

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and the youth sector

Speaking Notes of the CDEJ Chair

What have we learned to date about the impact on the pandemic on young people and the youth sector? I will focus on a number of key emerging issues that we will need to further explore and evaluate.

In most countries, state funding for the youth sector appears to have remained relatively stable over the past year. However, here is also evidence of funding being cut, particularly at local level, or redirected, delayed, cancelled, or postponed.

Communication during the pandemic was targeted at the population in general rather than at specific categories, such as young people. There was also some evidence as to poor communication and mixed messaging as regards responses to the pandemic. A number of countries did however specifically communicate directly with young people, whether through television, social media, state organisations for young people and NGOs.

The requirements of social distancing during the lockdown severely impacted on youth sector programmes and activities and also reflected the importance of the physical environment and face-to-face contact in the sector. While online and digitalized approaches were adopted, there was a lack of capacity, resources and training in some countries as well as an urban/rural divide in some instances. Young people with fewer opportunities also appear to have been more severely impacted. There is also evidence that many countries were proactive and innovative in their responses.

One reason for the relatively mixed response of state operated programmes during the lockdown may relate to their lack of both capacity and ability to adapt and transfer from a physical environment to a digital environment.

The activities of NGOs were in most countries suspended or severely restricted, with facilities being closed and face-to-face meetings postponed or cancelled.

Countries where funding for the youth sector is focused on project-based activities carried out by youth NGOs and largely dependent on European, international, or intermittent state funding, appear to have been more adversely affected. However, some countries did respond to the need for additional funding.

Many NGOs started offering information, counselling, and support for young people on-line. While training and technical support for NGOs were available in some countries, there was also evidence of a lack of digital capacity and adequate training.

The main consequences of the lockdown for young people include loss of social contacts; anxiety and mental health issues; decrease in participation in decision making; unemployment; and restrictions on education.

While the full impact of the pandemic has yet to be assessed, a number of emerging issues might be highlighted as this juncture:

- the effects on young people, and of young people with fewer opportunities, of social distancing and isolation
- the vulnerability of the NGO sector in terms of financial and resource capacity
- the need to reevaluate digital capacity, development and potential.