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Introduction to COVID-19

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the current global pandemic is the first known to emerge as the result of a novel coronavirus, identified as SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19.¹ This respiratory disease is easily transmissible mainly from person to person, in droplet form, when an infected individual coughs or sneezes. It can also spread through contact with contaminated objects or surfaces. The symptoms associated with COVID-19 have ranged from very mild (including some cases with no reported symptoms) to severe or fatal. The fatality rate is still unclear as the pandemic unfolds, and there exist some variations across geographic regions and age groups.

Pandemics begin with an investigation phase, followed by recognition, initiation, and acceleration phases.² Different countries can be in different phases of a pandemic at any point in time, and different parts of the same country can also be in different phases of a pandemic. Currently, several countries are experiencing what is known as community spread; this is considered part of the acceleration phase. Therefore, one of the most important tools public health officials need is a reliable system that can quickly report accurate data about the outbreak. This way, officials can rapidly identify and implement the most effective interventions.

¹ WHO, "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) - Events as They Happen," accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

² CDC, "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 17, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/summary.html>.

Though more demographic and epidemiological data is needed, it is known that COVID-19 can infect individuals of all ages. However, the WHO has cautioned that older persons (and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease) appear to be more vulnerable to severe illness. In addition, health experts are alerting the public to the possibility that this illness can also hit some populations with substance use disorders particularly hard.³ This is due to the fact that the virus attacks the lungs; COVID-19 could be an especially serious threat to tobacco smokers or vapers.⁴ Although young, healthy individuals typically have a more robust immune system than the elderly, the WHO encourages everyone, including youth, to take extra precautions to avoid infection and transmission: Washing hands regularly, keeping a social distance from others, and staying home when sick.

Social distancing is vital, not only to decrease spread but also to limit a surge in cases whereby hospitals exceed their capacity to treat those gravely ill. That's why many governments have called on youth to embrace the effort to protect themselves and the overall population. Youth are also in a position to help those who are most vulnerable, and to aid in increasing public health social awareness campaigns among their communities. **Thus, youth are critical and part of the active plan to limit the virus's spread and its impact on public health, society, and the economy at large.**

Socio-Economic Impacts

Already, the global COVID-19 pandemic has led to severe economic and labour market shocks. With an estimated rise between 5.3 and 24.7 million in the number of those unemployed globally,⁵ the impact on youth employment is likely to be severe given that youth (15-24) are already 3 times more likely to be unemployed than adults.⁶ Furthermore, COVID-19-related shocks to the labour market are likely to impact the quality of jobs for young people, be it in the form of zero-hour contracts, informal employment, etc. Such forms of employment are markedly more common among youth as 77 percent of employed young people hold informal jobs while 126 million are extreme and moderate working poor worldwide.² Importantly, the impact on the quality and quantity of jobs will likely disproportionately affect young people engaged in the service sector and/or performing manual routine jobs. Young people with these jobs are also at risk for experiencing heightened health-related hazards because they cannot work remotely.

³ National Institute on Drug Abuse, "COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders," March 12, 2020, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/COVID-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ ILO (2020), 'COVID-19 and the world of work: Impacts and responses

⁶ ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020, p.13, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_737648.pdf

Measures to ease the financial burden of youth have taken multiple forms thus far, but they are not enough to address the full breadth of the pandemic. From changes to statutory sick pay to tax deferrals, company loans, cash bonuses, and more, the measures the world is taking encompass working populations as a singular group and need to be further expanded. China's actions, for instance, only reflect the uncertainty surrounding the duration of the pandemic with all measures in effect up to 3 months after its resolution. Subsequent outbreaks around the world primarily address changes to income support schemes. Across all measures reported so far, a universality exists: Their temporality. Whilst short-term financial support is needed, the differing levels of impact and a long-term strategy should be considered. For example, promoting a narrative of opportunity may ease the transition into a post-pandemic economy; to learn how to engage youths in a work culture in flux is just one way to work toward increasing the economy's resilience.

The global COVID-19 pandemic is also having an unprecedented impact on education systems all over the world with far-reaching social consequences. According to UNESCO, 165 countries have so far (as of March 27) implemented nationwide closures of educational institutions, and several more have implemented localized ones, in total affecting 1.52 billion of children and youth. This number represents over 87 percent of all enrolled learners and is expected to increase further as the pandemic spreads and more countries enforce nationwide closures.⁷ Moreover, the duration of these closures is highly uncertain.

The situation can be expected to have severe consequences in terms of interrupting learning, compromising nutrition, and elevating drop-out rates. In particular, the closures are disproportionately impacting disadvantaged and underprivileged children and youth who have fewer educational opportunities outside of school, a lack of access to remote learning tools and the Internet and rely on free or discounted school meals for healthy nutrition. With protracted closures, it will become a challenge to ensure that students return to school once reopened. To alleviate the situation, governments should ensure there is continuity in learning by promoting high-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions, focusing in particular on reaching vulnerable groups.⁸ In addition, international cooperation to share best practices on effective responses will be instrumental.

⁷ UNESCO "COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response" <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>

⁸ UNESCO "Half of world's student population not attending school: UNESCO launches global coalition to accelerate deployment of remote learning solutions" <https://en.unesco.org/news/half-worlds-student-population-not-attending-school-unesco-launches-global-coalition-accelerate>

Another area of impact is on **young migrants and refugees**. Given 70 percent of all international migrants are below 30 years of age globally⁹ and in 2019, 38 million international migrants were below the age of 20 years,¹⁰ epidemics such as COVID-19 are likely to disproportionately affect this population. Furthermore, out of about 100 countries affected by COVID-19, 34 have a refugee population of more than 20,000 who are at very high risk¹¹ as they often live in precarious living conditions. This group gets left behind in the provision of healthcare when national systems' capacities are overstretched due to COVID-19. There is also a risk COVID-19 may further stigmatize migrants and refugees or increase xenophobia and racism, which in turn may further affect the ability of young migrants and refugees to receive healthcare and maintain their livelihoods.

Social Policy Responses to COVID-19

Whilst the public health response to COVID-19 is ongoing, a number of other social policy responses are also necessary as the crisis of COVID-19 expands to socioeconomic spheres of life. Social protection systems are one major way in which governments aim to mitigate some of the impacts that COVID-19 is having on people's wellbeing and livelihoods.

However, access to social protection varies significantly depending on a person's background, including age, and this can further exacerbate vulnerabilities of young people. Too often, the specific needs of young people, stemming from this unique transition period between childhood and adulthood, are not properly considered in social protection systems. This includes young people who miss out on child- or family-based social protection systems but do not yet have access to employment-based social protection. These gaps in access can adversely impact young people's lives and generate negative consequences that can be felt in the long term and even spill over across generations.

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive social protection is even more vital to protect young people who are already, in normal times, at a higher economic and social risk. Because young people are disproportionately affected by unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely drastically increase unemployed youth, a population already overrepresented in the informal economy (around three quarters of young workers are in informal employment around the

⁹ 2019 International Migration and Displacement Trends and Policies Report to the G20 <https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/G20-migration-and-displacement-trends-and-policies-report-2019.pdf>

¹⁰ UN DESA (2019), International Migration 2019 Report, New York

¹¹ UNCHR *The Refugee Brief* (blog), March 11, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/the-refugee-brief-11-march-2020/>.

world).¹² As many social insurance programmes are linked to formal employment, that leaves many young people, especially young women, underserved or unserved.

The labour market disadvantages faced by young people also affect their access to other social protection schemes like health insurance. Many young people in countries where universal health coverage is *not* available are either unemployed, informally employed, or among the working poor. As such, they have neither health insurance nor the means to cover additional health-related expenses. Therefore, a large portion of young people will not have access to health care and services necessary to treat and prevent COVID-19. Moreover, homeless and unbanked youth are at even greater risk and must be included in national social protection systems.

As member states initiate emergency fiscal measures to expand social protection as a response to COVID-19, it will be important to ensure that their system includes all youth in their social protection measures.

Youth Responses to COVID-19

COVID-19 affects all segments of the population, with young people playing a key role in the management of this outbreak and the recovery following the outbreak. Though much is still unknown on how the disease affects young people, governments are mandated in the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) to ensure their services meet the needs of young people. In these circumstances, it is important to ensure that youth are heard alongside other community and patient voices in the rollout of health and non-health interventions in response to COVID-19.

Building up the capacity of youth to be able to make their own decisions on health and to take responsibility for health is also a key element of WPAY. In this context, health education, public health promotion, and evidence-based information are critical in combating the spread and effects of COVID-19, especially to challenge the spread of disinformation online. The role of governments as well as youth organizations and community groups will be essential to ensure that trustworthy public health information is disseminated. Young people themselves are also utilizing online technologies to spread public health information in engaging ways such as videos to promote effective handwashing or explain how social distancing can save lives.

Young innovators are already responding to the virus through social impact innovation. Around the world, a number of initiatives are being developed to leverage young people's efforts to

¹² UN DESA, World Economic Situation and Prospects, April 2019 briefing, no 123.

generate and deliver support to at-risk populations or populations affected by the pandemic. Whilst most of these initiatives are on a voluntary basis (e.g. young people offering to shop for and deliver food to elders or at-risk people), they can also take the shape of social enterprises. Many youth-driven technology innovation hubs are supporting startups to develop effective solutions to address COVID-19. For example, CcHUB (an open living lab and pre-incubation space) in Nigeria is offering to provide financial, research and design support for projects related to COVID-19.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In a little over 3 months, COVID-19 has morphed from a small outbreak to a pandemic, which the WHO deems a public health emergency of international concern and a socioeconomic crisis affecting everyone. Whilst epidemiologists are still analyzing the devastating health impacts on young people and their families, indicators suggest there will be widespread economic and social impacts on their communities and economies. Governments and the UN System must understand and anticipate these impacts so the worst effects of this crisis can be avoided.

The priority remains a vigorous and global public health response that interrupts transmissions and provides effective care and treatment for those who are positive. In this effort, youth can play a key role in supporting the public health response by taking responsibility for their health based on the best available evidence and information.

However, the economic and social impacts also present challenges for Member States. Young people are already disproportionately unemployed. And for those who are employed, many work in the informal economy, gig economy, on precarious contracts or in service sectors of the economy that are likely to be severely affected. More than one billion youth are now no longer physically in school. Vulnerable youth such as migrants and refugees or homeless may fare even worse. This could lead to unprecedented levels of unemployed youth and education or training requiring robust social protection expansions.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic calls for global solutions and intergenerational solidarity, and for innovative, inclusive policy solutions. The Sustainable Development Goals will be more important than ever in accelerating the response and recovery of this epidemic — as well as build the resilience and "social immunity" that the world needs to combat the next pandemic. The following recommendations are put forward for the consideration of Member States and UN entities:

- Provide universal health coverage, including all young persons, and ensure that the health system effectively meets the needs of youth in COVID-19, including public health promotion, testing and treatment.
- Promote public health approaches and accurate information so that young people can be empowered to make evidence-based decisions on their health.
- Monitor youth unemployment and underemployment, take targeted measures during the recovery to promote youth employment and decent work.
- Adapt the delivery of education, through digital and non-digital methods, from early childhood education to tertiary education to ensure the continuation of skills acquisition and learning.
- Protect the rights of migrants, refugees and other minority youth during this epidemic, including right to health care, and combat the rise of xenophobia and racism resulting from the spread of COVID-19.
- Ensure that social protection systems include all young people, with special attention paid to those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, such as homeless youth, youth with disabilities, unbanked youth, etc.
- Consult and meaningfully engage youth in the development of health, economic, and social interventions in response to COVID-19 and in its recovery.
- Incentivize youth innovation for the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and the management of its corollary socioeconomic impacts.

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