving hope to others and inspiring them to hang in there. I also wrote a post on mental health, something that is being ignored during this crisis…. I learnt how to use the Zoom app and Skype for business to make presentations and attend meetings! My social and professional network has got stronger too. I am more at peace now and when all this is over, I'll strive to improve on my livelihood. (Uganda, female)

How have other young people in the community been affected?

Similar themes emerged when young people were asked to narrate stories of other young people in their communities that had been affected even more than them. Around half of the young people contributed these additional stories which focused almost entirely on the impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of vulnerable or marginalised young people and their families. The experiences align with those outlined above but sometimes they reference a larger scale impact on a whole neighbourhood or community. Mpasa, from a rural area of Malawi, recounts what he sees around him in his community,

Most people around me have deeper challenges because they are daily earners, they have to struggle day by day in order to feed themselves and their families, Due to this pandemic, and the total lockdown, life is miserable for the needy. (Malawi, male)

The stories illustrate **the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people who are vulnerable and marginalised** including young migrants and refugees, those living in rural areas (or forced to return to their families in the rural areas), adolescent girls and young women, indigenous and ethnic minority youth, young people with disabilities, young people living with HIV/AIDS, young people of different sexual orientations and gender identities and homeless young people.

Young storytellers were aware that these people faced barriers accessing healthcare services and social protection even before the pandemic, and they are more likely to be dependent on earning a daily income or the charity of others. Mia, a young woman from Eswatini, was concerned that the disruption to livelihoods for some of the most vulnerable female heads of households might lead to them being so desperate they would put themselves at risk.

My neighbour is a young woman 22 years of age. She is breadwinner in her household, having to take care of three siblings. Her mother died of cervical cancer and her father is disabled. She is a street vendor. She would sell second-hand clothes to provide food, water, electricity, clothes for her family. Since the pandemic started, the market has been shut down which left her and her family with no source of income.

This has left her family in a really bad state, relying on government's grant which isn't that much. She is left vulnerable which can cause her to expose herself, not only to COVID-19, but also to contracting HIV/AIDS, STIs and unplanned pregnancy, she can even put up herself for prostitution so that she can have enough money to provide for her family. (Eswatini, female)

Whilst the disruption to livelihoods for the poorest and marginalised was the largest single issue highlighted in young people's stories from across all three regions, many of the other concerns reflected the different realities and the negative impact on social relations.

For example, in the Pretoria and Nairobi regions, around 6% of young people raised particular concerns about the impact of the pandemic on **adolescent girls and young women** with accounts of young women being forced into marriage, and/or subjected to domestic abuse and sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). As Dziko from rural Malawi, and Faith from a semi-urban area in Uganda explain:

COVID-19 is affecting other youths more especially adolescents. Due to closure of schools some of the girls are getting married. For instance, a 13-year-old girl got married last month because there is no hope for the government to reopen of schools, so she chose marriage. But to be frank, this girl before the pandemic used to be a good girl and worked very hard in school. (Dziko, male)

Before the pandemic, my fellow youth in the neighbourhood was having good time with family and did not have so many wrangles amongst her parents but due to the lockdown she is facing domestic violence since her parents keep fighting each other and also beat up the children. (Faith, female)

Other stories from both young men and young women in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Kenya (3% of all storytellers from the Nairobi and Pretoria hub) highlighted problems that young people were facing without **access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SHR) services.**

Three young men from Malawi pointed out that many of the problems for vulnerable young women and girls were exacerbated by difficulties in accessing the SHR services. The outcome, Moses said, would be seen with a rise in teenage pregnancies, forced marriages and SGBV.

Peter's story about his friend Violet's situation in semi-urban Malawi illustrates the multiple vulnerabilities that some adolescent girls and young women are facing as a result of discontinued education, such as early pregnancies, lack of family support, risks to GBV, HIV, STDs and to a bigger extent shattered dreams.

The stories from the Bangkok hub highlighted the huge problems faced by young people who were totally dependent on a daily wage as was the case in the Africa region, but they also highlighted other concerns that were not so prominent in Africa. Around 10% of the sample made reference to how the disruptions to vulnerable young people's lives was negatively impacting on their mental health and wellbeing. Kamal's story highlights the plight of one of his friends in urban Nepal who faced additional difficulties because of his **sexual orientation**:

A friend of mine, who had just come out as gay to his parents before the lockdown started, was compelled to move in with his parents as his hostel was shut down due to COVID-19. His parents refused to accept him, and in a way, they disowned him after coming out. As a final year college student working in a café as a part-time worker, he has been facing many difficulties. I spoke to him a week ago, and he told me that his parents refuse to talk to him on any gay-related topic. As a result, he has been depressed. He says his mental health has been deeply affected due to the pandemic. He's been trying to interact with his parents, but they've been giving the cold shoulder to him. (Nepal, male)

Some young people living in countries within the Bangkok hub also highlighted the plight of **displaced people** and those **dependant on remittances** from relatives working abroad or in the cities. These stories from the Philippines and Thailand illustrate the problems some children and young people are facing:

I have a neighbour who has young children living with them, but they are not that focused on them, even during COVID, they just let them go out of their homes to play on another neighbour's backyard without wearing any mask. Their parents are actually abroad and they kind of miss them but they can't do anything about it because they do not have any gadgets that can connect them with their parents. Their guardians are busy looking for a living to support them which is why they get to be lax sometimes in ensuring that the young children won't go out of their homes. (Ramon, the Philippines, male).

The young people who stay at home by themselves because their parents work in Bangkok have difficulties during this time. The parents' income has become smaller and is not enough for the children's daily expenses. Then, there is the question of the children's safety living at home alone, even though there are nearby relatives who look after them from the distance. (Som Chai, Thailand, female)

There was one story from Zimbabwe of a child-headed family, dependant on interrupted remittances from South Africa.

In Nairobi and Pretoria, concerns were raised about access to healthcare for **young people who are dependent on HIV antiretroviral drug**s. This was raised by 5% of young people from the Pretoria hub and 3% of young people living in the Nairobi area. It affected young people living in rural, semi-urban and urban areas. Ogun raised concerns about young people who are HIV positive in his community in urban Zimbabwe:

There are young people who are living with HIV in my community and they have since experienced challenges in accessing their drug refill as they were turned back home by the security forces. This had a greater impact on them as they would default taking their ARVs if they fail to access the facility. More to that, some even tried to convince the police by showing them their ART refill books but rather the police shouted "...go back home we are not the ones who forced your parents into prostitution..." This statement is filled with stigma and discrimination and also unwilling disclosure. (Ogun, Zimbabwe, male)

Across all three hubs, the stories about other young people more badly affected highlighted the impact of the pandemic on **those requiring care and support because of a disability**. The impact on young people with disabilities or living in families with a disabled parent or child was highlighted in one in ten of the stories young people narrated. The concerns raised were primarily about the disruption to the care and education that they needed and the additional challenges they face when trying to stay safe and protect themselves. Sekani's story from rural Malawi illustrates how people with disabilities have been especially badly affected by the pandemic and the accompanying restrictions,

Those with disabilities have also been affected because the assistance from well-wishers is now limited by the pandemic and some do not have enough protective materials from catching the pandemic. Social distance cannot be observed as some are helped even during movements from one place to the other. (Malawi, female)

Layla from Kenya, explains how government and community responses to COVID-19 in her semi-urban area have not factored in the particular barriers that those with a disability are facing as a result of the pandemic and describes how well-wishers and the local church have stepped in to help her friend who has a hearing impairment. Her story raises issues about **social accountability** and **social inclusion:**

A friend of mine who has hearing impairment, I feel like she is really struggling with the situation. The government or even the community did not factor persons with disabilities when the pandemic started and for some time she did not even have information on what was happening and thus was being exposed more to the virus due to the lack of information. She is also unemployed and thus has no means to take care of herself especially now that she can't take part and casual labour and make money to sustain her. Well-wishers and the church have been supporting her during this time. (Kenya, female)

The next section of the report looks in more detail about how young people are responding to the needs they identify or witness in their communities. How they are trying to help and engage in the response to COVID-19, raising their voice and showing leadership as individual citizens and members of their community and through their youth networks.

ACTION: How young people are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The action they are taking and the challenges they face.

The story gathering research has powerfully illustrated the effect of the pandemic and the various restrictions imposed on communities, particularly on vulnerable and marginalised young people. The stories are not all focused on the negatives, many describe how young people are supporting each other through the uncertainty and stress, as well as in practical ways like raising funds to feed the poorest in their communities and those reliant on a daily income to survive. When asked how they are participating in the response to COVID-19 and actions they have been taking, young people reflected (often with pride) on all of the activities they were engaging in to counter the impact of the pandemic.

The majority of young people (80%) described how they were participating or supporting COVID responses and actions in their communities and, in a few cases, nationally through online and offline platforms. For example, one young man from Kenya was working on local online campaigns to create awareness about SRHR and advocate for prioritisation of SRH as one of the essential services. He wrote an opinion piece for a national newspaper entitled, Menstruation, sex and abortion do not stop for pandemics.

Almost all young people from around Pretoria were taking action and participating in the response to COVID-19 in their communities as well as around three-quarters of the young people from the Nairobi and Bangkok areas (75% and 78% respectively). The barriers faced by young people responding to COVID-19 are explored below. The analysis first explores the different ways young people are participating as well as the reasons given for not participating (or not participating as much as they would like) which vary by gender and, to some extent, by region.

The two main clusters of activities that young people are participating in are:

Sensitisation and awareness raising about COVID-19. The activities here that young people are undertaking often through their youth networks include: online information campaigns, radio broadcasts and the distribution of information (face-to-face) to address fake news and make sure that those who are most vulnerable understand how the virus spreads and how to protect themselves.

Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 restrictions. The activities here are focused on distributing food to the needy, as well as personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, hand sanitiser and other hygiene products. Young people are making sure the vulnerable have supplies – using their local knowledge to identify and monitor the most marginalised populations and supporting those most in need to access emergency provision and essential social and healthcare services. In some countries they are raising funds to support the most vulnerable and providing psycho-social support to people in their communities who have been particularly badly affected by the virus and the restrictions. In rural Thailand some young people are being particularly creative – working together through their youth network to organise and deliver lessons to relieve the boredom and stress local children are facing because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Around two-thirds of the young people participating from the Nairobi and Bangkok hub areas are engaged in **sensitisation and awareness raising activities about COVID-19**, and 76% of those in Pretoria – this was the most common activity that young people were engaged in. A much lower percentage were engaged in activities designed to **mitigate the impact of COVID-19** – 40% across the whole sample as illustrated in Chart 11.

Additionally, a few young people (8%), most of them living within the Nairobi hub, spoke of the **advocacy** they are involved in. These activities include: communicating the stories and experiences of those particularly badly affected, lobbying local leaders and governments to provide for those in the greatest need, and checking in on the most vulnerable to ensure their wellbeing and to help strengthen accountability.

Chart 11: Numbers of stories describing the different types of activities young people are engaged in by VSO hub
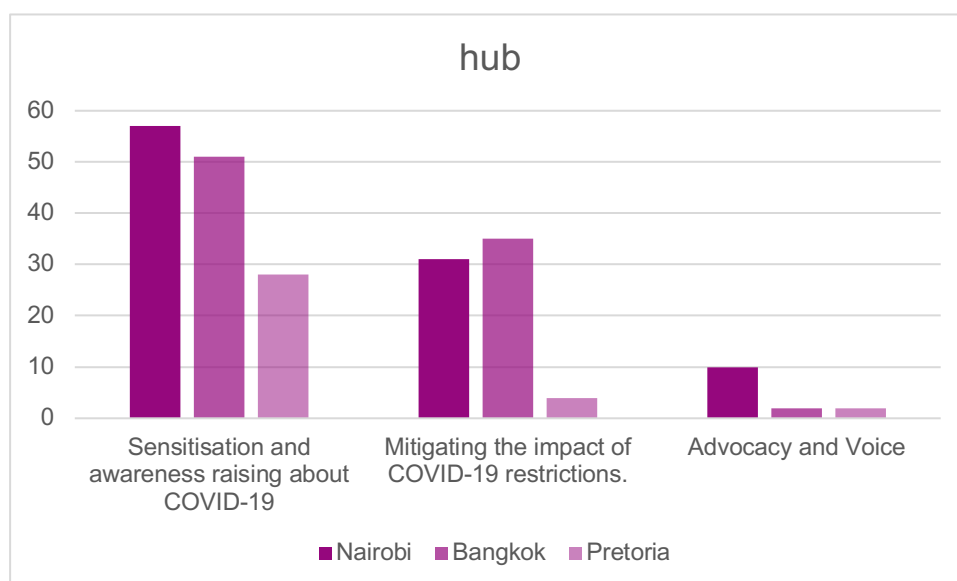
There are also some gender differences apparent from the stories across the whole sample, with men more likely than women to be engaged in sensitising activities and women more likely than men to be engaged in mitigating activities. The other significant difference with gender concerns the small number of stories about young people's engagement in Advocacy and Voice activities where only six such stories came from young men and nine came from young women. However, numbers are very small so it is not possible to analyse this further and caution should be used in interpreting these differences. The analysis now turns to explore each of three categories of activities in more depth.

Sensitisation and awareness raising about COVID-19

The activities here that young people were engaged with were designed to share accurate information on the virus and how to stay safe – encouraging people to social distance, wash their hands regularly and thoroughly and take other measures to successfully avoid contracting the virus. There were no discernible differences in the types of these sensitisation activities across the three VSO hub areas.

There were some differences affected by gender with young men more likely to be engaged in these types of activity than young women. This gender difference was most apparent in the stories from Pretoria hub where 90% of the young men participating were engaged in this type of activity compared to only 61% of participating young women. In Bangkok, 52% of young women and 69% of the young men were thus engaged and in Nairobi it was more equal at 62% young women and 67% young men.

Young people are using **technology and developing innovative** ways to communicate information about COVID-19 and thereby help the more vulnerable in their communities to protect themselves and stay safe. However, as some young people – particularly those living in rural areas in the Bangkok hub area – reference the fact that many of the most vulnerable do not have access to the internet or connected devices. Thereby pointing out the limitations of online approaches and how they can result in the exclusion of the poorest and most disadvantaged.

Across the whole sample of stories describing young people's COVID-19 responses (n=175), sensitising and information-sharing activities are taking place online (with blogging a popular pastime), through radio broadcasts and by putting up posters and knocking on doors to talk to people face to face. As previously mentioned, some young people are also raising awareness and sharing ideas about dealing with the fall-out of the restrictions. For example, financial hardship, GBV or depression.

Many young people expressly focused their awareness-raising activities on the most vulnerable in their communities – showing thoughtful insights into the most pressing needs. For example, Gonza from Uganda was "translating" coronavirus information for people who are illiterate – mostly the elders in his

semi-urban neighbourhood and another young person was sharing information with people who do not have a TV or radio. Zala from Ethiopia explained the target of her community action:

I'm working to limit the spread of coronavirus amongst vulnerable people like disabled people, blind people and low-income household people. Telling them all about COVID-19 and how best to protect themselves.

Others are contributing where they see a need. Nanu illustrates in her story below, how she arrived at her course of action incrementally, as she developed her understanding of who in her rural Nepalese community needed her help most.

Nanu's story

I have tried to make my neighbours and community members aware of precautions and importance of lock down. I live in a tiny market area of a village, so gathering and gossiping is not a big issue. I have always been polite while telling random people to keep distance and stay safe. I had some paper masks with me which I had bought in greed [when masks were scarce]. I gave them away to different individuals – mostly elderly people. Some elderly people asked about alcohol sanitiser as they have heard about it in radio. I showed them, they tried using it. I could see them smiling while I was explaining the use of it. I don't know if they thought to buy or not but I felt so happy when I heard aunty next door telling people to use sanitiser before handing something to others. Information was circulating. Though I was planning to do something more effective in my community I couldn't do it because people living here are busy doing their farming and daily household activities. So, for me the best possible was to be a means of information for those in need.

Layla, a young woman from a semi-urban area of Kenya, explains how taking part in sensitisation activities with civil society organisations is also helping her on a personal level:

I am currently participating in awareness raising with Red Cross and I have joined VSO's youth network for the fight against COVID-19. I saw a link that they shared where the asked young people to sign up if they want to be part of COVID-19 awareness activities at the county level. The activities have helped me learn more about the COVID-19 virus and has actually helped me understand it better. It is also a very good opportunity to do something other than just staying at home as it can be very sad and depressing. (Kenya, female)

Five young people (one each from Kenya, Malawi, the Philippines, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) described how they were particularly targeting **fake news and myths** about the virus as illustrated by Chiso's story:

Currently, I am initiating a social media campaign that is aimed at busting/dispelling myths and misconceptions associated with COVID-19 among in the communities by giving out right and correct information about the COVID-19 through social media and the radio. This online and radio project will be implemented based on the observations I have had in the field during the physical COVID-19 community sensitisation campaigns on social distance. (Malawi, Male)

Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 restrictions

As well as sensitising and awareness raising work, 40% of young people are involved in all sorts of **charitable giving and the distribution of food, supplies and protective equipment (PPE) to those most in need**. It is a particularly popular type of activity for young men and women in the Bangkok region and for young women in the Nairobi region. A lower proportion of young people from the Pretoria region were engaged in these kinds of activities (11%) compared with young people from Nairobi (36%) and Bangkok (42%). A greater proportion of young women were engaged in these types of activities in the Nairobi region (49% young women compared to 27% of young men) and in Pretoria (17% of young women compared to 5% of young men). In the Bangkok region, numbers were more even with 38% of young women and 45% of young men participating in the response in this way. The analysis explores those differences when considering the stories young people told about the barriers they were encountering to their participation.

The activities that young people were engaged in here include:

- Identifying the most marginalised populations. Based on their local knowledge young people understand who the most affected populations are.

- Distributing food supplies and PPE, as well as referring to service providers for support

- Making protective materials such as sanitisers and masks

- Providing psycho-social support for the most marginalised

- Fundraising for the most marginalised populations

The following are typical of the stories told by over 70 young people about the actions they are taking to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on those most in need in their communities and neighbourhoods – including reference to the enormous pride they feel in doing so.

Identifying the most marginalised populations

There are many stories of hope as young people describe how they are working to help others more unfortunate than themselves and the critical roles that young people have been playing in the community such as identifying and supporting the most marginalised populations. Masiko's story from rural Uganda illustrates this at an individual level of need:

One of my neighbours, who is an old woman, faced a lot and I couldn't control my sadness seeing her in that situation. This is a lady who stays alone without anyone's help who starved for 9 days in the house. As I went door-to-door supplying my liquid soap, that's how I found her. This old woman was a street beggar and since the street has been locked up, she stopped begging and her life was so hard. So I introduced her to my mum, and mum had her start helping her weed the groundnuts in the garden and then she was later paid for weeding. As I talk right now, there are a lot of changes in her life and she is now picking up. (Masiko, female)

Distributing food supplies and PPE as well as referring to service providers for support

The following stories illustrate these kinds of activities in each of the VSO hub areas:

Now I am participating as COVID-19 response youth community volunteer under VSO Ethiopia. My motivation to do this voluntary work is to help fight COVID-19. My proudest moment is when we give detergents to those who cannot afford them, poor and elderly people. The satisfaction of serving community is incomparable to anything. (Neela, Ethiopia, female)

I have been working with the network of young people living with HIV (ZY+) in the information dissemination and provision of PPE. I am proud to be part of the movement so I can help people with disabilities, orphans and vulnerable children. (Joseph, Zimbabwe, male)

….the most necessary thing for me was to feed the people, because lot of people lost their jobs and most business were badly affected. By the grace of god, I, along with my teammates, facilitated 50 deserving and needy families by providing ration bags which cost was 2000 and 3000 per ration bag. I got some ration bags from individuals and from different organisations. I did all the ration drive just to facilitate the needy families (Yasmin, Pakistan, female)

Making protective materials such as sanitisers and masks

Some young people spoke of making protective materials like masks or sanitisers. Masiko from rural Uganda set up her own soap making enterprise and distributed the soap to her neighbours, encouraging regular handwashing to prevent infection. Kwang from rural Thailand explains how her youth network came together to provide masks and hand sanitiser for the village:

During the critical period, the people in the village did not have face masks or hand sanitising gel. So, the local youth put together money to buy fabrics to sew face masks and used the leftover money to buy gel in bulk and small bottles to give away to everyone (Kwang, female)

Providing psycho-social support for the most marginalised

Young people are providing psycho-support where they think it particularly needed amongst the vulnerable. Namazzi from an urban community in Uganda was motivated by her own deteriorating mental health to start a blog:

I write about issues related to lockdown and the pandemic. I have become an emotional online support to those who need me. I plan to keep blogging as a way to connect with others. The proudest moment is when I received comments on the posts. Appreciative comments, those giving more details, personal experiences, argumentative comments, and those encouraging me to keep writing as am a good writer! The blog views are also over 500, something that makes me so proud since I am a beginner. I have had viewers from all continents, even Asia!

And a young man in Thailand was active in an LGBTI group which aimed to provide a forum for peer support to help affected young people cope with the particular stresses, anxiety, and loneliness they were suffering because of the restrictions.

Fundraising for the most marginalised populations

A few young people in Pakistan described how they were fundraising for the needy as well donating to those in need, Distributing supplies of food and PPE was sometimes combined with awareness-raising activities as with the work of the Nubian Youth Council in Kenya ,described by Mary in her story:

We have had sensitisation walks in the neighbourhood on how people can protect themselves during the pandemic. We have also distributed soaps to business vendors along the road to encourage them to have handwashing points and practice handwashing. We have also carried out food drives and donations where we have managed to reach 450 highly vulnerable people. (Kenya, female)

Advocacy and Voice

The other area were some young people are taking action is to advocate for the vulnerable and communicate their stories about how COVID-19 is impacting on their livelihoods, their health and their wellbeing. Only 15 young people (9% of those participating) referenced this type of activity in their stories with the vast majority of them (10) living in the Nairobi region. The reasons for that are not clear but again there are some clues when in the next section of the report, young people tell us why they are not participating or not as much as they would like. These stories illustrate young people's engagement in the following types of activities:

- Evidence generation on the impact of COVID-19 to strengthen social accountability.
- Lobbying and advocating for the needs of the most marginalised populations.

Evidence generation on the impact of COVID-19 to strengthen social accountability

A few young people, like Vasanthi from India and Esther from Zimbabwe, gathered evidence on impact of COVID-19 and managed to integrate advocacy actions and activities that would help strengthen social accountability to the most vulnerable:

Currently am involved in a mental health helpline service which involves providing psychosocial support to all the affected victims of the pandemic (both in rural and urban areas across India) and those facing challenges during the lockdown (child marriage, domestic violence and drug use). I am also currently a team leader involved in assessing the impact of the lockdown among SHG members in Kerala, involved in a course on COVID-19 science matters and conducting personal research on COVID-19 among fellow peers and family members (Vasanthi, India, female)

As VSO Zimbabwe Youth Engagement Action Team, we applied for a grant and got a youth engagement innovation grant of $3,600. As a team, we are conducting online surveys to assess the level of knowledge by youths on COVID, identifying the challenges they are facing, disseminating accurate information through social media platforms and providing virtual psycho-social support to young people living with HIV and disabilities. (Esther, Zimbabwe, female).

A few other stories illustrated how young people are monitoring or checking trends with regard to the effectiveness of the formal response actions in their communities and using that information to strengthen social accountability for the most marginalised people.

Lobbying and advocacy for the needs of the most marginalised populations

These two stories from Kenya and Pakistan illustrate the detail of the sorts of advocacy and voice activities young people are engaged in:

Via the social media platform that I follow, the county government posted that they wanted volunteers to help in packaging of food for relief to households affected by the pandemic. I am part of the local CSO network thus we took the role of monitoring the county government's COVID response initiative and submitted our key findings to them. My proudest moment has to be when we got the youth innovators grant from VSO. This will not only open doors for the youth of the chapter,but give us an opportunity to be fully engaged in the county response teams. (Caro, Kenya, female)

We introduced a corona helpline in Punjab. My role is to maintain the statistical data about how many people are being facilitated by this helpline. I also proposed an advocacy campaign that will soon be launched. (Muhammad, Pakistan, male)

In conclusion it is important again to emphasise that some young people are involved in a number of different types of activities – most commonly a combination of sensitising/awareness-raising and mitigating the impact on the most vulnerable. The analysis now briefly considers what the stories tell us about the different approaches young people are involved in – whether they are responding to the pandemic in a personal capacity, through a youth or other network or as part of the local government or community response. Thereafter the final exploration of the storytellers' engagement in COVID-19 responses and actions in the community looks at the reasons young people give for not participating or not participating as much as they would like.

Approach

It is hard to discern from the data much information on the nature of the different approaches young people are engaged in. However, it is clear that some young people are taking action with their peers through their **youth networks**. Alli's story shows how youth networks are working online to raise awareness:

I support the COVID-19 response by creating awareness online. I am a member of the National Engagement Network where youths in different regions have been walking door-to-door, market-to-market and in different areas within their regions sticking posters and giving guidelines on how to prevent COVID-19. I, on the other hand, post guidelines from WHO and our county's health ministry on how to fight COVID-19 on the official twitter page of The National Youth Engagement Network. (Tanzania, female)

Whilst some young people seem to just taking their own initiative to help vulnerable neighbours and community members, as Olivia's story from a rural area in Malawi demonstrates:

I am just doing charity work e.g. fetching water for the elder people who cannot walk for a mile to find water and also by washing clothes, not only that but also providing advice to those who need it. (Malawi, female)

A few of the stories indicate that young people are being enabled and supported to play a part in the **local government or community response** and all those stories were from young men. Young people in Rwanda described themselves as part of the response from local leaders, supported by VSO. As Habi recounts in his story:

As a youth, I am helping the Local leaders to mobilise on the implementation of policies for COVID 19. (Rwanda, male)

There are examples too of young men from urban Nigeria and rural Thailand being similarly involved:

I volunteered under national action on COVID-19 here in Lagos under local government. Were we sensitising market women on the need to keep proper hygiene around there shops and in their various house as well as washing their hands regularly after transacting any business with their customers and the need to properly sanitise their hands using alcohol-based sanitiser (Sam, Nigeria, male)

Due to COVID-19, a lot of people have been cut off from the society. I have taken part in distributing survival kits to villagers together with the village head. (Manjit, Thailand, male)

James from rural Kenya also indicated that he felt he was a valued part of the local response:

As a youth leader, I was approached by the local dispensary administrator to educate the community on how to keep yourself and others safe from the spread of COVID-19, using the guidelines given by WHO as well as enforcing the bylaws set by our county government. I have gained recognition from the Machakos county government as their COVID-19 champion, hence getting involved in other activities through the Machakos Youth Assembly on sensitising, not just my ward, but the entire county on COVID-19 safety measures. (Kenya, male)

In the next section, the analysis looks further at the reasons young people are saying that they are not participating at all in COVID-19 responses – or not participating as much as they would like. But it is clear from the stories of how they are participating that many are **overcoming big barriers in order to help** those less well-off than themselves in their communities, including dealing with their own fear of catching the virus.

The reasons young people give for not participating in any COVID-19 response actions in their community

Nearly a quarter (24%) of young people from 15 of the 19 countries who took part in the survey said they were not participating or not participating in COVID-19 responses as much as they would like for various reasons. Young people from Pretoria were the least likely to say they were not participating.

Reasons for not participating varied across the sample but the two most common reasons given for non-participation were **a lack of resources or support** (25%), and **a lack of opportunities or information about opportunities.** These issues were mentioned in around half of the stories of non-participation (52%). Other reasons given included:

- Fear of contracting the virus with no PPE or safety measures provided (16%)
- Restrictions of movement, lack of transportation, curfews (16%)
- Family responsibilities, including caring for a vulnerable member of their family (8%)

There were a few other reasons given in individual stories with one young person saying they felt they were not needed – the local government was doing just fine, and another young person saying that she couldn't participate because '*lockdown was interrupting ideas of the mind.*' Young people in the Bangkok hub talked more frequently of a lack of opportunities to participate and some government resistance to young people or communities participating in the response and young people in the Nairobi and Pretoria hubs more likely to cite a lack of resources, funding and support as well as supplies of PPE and other safety measures as reasons why they could not participate or only in a limited way. There were no obvious differences in the reasons expressed by young men or young women or by living circumstances (i.e. rural, semi-urban or urban) or employment status (employed, unemployed, studying or a combination).

Lack of resources or support

Two stories, one from rural Uganda and one from urban Mozambique highlight how young people experienced a lack of funding or other resources and support as a barrier to their participating:

I have run out of resources and therefore cannot go on further. I will just continue engaging a few members I interact with. If I gain access to resources. I am planning online platform campaigns. I am also planning for radio talk shows on at least 2 radio stations (Mukasa, Uganda, male)

I would like to do more than I have done, but it needs more financial resources than I have. As we are facing many problems of financial resources, we would like to go to the roads and communities to give more than we have. Financial resources, are so limited. (Adil, Mozambique, male)

Others felt they needed more information and training about the virus and how to keep safe, as Sonia from rural Kenya illustrates in her story:

I can't help out because I don't have the right information and the understanding of the coronavirus to be able to participate in any activities. Also, the restrictions by the government for people not to meet. If I had the right information, then I could participate in activities. (Sonia, Kenya, female)

Lack of opportunities

Young people's stories here highlight the other major reason, young people said they were not participating because they were not aware about existing opportunities or because they understood

there were no opportunities in their community. As Caasi, a young women of 22 years of age living in a semi-urban neighbourhood in Kenya, explains, '*I would like participate in any activities to fight against COVID-19 but there are no avenues to do so'.*

For Rashmi, a young woman living in rural Nepal, it was more about being kept up to date on the relief effort and getting support for a community response:

I am not updated about the information that where the local government is supporting the relief materials as well as the mechanism of COVID prevention committee. At this time there is not seen any support from any organisation or the local government in our community. So, I cannot participate in the response. (Rashimi, Nepal, female)

A small number of young people noted that youth are not welcomed as part of the community response. This was particularly apparent in the Asia Pacific region, as the following brief stories – all from young women, illustrate:

Because most of the organisations that came to help were the state ones and it is rare that they allowed youth to participate. (Thailand, female, studying and living in a semi-urban area)

The village administration does not call us. They are just doing by themselves. (Myanmar, female, unemployed and living in a rural area)

In terms of prevention, the government has assigned its own people to run the activities rather than allowing the communities to participate (Thailand, female, employed and living in a semi-urban area).

Two young men from Malawi also described how young people were left out by their local COVID-19 response team. As Stanley explains:

So far as our organisation we are doing some sensitisations through social media, radios through our initiative whereby we want to be blocking fake news which are circulating on the social media but we are facing some problems because the youths are not in the district COVID-19 response team (we are left out) when we ask them what's going on there are just saying that it's too late to engage the youths. (Stanley, Malawi, male)

Some young people from across all hubs found it difficult to engage, as they were not able to connect to their normal networks. Typically for COVID- 19 related reasons, they had had to re-locate to a different area of the country – rural and with no internet – to be with their families (often as a means of surviving without their regular income).

Other reasons for not engaging in COVID-19 responses

There were a range of other reasons given by some young people for not participating or not participating as much as they would like, including an absence of protection, restrictions on movement, a lack of transportation and family responsibilities. **Lack of protection or feeling unsafe** for other reasons was cited by 16% of the young people and was an issue across all three hubs. Young men as well as young women expressed their fears of the virus and concerns about the lack of PPE. Other young people spoke of the **lack of transportation** as a reason for not being engaged in the response to COVID-19.

One young woman from Cambodia spoke of how her family responsibilities prevented her from doing as much as she would like:

I live in a family with a newborn baby, so I hardly have time for myself. But she goes on to explain that she tries to her best to support through social media.

Three young people explained that they too could not participate as much as they would like because they are not allowed out by their families. But, once again, most found other ways to participate, as Ramon an 18-year-old boy from an urban area in the Philippines explains:

I just share on info related to COVID in my social media accounts. My mom doesn't allow me to go out as she fears COVID. I cannot really get involved right now in face-to-face or community activities because of the lockdown and my mom's worries, I do not want to worry her or add up to the things that stresses her this time of pandemic. (Ramon, the Philippines, male)

This analysis has revealed the enormous contributions young people have been making engaging in the local responses to COVID-19 despite the challenges they themselves are facing. Depending on the

context young people are living in, the means by which they are contributing varies from virtual, online or radio presences to face-to-face and sometimes a mix. Their efforts are helping to raise awareness and sensitise the most vulnerable, educating them on safe practices and empowering them to take steps to avoid catching the virus. Young people, often supported by VSO and other non-governmental organisations, are also playing a vital role in supplying food, PPE and other necessary provisions to those who have lost their livelihoods and are in a precarious position. They are also gathering information on the impact of pandemic, communicating stories on how the vulnerable have been affected and speaking out to highlight the responsibilities of government and community leaders to ensure that community responses are inclusive.

The stories draw attention to the many barriers that young people are overcoming in order to volunteer and help the neediest in their communities – the lack of resources, of information about opportunities to be involved and of PPE and other equipment to help keep them safe. There are also many stories of hope – young people are finding all sorts of ways to be involved, personally responding to a need they see as well as joining together with their peers and supportive organisations like VSO. The stories illustrate young people's enthusiasm, motivation and resilience, and highlight how volunteering in this way is helping young people to stay safe and to look after their own emotional health and wellbeing.

The final question young people were asked to respond to was about their suggestions for the future. The analysis now considers what young people think governments, organisations and youth should be doing to better prepare themselves for future pandemics or further and recurring spikes in the community transmission of COVID-19.

SUGGESTIONS: What suggestions do young people have for governments, organisations, young people and communities to be more prepared for a future pandemic?

When asked what they thought governments, organisations, communities and young people could do to be more prepared to better manage the effects of any future pandemics, just over 90% gave their opinion. Most of the stories included young people's ideas on what government and local communities should be doing – 6 out of 10 stories mentioned government by name. Others were less specific but talked about actions that are typically the responsibility of governments at different levels.

Over a third of the stories referred to what young people should be doing – mostly encouraging young people to engage in responses. A few, (6%) included suggestions for what NGOs could do and these suggestions focused on a co-ordination or support role particularly for getting supplies to people in need, as well as awareness raising and the distribution of PPE. However over a quarter (27%) referred to what they would like organisations ('supportive' or 'community based' organisations) to do.

Suggestions focused on the following themes, with the different stakeholders playing different roles in the preparations:

Ensuring safety and protection for the youth volunteers who are supporting in the pandemic response but also for the marginalised populations. As one of the barriers cited by youth was lack of PPE, it is important for organisations and government engaging youth to ensure that they conduct safety and security assessments and provide adequate safety equipment and training on safety measures.

Research to understand those most affected and their emerging needs to ensure an effective, inclusive response. Some young people called for research on those who are vulnerable in their communities and their needs, to inform the forward planning, targeted interventions and investment in healthcare systems.

Providing food, support and supplies to the most marginalised. Considering the massive and prolonged impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods especially the most marginalised, young people called on the government and key duty bearers to put in place mechanisms to identify and support those most in need with the provision of food supplies, PPE and other critical essentials.

Providing medical care and access to health services for the most vulnerable. Youth identified that access to healthcare services was heavily distracted as the government and key stakeholders focused more on COVID-19. Youth cited the need for SRH services, access to counselling and medication for vulnerable groups such as those living with HIV, pregnant girls and women and people with disabilities among others.

Measures to strengthen the security of young people's livelihoods. Suggestions from young people included: additional measures to assist young people in moving their businesses online, measures to encourage entrepreneurship, social protection measures, supporting youth-led innovations in times of crisis and support from government or donors to enable employers to continue to pay their workers during crisis.

Supporting continuity of education for learners. Education was disrupted for many young people and children especially those with limited or no access to technology. Young people called for government and civil society organisations to devise alternative learning interventions to ensure no one is left behind such as home learning, delivery of lessons through the radio stations, distributing books and supplies.

Mental and psycho-social support to distressed populations. Young people were concerned about the psycho-social impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable, and called on governments and civil society organisations to provide mental and psycho-social support for distressed individuals. For example, through group trainings, individual counselling, or toll-free support lines.

Accessible technology. With the lockdown in most countries, there has been increased need for, and use of, information technology. Young people with their knowledge, skills and experience of online communication methods are attuned to the power of digital methods and are concerned that internet accessibility for the most marginalised populations is problematic. They are calling for more to be done to improve the reach of access enabled technology so that everyone can receive public health information and can continue with their learning.

The overall approach young people were calling for can best be described as a **disaster preparedness plan** with governments, supportive organisations, young people and communities each playing their part. Providing resources and, most importantly, resourcing the disaster preparedness plan was seen as the governments' responsibility. Supportive organisations were asked to liaise with governments to ensure (and perhaps co-ordinate) support for young people's involvement in the planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the plan. Young people had a wealth of ideas and suggestions to inform future planning, and many are very motivated to contribute. For example, by volunteering to help those in need, researching need and community mapping, raising awareness and empowering and supporting the most vulnerable young people in their communities.

As well as calling on government to devise a preparedness plan, a few young people referred to the need to **strengthen accountability** – to monitor service provision and implementation of the pandemic response plans, reach out to the most marginalised, tackle corruption and establish improved standards of governance.

Their stories have demonstrated the **valuable contribution young people can make** to any future pandemic response, the breadth of relevant knowledge, experience, and insights they have about their communities, and the huge reservoir of energy, enthusiasm, and motivation they bring. It is important that youth are engaged in the planning as well as execution of the plans, supported in the process through capacity building and the provision of necessary equipment and information.

5.   Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The research presents a rich account of how COVID-19 has impacted young people's lives, how they are responding and participating in the response as volunteers, the challenges they are facing, and what future interventions they think should focus and inform VSO's programming and leadership work. The report concludes by highlighting the key learning from the research and setting out a number of recommendations.

The stories young people have shared in this research highlight real hardship. Young people have lost their livelihoods overnight, had their studies and volunteering opportunities interrupted, and their social support networks disrupted. Some young people, including some VSO volunteers whose placements had been interrupted/terminated at short notice, are fearful, and many are uncertain of what the future holds. The stresses and strains are creating tensions and negatively impacting some young people's emotional health and wellbeing.

However, the stories also show how participating in COVID-19 responses – and having opportunities to help and protect those worst affected – can benefit young people. It makes them feel proud, hopeful, useful, and more optimistic about the future. It has helped them develop skills and competencies in social protection work, advocacy and community engagement and development.

The research has provided an interesting insight to the role youth can play in identifying those who are highly vulnerable, marginalised or excluded in communities (even those not identified by state officials). Young people have identified those who have been particularly affected in the storytellers' neighbourhoods and communities. These include young migrants and refugees, those living in rural areas, adolescent girls and young women, indigenous and ethnic minority youth, disabled young people, young people living with HIV and AIDS, young people of different sexual orientations and gender identities, homeless young people and those dependant on daily work or the charity of others.

The most cited gaps in provision exposed by the pandemic and the formal responses, were around the increased risks of SGBV for vulnerable and marginalised adolescent girls and young women, resulting in child pregnancies, forced marriages and abandoned educations.

The research provides powerful evidence of the contributions young people are making to community responses to a pandemic – building resilience, targeting those most in need with the tools and provisions that they lack, thereby protecting and empowering the most vulnerable. They are using their online communication skills and knowledge to challenge fake news and disseminate accurate information, and their research capabilities to assess and map need and review progress. They use their energy, enthusiasm, motivation and many other positive attributes to build resilience, protect and empower the most vulnerable and demonstrate social inclusion in practice. Some are also speaking out and working to strengthen accountability.

Not all young people were able to participate in COVID-19 responses or to do as much as they would have liked. The main barriers highlighted were the lack of financial resources and equipment to keep themselves safe (such as PPE) and the lack of opportunities – or the lack of information about any opportunities exacerbated by no or poor access to information technology. Disappointingly, a minority of the stories also testify that in some communities and countries (but not all), young people are not routinely included or indeed welcome, as part of the governmental COVID-19 responses.

There are however many more stories of hope. Young people are finding all sorts of ways to be involved, personally responding to need as they see it, as well as joining together and working collaboratively with their peers and supportive organisations like VSO. The stories highlight how volunteering in this way is really helping young people to stay safe and to look after their own emotional health and wellbeing.

Young people have provided many useful and thoughtful suggestions and ideas on how governments, organisations and youth can better prepare for or respond to any future pandemic or further waves of COVID-19. The biggest gaps identified by young people are almost all concerned with provision and support for the vulnerable and the marginalised. They are calling for research to better understand the circumstances of those most negatively affected in their communities. They want duty bearers to ensure the provision of food, support, supplies, psycho-social support, medical care and continuing access to health services for the most vulnerable. Some of the older young people within the sample proposed a

number of creative and innovative measures that governments and civil society organisations could take to strengthen the security of young people's livelihoods.

Many of the stories told how disruptions to education and the closure of schools, colleges and universities had negatively impacted young people and children – especially those with limited or no access to technology. Young people called for government and civil society organisations to devise alternative learning interventions to ensure no one is left behind, such as home learning, educational radio broadcasts and distributing books and supplies. They are calling for more to be done to improve the reach of accessible technology so that everyone can receive public health information and learners can continue with their education.

Young people's suggestions exemplify the valuable contributions young people can make to future responses to pandemics in all countries and hold promise for purposeful dialogues with community leaders and governmental agencies about young people's participation in the response to any future pandemic.

Recommendations

The findings suggest a number of messages for governments and duty bearers, as well as VSO. There is a need to build recognition amongst key stakeholders, including governments, on the roles that the youth can usefully play during crises, and build their capacity on meaningful youth engagement. Additionally, it is critical to build youth skills so they are able to contribute meaningfully and influence decisions in areas such as leadership, participatory research, advocacy, social inclusion, social accountability, resilience and policy dialogues.

The following recommendations are put forward for consideration:

1. VSO should play a convening role by **facilitating a new "COVID-19 aware" dialogue** with governmental agencies and community leaders as they review their pandemic preparedness/response plans, and create an enabling environment for meaningful youth leadership and community engagement to contribute directly and hold duty bearers accountable when they fail to respond to vulnerable groups' development needs.

2. VSO should consider **piloting youth networks' focused initiatives**, to explore and support their creativity to lead sustainable community responses, particularly by positioning them well to develop resilience-building plans/actions.

3. Based on VSO's emphasis on social inclusion and resilience, it will be relevant to reflect on what **programming opportunities** exist within VSO's portfolio to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on highly vulnerable communities. This may include:

    a. Devising alternative learning interventions to ensure no one is left behind, such as: home learning, digital lesson delivery, effective use of other media channels, radio, books and supplies.
    b. Enhancing access to routine SRHR services, and psycho-social support, particularly for girls and women and those with multiple vulnerabilities, and advocate for improved service and support in preparedness planning for people with disabilities.
    c. Targeting highly impacted youth and co-producing quick and creative livelihood responses, including access to finances/supplies, supporting the digitalisation of small enterprises, and promotion of cross learnings.
    d. Designing specific interventions and campaigns to tackle identified challenges, such as SGBV, psycho-social support needs, or promoting equality through online information access.

4. Noting the strong interlinkages of impact in different sectors, VSO should consider adopting a more **integrated and holistic approach to its programming,** especially in fragile settings.

5. Recognising the **impact of the pandemic on youth volunteers themselves**, VSO should consider following up all of the community volunteers that ended their placements while lockdown restrictions were in place and offering some short-term mentoring, psycho-social support and capacity-building as required. It is also critical to ensure **youth volunteers' safety and protection** is not compromised and is well thought of in all interventions and engagements.

6. The research has highlighted the need to rebuild trust and relations at family, community and even at national levels through social cohesion initiatives. This can focus on behavioural change interventions by enhancing communication, constructive dialogues and collaborative social action, and by building on **clear accountability and monitoring mechanisms** at different levels.

7. Governments should put in place **social protection policies and inclusive practices, including access to digital technology** where it does not exist, to reduce the impact of unanticipated shocks on highly vulnerable communities. Civil society should continue generating evidence that can support government's prioritisation processes, as well as mobilising resources towards actions.

8. **Support for youth networks** formation and strengthening should continue, particularly to realise sustainability through community-owned and inclusive development interventions. Civil society should **promote youth participation and leadership** in future preparedness, planning, and response action citing the positive contribution of youth that is evidenced in this research.

9. **Promote and enhance youth volunteering through the networks** as a pathway for personal development, youth voice and civic engagement, ultimately resulting in youth realising their potential and contributing to sustainable development goals.

Youth Insights & Story Gathering on COVID-19 Pandemic

VSO is gathering insights and stories within its youth networks at country level to understand how COVID-19 has impacted on youth lives, current engagement levels, and to capture youth views on where future interventions should focus on. This will be done through gathering youth personal stories as well as youth voices on behalf or marginalised youth that our youth networks work with in their communities.

Thank you for sparing your time to share your story and views. This will not take long as you can use your own structure to answer the questions based on the guiding notes. We will treat your responses confidentially (only the steering committee will have access to this information), and we will only use the information only to document how youth are affected by COVID-19, are engaged in response actions, and to inform VSO's youth programming and leadership work.

As you respond, please take note of questions that require you to share your personal story/experience and those require you to share other youth experience (from your interaction with them, observations etc.)

Section 1: Individual Consent

1. I agree to the use of my photograph(s), stories either complete or in part, alone or in conjunction with any wording for VSO's charitable activities, to include, but not limited to internal review, fundraising, approved partnerships and publicity activity.

   Yes ☐   No ☐

Section 2: Personal Information

2. Full Name
3. Country
4. Name of Youth Platform that you belong to (if applicable)
5. Age
6. Gender

   Male ☐   Female ☐   Other ☐

7. Do you have any disability?

   Yes ☐   No ☐

8. How would you describe where you live?

   Urban ☐   Semi- Urban ☐   Rural ☐

9. How would you describe your current status?

   (Please select relevant ones (you can select more than 1 as applicable)
   Employed ☐   Unemployed ☐   Studying ☐

10. Email Address:
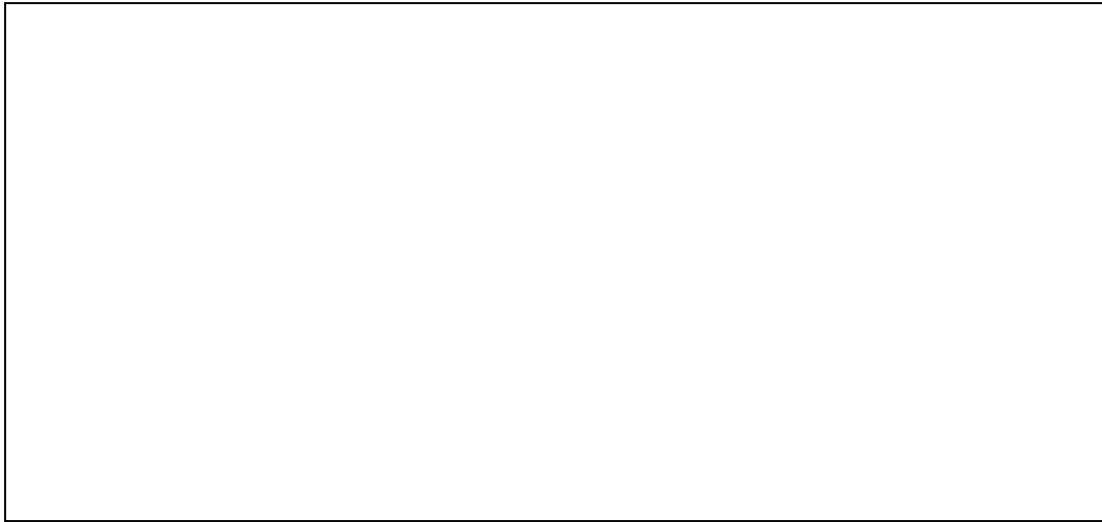
Section 3: Effect of COVID-19 on your life

11. Please narrate your personal story about how you have been affected by the COVID-2019 pandemic. (Guide: your life before the pandemic, the challenges you are facing now, any opportunities as a result of COVID – social, economic, personal aspirations, emotional well-being, legal, political, physical elements and service related)

12. Likewise, please narrate a story of any other youth in your community who is affected even more than you by the COVID-19

(Guide: this can be someone who has additional vulnerability, or a youth passing through deeper challenges. how was his/her life before the pandemic, the challenges he/she is facing now, and how he/she is coping – social, economic, personal aspirations, emotional wellbeing, legal, political, physical elements and service related)

Section 4: Engagement in COVID-19 Responses and Actions in the community

13. Please narrate your story on how you are participating in, or supporting any COVID-19 response actions in your community /country

(Guide: explain how you got the opportunity, your motivation, what you are doing to support the response and future plans/thoughts, and your proudest moment in your engagement)

you can also share pictures, articles or links to any social media work you have been involved in)

14. If not, please tell us why you are not participating in any COVID-19 response actions in your community /country.

   (Guide: why not, what limited you, what could motivate you to participate, what kind of support would enable you to engage /support, how would you like to be engaged/contribute?)

Section 5: Future preparation required in case of re-occurrence of a pandemic similar to COVID-19

15. In your opinion, what can be done by the Governments, organisations, communities, youths to be more prepared to better manage the effects of any future pandemic such as COVID-19? And for it to have less disruptive effect for youth and their aspirations?

(This may include policy recommendations)

16. Would you like to share with us your photo/s or additional documents /articles in relation to your personal stories? If yes, please provide your contact details (email/phone) below that we can use to contact you.

Section 6: Thank you

Thank you for taking your time to fill in the questionnaire and to share your personal stories as well as for other youth in your community.