

The European Youth **Blueprint To Recovery**



DATE	June 2020
CRISIS	Covid-19
LOCATION	Earth
POPULATION	Young people

Equality Needs To Be Our Compass

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of understanding the cultural context of the research. It highlights the need for researchers to be aware of their own biases and the potential for cultural differences to influence the results of their studies. The second part of the paper focuses on the methodology used in the study, including the selection of participants and the data collection process. The third part of the paper presents the results of the study, which show that there are significant differences in the way that people from different cultures perceive and experience the world. The final part of the paper discusses the implications of these findings for future research and for the development of cross-cultural communication strategies.

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

01 - INTRODUCTION

Over the past months, much has been said about the COVID-19 pandemic: its roots, its impact, its consequences. While there is still much more to learn, we must already start to take stock and look ahead in order to support those who need it the most.

One of the most striking truths is that, while we all had to self isolate and adjust to a new reality, this crisis, the same as any other crisis, has mostly affected already vulnerable people in our societies. Existing inequalities were only exacerbated. We, the young generation, might not be the most hit by the health crisis, but its consequences will form our disadvantage for decades to come, if no measures are taken.

As COVID-19 was spreading, there were people who were more at risk than others to fall ill and die from it. As our health systems were unfit and terribly shaken

by the brutality of the pandemic, many did not have equal access to care. As no region in the world, Europe included, was prepared for this pandemic, inequalities were revealed between countries' responses, calling for a united and coordinated response, rooted in solidarity. As lockdown measures were put in place and our lifestyle changed, too many of us were left without a stable income, a safe place to live, and a basic support system. As the consequences of the crisis are becoming concrete and economic recession has begun, too many again will suffer if appropriate measures are not taken.

To quote the United Nations Deputy Chief, Amina Mohammed, this crisis has been

“exposing the frailties and inequalities of our societies.”

Equality is the foundation of sustainable, functioning and progressive democratic societies. And as the world is on the road to recover from this crisis and our institutions are discussing how to walk that road, equality needs to be our compass. Young people and youth organisations are dreaming of and working towards a more equal society. During the period of lockdowns, we have witnessed an extraordinary response by the youth movement to act in solidarity with those more affected by the crisis.

However, young people have been severely hit too. We, the young, are more at risk of losing our jobs or of not being able to benefit from social protection. In fact, according to the International Labour Organisation, 1 in 6 young people lost their job because of the economic consequences of COVID-19. Youth organisations are also deeply affected by this crisis: too many have become extremely vulnerable because of cut activities and some are even at risk of closing down. This is a threat to our democracies.

When inequality reigns, there is no hope for a strong democratic society, founded on human rights and vibrant civic space. When people are worried about having a roof over their heads, a decent job and simply making ends meet, there is often no space for being active in our communities, taking care of others and learning from each other to build a better world. If inequality reigns, our democracies are at risk.

Last but not least, this crisis, with all its learnings and dire consequences, is also an opportunity for us to call for a new system. There is a momentum for our societies to switch gear towards a more sustainable world: one rooted in social, economical and environmental equality. Let's not forget that there is a bigger

and more threatening crisis that won't go away: the climate crisis and global warming. As we have to redefine our social contract and our economic model, let's ensure they are guided by justice and equality, putting people and the planet at the core of a new system.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the European Youth Forum has worked to ensure that no young person was left behind and that youth organisations were supported in their solidarity actions. With this European Youth Blueprint to Recovery, we present a series of policy recommendations aiming at influencing the institutional response to the crisis. Our solutions are built around three pillars for the reconstruction of our societies in the wake of the crisis:

- Social & economic inclusion - preventing the lockdown generation;
- Human rights, civic space and participation - maintaining and strengthening our democracies;
- Beyond recovery - sustainable alternatives to build back better.

In the coming months and years, the European Youth Forum will advocate for solutions that ensure a fair and sustainable recovery, ensuring that we don't go back in time but we build back better. We will ensure that the voice of young people and youth organisations will be heard in all the necessary conversations and be part of the decision making process at all levels: global, European, national, regional and local.

PREVENTING THE LOCKDOWN GENERATION

02-SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INCLUSION

FACTS

The health crisis is fast becoming an economic and social one, with many questioning what will bring more fatalities - the pandemic or the upcoming economic downturn. While the virus might not have impacted young people's health as much as it did other groups, the pandemic disrupted our education, it's affecting our jobs and income prospects, and it's putting our overall wellbeing at risk.

Our already precarious position in the labour market before the pandemic makes us even more vulnerable now. Since 2008, youth unemployment has been consistently higher, more than double the overall unemployment rate in the EU.¹ Precarious contracts, and in-work poverty have been on the rise among young people, with many of us taking up short-term or temporary jobs that often lack quality and proper remuneration. We are usually the 'first-out' when job losses occur, with youth unemployment rising almost twice as fast as the overall unemployment rate during recessions.²

With this new crisis, we will once again see young people lose jobs. We are over-represented in the hardest hit sectors of the economy: 1 in 3 young people³

1 Eurostat (2020) [April 2020 Unemployment news release](#)

2 Bell, D.N. and Blanchflower, D.G., (2011) [Young people and the Great Recession](#). Oxford Review of Economic Policy, 27(2), pp.241-267.

3 According to Eurostat data, over 30% of young workers between the ages of 15-24 worked in those industries.

work in the wholesale, retail, accommodation and food sectors in the EU, where many job losses are expected.⁴ As young people often gain their first work experience in these industries, we are now losing crucial opportunities to develop our skills and earn a living.

In this scenario where jobs are being lost, age-based discrimination in welfare systems causes an additional level of vulnerability for youth. As not all young people have extensive work experience, we often can't access unemployment benefits, which are mostly contribution-based.⁵ When out of a job, accessing minimum income schemes can also become a challenge, as the existence of age minimums in many countries further penalise youth.

The pandemic put a strain on our education and training; schools and universities were closed; apprenticeships and internships were either interrupted, postponed or moved online. While distance learning offers great potential to those who can take advantage of it, it is the already marginalised who remain left out. Young migrants and refugees,⁶ and Roma youth often lack internet access in their communities, and computers in their homes.⁷ Furthermore, the specific needs of children and young people with disabilities are often not taken into account.

As graduating during a recession has significant consequences for young people's

4 Decent Jobs for Youth (2020) [Young Workers will be Hit Hard by Covid-19's Economic Fallout](#)

5 European Youth Forum (2016) [Excluding Youth: A Threat to our Future](#)

6 United Nations (2020), [Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on children](#).

7 See <http://ergonetwork.org/2020/03/covid-19-extreme-hardship-and-solidarity-in-these-times-of-crisis/>

FIGURES

Eurofound:

- 13% of young people work without any contract, putting them at a greater risk of being affected by this crisis.

Eurostat:

- In 2016, 43.8% of young people aged 15-24 were in temporary forms of work, as opposed to 13.1% of people aged 25-49, and 6.9% of people aged 50-64.

ILO & Partners:

- Over 1 in 6 young people worldwide have stopped working since the start of the crisis.
- Among young people who have remained in employment, working hours have fallen by 23%.
- Around half of young students report a likely delay in the completion of their current studies, while 10% expect to be unable to complete them at all
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Eurostat:

- In April 2020 while the unemployment rate of the general population increased by 0.2%, from 6.4% to 6.6%, the youth unemployment rate increased by 0.8%, from 14.6% to 15.4%.

OECD:

- According to an OECD survey on Youth and COVID-19, some 40% of young people express great concerns about their employment status and their disposable income.
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UNICEF:

- The temporary school closure due to COVID-19 has affected more than 91% of students worldwide – around 1.6 billion children and young people.

Eurocities:

- According to a study of 23 European cities with large Roma populations, energy and electricity are not always available in the homes of Roma families in nearly half of cities (47%).
- Some data from the national level on access to distant learning:
Italy: Data from 2018-19 shows that about 12.3% of children and young people (aged 6 to 17) don't have a computer at home. Only 6.1% of these young people live in households where there's at least one computer per family member. In the south of Italy, 41.6% of families do not own a computer at home and only 14.1% have one computer per family member.
France: 5% of learners do not have access to the internet or computers.

ESN:

- 24% of Italian exchange students surveyed have experienced discrimination due to their nationality since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eurofound:

- According to Eurofound's survey on living and working in times of COVID-19, 20% of young respondents felt lonely all or most of the time during lockdown, compared to 15% of older respondents.

OECD:

- According to an OECD survey on Youth and COVID, more than half of young people express great concerns about their mental health.

life and career prospects,⁸ not only are we being prevented from accessing our right to education now, but our chances of a successful school-to-work transition are also being jeopardised.

Without stable employment, quality education and social safety nets, we're also at a greater risk of social exclusion.

For example, COVID-19 has made youth homelessness more tangible. During the lockdown, social services witnessed an increase in the number of young people reaching out for help: not just new people entering homelessness, but young people who had been couch-surfing or experiencing homelessness but had not accessed social support previously.⁹ In the coming months, loss of income could result in increased housing insecurity and poverty, as many of us might be unable to pay rent and afford other basic necessities.

By restricting our daily lives in unprecedented ways, the lockdown has also had a disproportionate impact on our mental health. Data shows that young people have felt sadder and lonelier than adults during the lockdown.¹⁰

As we are faced with more uncertainty about our future, levels of stress and de-

pression may keep increasing in the upcoming months and years.

If these worrying signs remain undressed, we truly risk becoming the “lockdown generation” many are already talking about,¹¹ carrying the scars for decades to come, in the form of reduced earnings, higher risk of unemployment, worse health, and lower life satisfaction.¹²

11 International Labour Organisation (2020), ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition.

12 Gregg, P. and Tominey, E., (2005) The wage scar from male youth unemployment. Labour Economics, 12(4), pp.487-509.

8 Kahn, L.B. (2010), 'The long-term labor market consequences of graduating from college in a bad economy', Labour Economics, 17(2), April, pp. 303-316.

9 Stakelum, R. and Matthiessen M. (2020), Youth Homelessness in Generation Covid19: How does Covid19 impact on vulnerable and already marginalised young people experiencing homelessness?

10 See <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/is-history-repeating-itself-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-crisis-on-youth>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2008 crisis and the austerity measures that followed put young people in the precarious position we are still in today. This time around, we demand that institutions at all levels respond to the economic and social downturn with social investment and large-scale policies, not only to prevent long-lasting damage, but also to ensure that we are better prepared to face whatever crisis will come next. To achieve this, we call for the following policy measures:¹³

For the emergency response:

- Prioritise solidarity and prevent exclusion in times of crisis: Implement short-term measures (e.g. income support, suspension of evictions, deferments of mortgages and utility payments), to support the most vulnerable.
- Take into account the input of affected groups, including youth, as an essential contribution to finding rights-sensitive and sustainable solutions.

For the medium-term recovery:

- Heed the lessons from 2008: Make sure that policy responses do not relax labour legislation to stimulate high employment, but rather make the creation of quality jobs and social rights central.
- Invest more in young people: Increase social spending, both through the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, Next Generation EU, and through national budgets, by scaling-up youth-targeted social programmes; creating quality entry-level jobs; investing in public services; and financing social protection schemes.
- Equality and non-discrimination to guide the recovery: to avoid repeating mistakes that penalised youth in the past (e.g. the rise of low quality jobs; youth minimum wages).
- Make youth transitions easier: Ban discriminatory practices such as unpaid internships; and adopt a European quality framework for the Youth Guarantee to ensure consistent standards across offers, and address gaps from existing EU policies to promote young people's access to quality employment.

For long-term change:

- Tackle precarious work: Introduce comprehensive, inclusive and forward-looking employment policy frameworks and legislation to better regulate new forms of work as they arise.
- Ensure social protection for everyone: Ensure all young people, regardless of employment status, have equal access to social protection and income support; and remove age-based eligibility that excludes many young people from accessing benefits.
- Make sure social policies target all social rights: Move towards a more holistic approach to social inclusion beyond employment. Social policies must include a balanced focus on all social rights, from housing to education and health, to tackle all root causes of poverty and exclusion. A starting point would be implementing all the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

¹³ These recommendations are based on the European Youth Forum's Policy Papers on [Youth Rights](#) (2012); the [Post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework](#) (2018); [Sustainable Development](#) (2018); the [Future of Work](#) (2019); the updated Position on the [Implementation of the Youth Guarantee](#) (2018); the [Resolution on Youth Autonomy and Inclusion](#) (2016).

HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIC SPACE & PARTICIPATION

03-MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING OUR DEMOCRACIES

FACTS

COVID-19 has deeply shaken the functioning of our democracies. Governments across Europe declared states of emergency and implemented nationwide lockdowns. Over the past few months, we've had to self isolate, avoid seeing family and friends, re-invent our working life. But the impact of emergency measures goes much further than our individual bubble: during this lockdown, our rights to protest, to organise, to travel freely, usually taken for granted, were restricted in unprecedented ways. In other words, COVID-19 has put huge pressure on our democracies, and on the exercise of our rights and fundamental freedoms.

It also became evident early on that not everyone is equal in the face of the pandemic. According to the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, the groups of people, whose rights were not fully implemented before the pandemic, experienced a further deterioration of the enjoyment of their rights due to the measures put in place to fight the crisis: "we need more equality. Indeed, we have not all been equal in the face of the pandemic. Those who were poor before it became poorer; those who were disadvantaged faced even greater disadvantages."¹⁴

¹⁴ See Dunja Mijatović - Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/effectively-responding-to-a-sanitary-crisis-in-full-respect-for-human-rights-and-the-principles-of-democracy-and-the-rule-of-law>

As young people, we face specific challenges and discrimination because of our age. But age alone doesn't define us: other personal characteristics - our ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, (dis-) ability - paired with the fact that we're young, often make us more vulnerable to multiple discrimination, and increase the barriers we face in accessing our rights.

Hence, young people risk being disproportionately affected by the crisis, seeing our access to rights severely impacted. What we are learning from the pandemic is that we cannot wait any longer for human rights to be made central, and for young people to be recognised as rights holders.

A society built on human rights also relies on a healthy civic space as its democratic backbone. As civil society organisations, youth organisations play a vital role as both - being strong advocates for youth rights, and providing safe spaces where the most vulnerable and marginalised among us can grow and thrive.¹⁵

During this pandemic, while safety measures were essential to protect the population, we have witnessed several alarming measures affecting our civic space. Indeed, some governments have taken advantage of the public health crisis to implement emergency measures to put "democracy under quarantine";¹⁶ and others silenced dissenting voices,¹⁷ and clamped down on the work of civil society organisations and young activists

¹⁵ European Youth Forum - "Safeguarding the civic space for young people in Europe" (upcoming)

¹⁶ See <https://www.youthforum.org/hungary-democracy-under-quarantine>

¹⁷ See <https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25932&LangID=E>

FIGURES

United Nations

- In its April 2020 policy brief, the United Nations identified three main fundamental rights that have been on the frontline because of the pandemic: Right to life and duty to protect life, right to health and access to health care, & freedom of movement

CIVICUS

In its Civic Space Monitor, CIVICUS has documented several alarming civic space trends. They are:

- Unjustified restrictions on access to information and censorship;
- Detentions of activists for disseminating critical information;
- Crackdowns on human rights defenders and media outlets;
- Violations of the right to privacy and overly broad emergency powers.

European Youth Forum (upcoming study on “Safeguarding civic space for young people in Europe”)

- 2 out of 5 youth organisations fear retribution from the government when expressing themselves
- 1 out of 5 youth organisations believe that young people have limited access to civic space, and more than half of them perceive young people as underrepresented in a civic space.

Erasmus Students Network

- 37.5% of the students interviewed experienced at least one major problem related to their exchange (e.g. loss of transportation to return home, issues with accommodation, access to basic goods).

Eurobarometer on fake news and disinformation

- 60% among those aged 15-24-year-old are more likely to trust online sources, and 77% are confident that they will recognise fake news.

through reprisals and repression.¹⁸ While worrying signs of a shrinking civic space were already present before COVID-19, the pandemic has reinforced trends that are putting civil society at risk.

Among civil society, the work of youth organisations has also been severely affected. As young people, we have adapted to the current challenges, by reorganising our engagement online and supporting our communities during this crisis. However, several organisations are starting to fight for existence. Many youth organisations' projects are being put on hold, some organisations are being forced to consider shutting down due to lack of funding. It is worrying that youth organisations will have to overcome additional barriers to be able to do their work, provide quality youth work opportunities and foster meaningful youth participation, because of COVID-19. Exit strategies will have to prioritise essential youth services to reopen to avoid further negative impact on civic space, already at risk with economic downturn.

However, even though the actions of youth organisations have been affected by the physical measures, limiting organising, running campaigns and providing services, the youth movement has shown an extraordinary capacity for adaptation: we showed solidarity, we helped each other, we created new ways of engagement.¹⁹

Even though young people and youth organisations were among the first responders to the crisis in their local communities mobilising volunteers and

providing other needed support, youth participation has been affected by the crisis. Activities encouraging youth participation have been suspended at local levels and it contributed to creating further social exclusion among young people, especially for the most fragile ones.

But for Europe to recover, youth participation will be key. As young people, we are more likely to participate in protests, social movements, and other forms of activism than other age groups.²⁰

We are at the forefront of the fight against climate change,

we have contributed to putting the issue on the political agenda, we have drawn the attention of policy makers to the damage we're doing to our planet. With this crisis, we want to engage and play our part in building back a better society. As traditional politics often leave us out,²¹ youth organisations and movements often provide the only space where we as young people feel that we can start a discussion and advocate for systemic change. This is why a healthy environment for civil society and youth organisations is crucial to ensure our participation in the recovery.

Another direct consequence of the pandemic was the sudden halt of all types of mobility. The current generation of young people has only known a Europe where freedom of movement is one of

¹⁸ See https://twitter.com/Youth_Forum/status/1263457068352184331?s=20 and http://en.rada.fm/2020/05/15/statement/?fbclid=IwAR3_qFlpbQSgpa-FoyhA8nligHdQJlrQeausyQOM8oRVUAPgnbFnzEFNpTY

¹⁹ See Annex - #SeparatedButUnited: What are youth organisations doing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

²⁰ See "Young People and Democratic Life in Europe" (European Youth Forum - 2015)

²¹ European Commission Situation of Young People in Europe, 2018, p 93: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b6985c0c-743f-11e8-9483-01aa75ed71a1>

the unquestioned founding values. Over the years, many young people have taken advantage of mobility opportunities, to learn, exchange ideas and discover other cultures.

COVID-19 was in many ways a shock to the system: countries closed their borders, mobility opportunities were suspended. While many had to postpone their cross-border mobility schemes, those already studying abroad were faced with the decision to either go back to their country, disrupting their learning experience, or to stay in their host country indefinitely, with no certainty as to when they'd be able to go back home, and facing unexpected expenses and challenges.

With all cross-border learning mobility activities suspended, it created a lack of opportunity for young people but also had a huge impact on the youth sector (organisations, professionals, trainers etc.), that had to face income loss, job loss and sometimes closure of structures.

Last but not least, the crisis has led to an increase of fake news and disinformation spreading, which has hampered efforts to contain the pandemic.²² Disinformation

²² European Parliament, Fact-checking Day: Fighting the virus of disinformation on Covid-19, April 2020 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200401IPR76306/fact-checking-day-fighting-the-virus-of-disinformation-on-covid-19>

spread suspicion with regards to the official guidelines and sources provided by authorities, undermining the already fragile citizens' trust towards democratic institutions.²³ More and more, young people are relying on online sources to inform themselves. As the online sphere is more exposed to disinformation,²⁴ the risk of young people being victims of fake news might be higher.

While we have seen European²⁵ institutions stepping up to track down fake news and tackle disinformation, this crisis has also shown how fragile the balance between freedom of expression and our right to truthful information is, especially in certain national contexts.

What we are learning from the pandemic, and from how it affected reality as we know it, is that a thriving civic space and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are the backbone of any functioning democracy. As Europe starts to plan life after COVID-19, we call for these to be the foundations of the recovery.

²³ Edelman, *Trust Barometer 2020*

²⁴ European Commission, Tackling COVID-19 disinformation -Getting the facts right https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf (2020)

²⁵ Ibid.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As the world paused for health reasons, many obstacles came in the way for governments to ensure the fulfillment of our human rights and participate fully in the democratic debate. Now that we are lifting up those temporary barriers, a rights-based approach needs to guide us. We need to protect and empower the youth sector that is vital to our democracies. We need to build an enabling - physical and digital - environment for citizenship education and youth participation. To achieve this, we call for the following policy measures:²⁶

For the emergency response:

- Involve young people and youth organisations in designing the emergency response as they can provide a wide range of expertise and access to the most vulnerable.
- Prioritise investments in the youth sector to ensure that youth services and youth work activities are secured during and in the aftermath of the crisis. Young people and youth organisations should be co-designers of this process.
- Remove all unnecessary obstacles to the full enjoyment of rights during the crisis and ensure that any barriers introduced to rights enjoyment are removed as soon as the health situation allows it.

For the medium-term recovery:

- Ensure the recovery is rights-based: Implement a rights-based approach to the recovery, focusing on ensuring full access to rights in long-term, rather than addressing short-term needs. Strengthen the place human rights occupy in our societies, starting by giving a more central focus to the equal enjoyment of social, economic, and cultural rights, as well as civil and political.
- Partner with and support youth organisations to provide support to the most disadvantaged young people and identify their needs.
- Support activities building the capacities of youth on critical thinking and media literacy to strengthen the resilience of young people to fake news and disinformation.
- Continued and sustainable financial support should be provided to youth organisations and youth initiatives that have been active in solidarity actions during the crisis.

For long-term change:

- Recognise young people as rights holders: Mainstream youth rights and intersectionality in relevant social and employment policies at all levels, to tackle the specific barriers faced by young people in accessing their rights, and take into account the heterogeneity of youth when implementing policy change.
- Increase support to quality citizenship education²⁷ to ensure young people have the necessary skills to face the challenges of the aftermath of the crisis and take part in the democratic debate about recovery.
- Strengthen and rethink youth participation mechanisms at different levels. Co-management should be used as a model to implement participatory mechanisms aimed at developing policy beyond the youth sector, on all policy areas affecting the life of young people.
- Start a large reflection on the impact of digitalisation in decision making processes by identifying opportunities and threats and moving forward towards broader recognition of innovative forms of participation, both online and offline.

²⁶ These recommendations are based on the European Youth Forum's Policy Papers on [Youth Rights](#) (2012); the [Post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework](#) (2018); the [Resolution on Youth Autonomy and Inclusion](#) (2016); [Policy Paper on the Erasmus+ successor programme](#) (2017); [Updated position on the European Solidarity Corps](#) (2018); [Policy Paper on Citizenship Education](#) (2013); [Policy Paper on youth work](#) (2014)

²⁷ See European Youth Forum, [Policy Paper on Citizenship Education](#) (2013)

BEYOND RECOVERY

04-SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVES TO BUILD BACK BETTER

FACTS

COVID-19 is demonstrating all too well that unequal and unsustainable societies go hand-in-hand with increasing health issues, fragile economies and delicate democracies. As the world starts to recover from the pandemic, the social, economic and environmental impacts of the bigger crisis that we are facing has become clearer. COVID-19 has triggered a more profound reflection on the way our society is structured and works, and the values it promotes.

By magnifying inequalities, the health crisis has exposed the damage caused by years of austerity,

excessive privatisation, and underfunding of public services; it has shed light on the shortcomings of our often celebrated European social model; and it has exemplified how unequal our society is in accessing basic needs such as healthcare, education, housing, or food.

Environmentally, this crisis has shown the extent to which our current lifestyle pollutes the environment. While climate change as such hasn't stopped and benefits are only temporary, since the lockdown measures have been in place CO₂ emissions and air pollution have con-

sistently decreased,²⁸ and we have witnessed more biodiversity, and a generally healthier planet. In turn, this has resulted in a decrease in health conditions linked to air pollution exposure. At the same time, since individuals with pre-existing conditions seem to be more vulnerable to COVID-19,²⁹ chronic air pollution has indirectly put an additional strain on healthcare systems. Additionally, temporary environmental gains have come at a cost, as the lockdown resulted in millions of jobs being lost. These tradeoffs once more show the unsustainability of our current systems. More than anything, this crisis has provided a glimpse into what a low-carbon future may look like with a society that respects rather than exploits our natural environment. As major fiscal stimulus and rescue packages will have to be introduced to manage the upcoming recession, governments must avoid repeating past mistakes, and prioritise long-term human wellbeing and invest in ecological stability.

From an economic standpoint, early projections show that the recession that we are about to face will be comparable in scale to the 2008 financial and economic crisis, if not larger.³⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing the failures of our current economic systems. Already before the outbreak, the world had been facing multiple crises – the climate crisis, rising inequality, and increasing public mistrust in political leaders and democratic processes.

As young people, we, and the most marginalised among us in particular, are often at the frontline of the impacts of unsustainable models.

28 See <https://energyandcleanair.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CREA-Europe-COVID-impacts.pdf>

29 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/04/is-air-pollution-making-the-coronavirus-pandemic-even-more-deadly>

30 See <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/> and <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-trade/coronavirus-downturn-will-be-worse-than-2008-wto-says-idUSKBN21C3Bo>

FIGURES

Eurofound:

- Almost 40% of people in Europe report their financial situation as worse than before the pandemic – double the numbers reported in surveys before the crisis. Close to half are indicating their households cannot make ends meet.

Forbes:

- While many people are struggling, 25 of the wealthiest people on Forbes' list of the world's billionaires have gained \$255 billion during 2 months of lockdown

World Health Organisation:

- 4.2 million deaths every year as a result of exposure to ambient (outdoor) air pollution; and 91% of the world's population lives in places where air quality exceeds WHO guideline limits.

Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air:

- Lockdown measures have led to an approximately 40% reduction in average level of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) pollution and 10% reduction in average level of particulate matter pollution in April, resulting in 11,000 avoided deaths from air pollution.

ILO:

- The equivalent of 305 million full-time jobs were lost worldwide in Q2 of 2020.

ILO:

- Following the 2008 crisis, around 16% of total fiscal stimulus spending went into green measures and investments - not nearly enough to implement a green transformation.

European Commission - Spring Economic Forecast:

- The EU will face a record downturn in economic growth with a 7.4% reduction in GDP for 2020.

Our higher vulnerability today - from the gaps in employment and social policies, to the threats of climate change - means that we have a greater stake in the future. Responses to the pandemic risk greatly exacerbating these crises if we do not challenge root causes: an unsustainable economic system putting growth and profit over people and planet. It is vital that our responses do not seek simply to go back to the status quo and "relaunch" GDP growth, reducing market regulations for the sake of "flexibility" and imposing austerity measures to curtail public debt. Instead of rebuilding a broken system, we must consider the policies required to build back better so that our economy delivers social and ecological wellbeing.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sustainable development concerns everyone, but young people can play a unique role in ensuring that we build back a better Europe, where economic sustainability, human and ecological well being, and equality of opportunity are at the centre. We not only demand to participate in the decisions shaping our own future, but we want to drive these decisions and lead social change for future generations as much as for ours. To achieve this, we call for the following policy measures:³¹

For the emergency response:

- Put the most vulnerable and affected first: Deal with the pandemic and its immediate social and economic consequences to protect the most vulnerable who are paying the highest price in this crisis.
- No bailouts for polluters: Focus bailouts on socially and environmentally sustainable companies and attach environmental conditionality to bailouts of high carbon industries or buy them up and turn them into "green companies".

For the medium term recovery:

- Uphold the commitment to sustainable development: As billions of euros at EU and national level are being invested in the recovery, these resources shouldn't be used to fund any economic activity that is not in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement, and the "do no harm" principle enshrined in the EU Green Deal.
- A coherent approach for a green and fair recovery: degrow and divest from economic sectors that do not contribute to ecological and wellbeing goals; invest in those that do; facilitate a just transition for all that creates jobs in and reskills for sectors positively contributing to the environment and wellbeing of our societies.
- Do not leave essential public services to market forces: Strengthen the role of the public sector, to ensure that essential services such as healthcare are funded and accessible to everyone, so that society is better prepared to handle the next crisis.
- A new European economic governance: The economic governance review and the Stability and Growth Pact must exempt climate friendly public investments as part of corona recovery from deficit calculations; and replace gross domestic product (GDP) targets with wellbeing indicators and link to climate ambitions and the SDGs.

For long-term change:

- Redistribute wealth: End austerity and build a system that tackles inequality, and invests in human wellbeing and protection of the natural environment that sustains us. Implement measures that ensure a sustainable and socially just allocation of profits, including by reforming taxation to clamp down on tax avoidance and tax evasion; and tax digital technology companies as well as high polluters to raise funds for stronger, reformed welfare systems.
- Invest in a new economy by supporting businesses that put sustainability at their core and ensuring the right policy conditions for alternative, sustainable economic models that prioritise human and planetary wellbeing. Invest in skills related to climate adaptability and mitigation, as well as sustainable consumption and production, and support youth organisations and recognise the role they can play as non-formal educators in achieving these aims.
- Provide green infrastructure and energy: Place further restrictions on unsustainable practices, for example through a ban on coal and phasing out of fossil fuels, and ensure access to renewable energy and environmentally friendly means of transportation. Ensure a just transition through education, relocation and retirement options for those most affected by a transformation to a low-carbon, circular economy, and secure adequate funding.
- New goals: Adopt alternative measures of progress based on the real wellbeing of people and the planet to replace GDP as our yardstick of progress.

³¹ These recommendations are based on the European Youth Forum's Policy Papers on [Sustainable Development](#) (2018) and the [Future of Work](#) (2019); and the [Youth Progress Index](#) (2017).

WHAT ARE YOUTH ORGANISATIONS DOING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

#SEPARATEDBUTUNITED

Since the onset of the pandemic, young people and youth organisations have been at the forefront of the response. While COVID-19 and lockdown measures challenge our work, as well as the financial stability of many youth organisations, we have adapted to this new reality, re-organised our engagement, and led solidarity actions in our local communities.

The European Youth Forum's strong network of youth organisations has always worked to empower young people to be catalysts for positive change. In times of adversity, this network is more important than ever: we're separated but still very much united. The European Youth Forum is collecting information on the actions taken by youth organisations across Europe to provide a positive contribution to society in this crisis. The following are only some examples of the countless projects and initiatives led by young people and youth organisations during this pandemic.

We reached out to the most vulnerable and supported them through this crisis

- The Erasmus Student Network released a motivational video to reassure the international students in these difficult times. You can watch the video on [Facebook](#) or [Youtube](#).
- Many National Scout Organisations have taken concrete steps to organise community support and offer help to vulnerable people. A list of the activities can be found [here](#).
- The Big 6 Youth Organisations (YMCA, YWCA, WOSM, WAGGGS, IFRC, The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award) put together [six toolkits](#) to support local communities during the pandemic.
- The National Youth Council of Austria collected useful information concerning COVID-19 and how to access various support services, and made it available [online](#).
- The British Youth Council is part of the [#YouthWorkSupport](#) initiative, developed to provide a single platform for youth workers and those working with young people to access information, advice, guidance, support and tools. A massive collaborative effort to support the youth sector to meet the challenges young people will face over the coming weeks and months due to COVID-19..

We organised online activities & webinars to foster engagement and activism

- Youth for Exchange and Understanding organised a webinar titled "Digital tools we (don't) love and use!", to familiarise young people and organisations with different online and digital tools, to be used for youth work.

- The National Youth Council of Ireland organised ["The Solidarity Conversations"](#), a series of training sessions, to discuss COVID-19 and what it means for youth work; and provide a space for youth practitioners and youth workers to share, question, reflect and connect online.

- The European Youth Forum and many of our Member Organisations organised online activities and panel discussions in the context of the European Youth Event. From youth participation to youth work; from mobility to youth and women's rights, youth organisations have led the discussion and actions on many key issues in these uncertain times.

We did research on the impact of COVID-19 on youth and human rights

- The Erasmus Student Network published a [research report](#) on the impact of covid-19 on student exchanges in Europe, building on a survey that involved around 22,000 international students and trainees in Europe.
- The European Student Union published a thorough [review](#) of the human rights violations during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The European Youth Forum joined forces with the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, International Labour Organization, United Nations Human Rights Office, UN Major Group on Children and Youth, and AIESEC, to develop [a survey](#) aimed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on youth rights, bring youth voices to the forefront of action and policy responses.

And so [much more](#)

