

Effects of Covid-19 across youth work and youth activities

Summary of the survey launched by the CMJ working group on responses to Covid-19¹

by the Pool of European Youth Researchers of the
Partnership between the European Commission and
the Council of Europe in the field of youth

Introduction and methodology

The Covid-19 pandemic (hereafter Covid-19) is having a significant effect on all dimensions of young citizens' lives, it requires specific attention and tailored measures from both governmental and non-governmental organisations. The pandemic has dramatically affected the youth sector: very few organisations managed to move their activities online to have a significant outreach to young people – especially to those with fewer opportunities, policymakers have been attempting to develop rapidly a coherent set of measures to tackle the current challenges, while researchers have launched different projects and initiatives to document the impact Covid-19 is having on young people and potentially on their future development.

In order to document the above-described situation, the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) wanted to hear from people working or volunteering in youth organisations, initiatives and networks across Europe on the effects of Covid-19 on youth work and youth activities. A questionnaire was distributed among different youth networks from 1 July to 1 August 2020. The answers submitted offer an overview that can help us to understand better the situation across the Council of Europe member states in order to provide appropriate support to youth organisations and constructive guidance to government bodies working on youth-related issues.

The current summary aims to offer a brief picture of the state-of-play related to:

- ✓ how the Covid-19 pandemic influences the youth organisations which responded to the survey in terms of regular youth work activities undertaken in youth clubs, youth centres and other youth spaces, budgetary matters and youth outreach;
- ✓ practices undertaken by the youth organisations in view of the crisis;
- ✓ the digital tools and instruments being used or developed by youth organisations during the pandemic in order to support young people;
- ✓ the support – mainly financial – youth organisations need to respond to the current crisis through the measures being taken at national and also international level.

Based on these questions, which were the basis for the questionnaire, the set objectives of the process were to:

- offer a general overview of the challenges facing youth organisations within the context of the pandemic;
- present existing practices of youth work services delivery and of the activities that youth NGOs had to adapt and of the online tools being used;
- identify the financial and other support measures local and national authorities put in place to support youth organisations;
- map the youth NGOs' uncovered needs in order to respond to young people's needs and interests;
- devise a set of messages for relevant stakeholders to further support the development of the youth sector.

The profile of the respondents and essential data:

Within the space of a month, 48 youth organisations across Council of Europe member states completed the survey: 18 youth organisations stated they are local NGOs; 14 were international networks or organisations; 10 were nationally based and six regional. Over 70% of them were members of a larger body of networks/associations, namely the European Youth Forum. In terms of field of activity, 83% worked in youth work, 46% in the field of human rights education and 45% in youth policy. Essentially, for the analysis, all subjects having responded to the survey stated they have been **negatively** impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This included project delays, outreach and a decrease in visibility; lack of financial

¹ The opinions expressed in this document are the responsibility of the Pool of European Youth Researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

support from private and public institutions. Almost all their projects were cancelled, such as volunteering, mobility programmes and youth centres were closed.

EFFECTS ON THE ACTIVITIES:

In terms of the effects of the pandemic, it should be highlighted that the majority of youth organisations stated they had to cancel all their programmes for 2020-1 due to a lack of funding and/or difficulties in keeping the organisations motivated through distance. The youth organisations were also asked whether the current situation has affected their existing or pending grant applications: 62% had experienced delays in responses, 45% had been granted an extension to their application and over 36% were facing budget cuts.

Also, for the international organisations and for the organisations working mostly on youth mobility activities, the impact would continue to be visible. Most of them had had to cancel their mobility activities and, when and where possible, to move some of these planned activities online. The same happened for the organisations running national and international volunteering programmes, most of them were unable to continue these programmes. Apart from having a reduced base for the selection of volunteers, the organisations also mentioned that board members tended to be less motivated and involved to support the activities, while staff members were also coping with the same lack of motivation – including the lack of any financial motivation to boost the activities.

When asked what additional measures they took to ensure their activities could continue, the majority resorted to online opportunities, especially by familiarising themselves with digital technologies. The digital tools and instruments they used included Digital badges, Miro, Google Hangout, Zoom, Facebook, Discord, Slack, Padlet and Jitsi. Youth organisations were not aware of many digital tools, instruments and practices developed by state authorities. Instead, in comments, they noted that state authorities should do this more often and make use of the expertise of youth organisations when setting them up. It should also be highlighted that most of the respondents stated they had also tried a hybrid model of activities – combining some of the existent offline methodologies with the online ones and also set up training modules, both for their youth workers and their young beneficiaries in order to help them to become familiar with online tools and platforms.

FUNDING

In terms of sources of funding, before the pandemic, the youth organisations having responded to the survey were mostly financed through local, national and international calls for projects, fee-based programmes, private funds from companies or through annual governmental granting activities, their programmes being entirely based on these granting schemes. Once the Covid-19 lockdown had started, most of these grants were delayed, private donors allocated funds to support medical systems, some of the members were not able to pay the fees for the programmes, online activities were not granted the same support as offline ones, local calls for projects – especially those organised by local governments or by local authorities – were either cancelled or postponed, while some of the beneficiaries that had already released grants for programmes that had to be postponed till 2021, asked to be reimbursed.

Also, even when some of the activities took place online, the shift resulted in additional costs for the youth organisations. Not all youth organisations had sufficient equipment to cover these activities and not all youth workers were trained to run online programmes. Consequently, the costs for the equipment and for training programmes affected projected budgets. In addition, in order to ensure the safety and protection of staff members and of the young people participating in some of the programmes, the organisations had to procure sanitary supplies – protection masks, hygiene gel, etc.

Over 80% of participant youth organisations stated they had not received any form of support from local, regional and/or national authorities. Those who answered positively appreciated when the state offered to pay temporary unemployment for employees who could not work full-time and were able to receive tax rebates. Most of those answering positively to this question stated there are no additional conditions attached to grants received from local, regional and/or national authorities. A minority stated that new conditions included adapting to the new physical-distancing policy as well as some bureaucratic hurdles. Some of the organisations said they sensed a lack of transparency in eligibility for emergency grants and felt these granting opportunities would favour larger, better established organisations and individuals. The lack of communication with the local stakeholder was also highlighted, the authorities were not proactive in approaching youth NGOs and designing support measures for their activities.

In some cases, specific support was mentioned. In a few cases, the state offered to pay temporary unemployment for those employees who could not continue their offline activities and paid part of their salaries – the organisations advanced the sum and were then reimbursed by the state. Even where no direct measures for NGOs had been designed, youth NGOs could still benefit from the general support measures that were put in place by the state authorities. There were also some local authorities that provided grants to youth activities during the pandemic, other national and local institutions ran additional calls to respond to the Covid-19 crisis.

If, at local and national levels, support was somewhat reduced, some European institutions designed support measures that were used by the youth organisations: the special call for projects run by the European Youth Foundation, the Solidarity Fund, the European Cultural Foundation through the specific granting scheme, some private donors' granting lines. These calls were launched more to support specific target groups to cope with the pandemic, the respondents mentioned they could not use the funding to make up for the reduced revenue of their organisations. Some of the calls were specifically related to education or social inclusion and were not available to organisations delivering youth work services using arts and culture as instruments. Moreover, the grants specifically targeted aspects related to the pandemic so the organisations were still not able to cover staffing and utilities costs or the complex needs of some of the beneficiary groups. Even when able to access these specific granting schemes, the youth organisations faced difficulties in adapting their activities to the required physical-distancing conditions or in designing the protocols that would ensure the safety of the participants – in the event offline actions were possible.

In terms of funding, over 80% of the youth organisations which participated stated they receive their funding from European institutions and governmental grants. When asked whether they had received any support from international institutions or whether support was pending, over 90% replied no. Those who said yes said they were waiting to receive EU grants, including Erasmus+, a few were in receipt of grants from embassies. Concerning the European Youth Foundation, only 51% of participating youth organisations were registered and most of them did not apply for the special call for Covid-19 pilot activities since they were struggling with drafting applications. Due to the pandemic, their access to grants has been delayed and due to cancellations, their budgets have been decimated.

PROPOSALS TO THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

The last part of the survey asked the organisations to suggest some specific measures the European institutions could implement to support their work and their capacity to handle the pandemic.

For the European Union, the measures proposed by the respondent youth workers were:

- grant access to digital tools;
- be more flexible on mobility activities and open up some Covid-19 situation-suited grants;
- create an emergency line for helping youth organisations to organise activities and make ends meet for their beneficiaries;
- award special grants for covering administrative costs and ensuring the operation of local NGOs;
- provide opportunities for funding for volunteering and intercultural dialogue (with research or larger events and some support for general co-ordination);
- provide assistance to youth workers, educators, who usually work on a freelance basis;
- provide financial support to compensate for the unexpected loss of revenue – especially allocate more working days to projects which were extended or events which were postponed;
- relocate/allocate Erasmus+ funds to more national activities;
- provide financial resources to pay salaries for youth workers/staff;
- offer operational grants to local youth organisations so they can survive the crisis and respond to the needs of the local communities.

As for the Council of Europe, the specific proposals mentioned are:

- design special grants for covering administrative costs and ensuring the operation of the local NGOs;
- place volunteers higher on the list of priorities and methods for creating a strong Europe;
- provide advocacy support and research on the changes youth faces during the pandemic;

- be more flexible with regard to current projects funded by the EYF;
- provide digital resources to improve communication with participants of youth organisations;
- co-operate with the EU in opening borders and providing a stable situation for the implementation of project activities;
- publish a guide or handbook on how to work online with young people. Promote digital youth work and create a guide on how to work with young people and big groups while respecting all protection measures.

Emerging challenges, gaps and opportunities

The summary above gives an overview of the challenges youth NGOs have been facing during the pandemic and a list of proposals for the European institutions. The analysis of the results above highlights some of the important measures that could be taken to support the youth sector to revitalise and to continue delivering quality youth work activities for young people:

1. In cases where local, regional and national support was not available, the authorities could take measures to support youth organisations. The situation could be portrayed as a window of opportunity for the youth organisations as well, to better advocate for their cause and for their beneficiaries.
2. From the responses, it is evident a digital gap exists, not only the digital gap youth workers and staff of youth NGOs are going through, but also the difficulties caused either by a lack of equipment or by a lack of competencies young people are facing – especially those with fewer opportunities. This digital gap deserves special attention from governmental and non-governmental actors and resources to tackle it.
3. The pandemic also emphasised the challenge of sustainability of youth organisations. Most of the respondents mentioned that they face serious challenges to continue their activities due to shortcomings in funding or being unable to diversify their funding opportunities. Governmental structures should also help youth organisations to tackle this situation.

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