**Putting Youth at the Center of COVID-19 Recovery**

# Introduction from the Alliance for International Youth Development

While the entire world is facing unparalleled disruption, adolescents and young adults are likely to bear the brunt of the global economic and social crises unleashed by the coronavirus. Addressing these crises cannot wait until after the virus has receded. And young people themselves should be at the center of pandemic recovery plans. They are not just victims of these interlocking crises. They can lead the response, effectively and cost-effectively, and contribute to mitigating the long-term health, economic, and social costs that their generation may experience most profoundly.

In July 2020, the Alliance for International Youth Development (AIYD) was asked by USAID to provide insights for its internal deliberations regarding recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The contents of this document summarize contributions from AIYD members. To learn more about AIYD, please go to [www.theyouthalliance.org](http://www.theyouthalliance.org) or contact us at info@theyouthalliance.org. Further information about the role of youth in the coronavirus can be found in [*Youth or Consequences*](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/08/youth-or-consequences-put-youth-at-the-center-of-covid-19-recovery/)*,* a Brookings Institution article by AIYD Leadership: Kristin Lord, Susan Reichle, and Patrick Fine.

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## 1. Landscape

*Major trends accelerated by COVID-19 that are shaping the development and humanitarian landscape and how USAID can prepare for these possible futures in priorities and approaches.*

**EDUCATION**

* **Youth Learning Losses:**
	+ The COVID-19 pandemic has created the most significant disruption to education in history, and prolonged school closures could further entrench inequalities in access to learning.
	+ Temporary closures in more than 180 countries have kept nearly 1.6 billion students out of school[[1]](#footnote-1), further complicating global efforts to reduce learning poverty[[2]](#footnote-2).
* **Digital skills, digital access –** The skills and resources to navigate a digital world have become a more significant barrier for the inclusion of marginalized and previously excluded groups. Because students lack internet, stable electricity and devices, a widening digital divide is exacerbating inequity in education.
	+ The need for skill-building includes not only learners and future members of the workforce but also distance learning pedagogy for educators.
* I**ncreased demand for accelerated education and alternative learning pathways:**
	+ As school closures continue, children and youth are leaving the general education system and opting out of technical and vocational education.
	+ Once the pandemic subsides, there will be increased demand for over-age learners to return into the system, including a large number of out-of-school youth. More than ever before, countries will need to establish and institutionalize accelerated learning approaches and pathways for children and youth to return to school.
	+ Governments and donor partners will need to seek innovative family- and community-based solutions to attract youth back into completing their education.

**WORKFORCE AND ECONOMY**

* **Disruptions to the world of work affect youth and particularly young women:** Shifts to the world of work had been underway, which is accelerating digitization and shifting the skills needed to digital skills and transferable soft skills.
	+ There has been an uptick in Freelance Work during COVID-19, particularly online freelance and gig work.
	+ Youth need soft skills like adaptability, resilience, interdisciplinarity, entrepreneurial thinking and critical thinking to navigate this age of disruption.
	+ The pandemic creates new economic classes creating economic winners and losers and is on track to deepen entrenched inequalities:
		- Working from home can benefit highly skilled employees but depress others' wages and make it hard to organize. Many low skilled workers face health risks to continue earning an income.
		- Women have long faced dual responsibilities of caring for family members and their work – this affects their careers and earning potential, particularly as childcare services remain closed for public health.
* **Youth Livelihoods & Resilience**: In the face of lockdown and economic slow-down, many people are drawing from their savings, impacting the liquidity of youth savings groups that they would otherwise invest in their small businesses and are resources that will soon tap out.
* **Thousands of small and medium-sized businesses are at risk –** this creates uncertainty for employees of SMEs and hinders innovation that addresses the challenge of this time.
	+ Supply chains are disrupted with inter- and intra-national borders being closed, businesses in lockdown, and workers and customers staying at home. This will have several impacts:
		- Youth seeking formal employment may have a more challenging time finding wage-based jobs.
		- Youth who are looking for work-based learning opportunities may experience greater difficulty in being paired with an employer.
		- It exacerbates issues that youth in informal employment already have accessing markets.
		- Workforce development institutions will have to adapt their curriculum to the significant shifts in the economy, with a focus on building skills in self-employment/ entrepreneurship.

**MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION**

* **Mis/disinformation infiltrates information related to the pandemic**:
	+ Pandemic misinformation exacerbates public health impacts.
	+ Hate speech and stereotyped disinformation have massive implications for social cohesion and democracy.
* **Risk of youth becoming radicalized online**: With over 2.6 billion people on Facebook, the population of vulnerable, isolated, and unprepared for online manipulation is vast.
	+ Giving youth the tools to recognize misinformation, disinformation and emotional manipulations is a documented way to build resilience to this kind of manipulation.
* **Social media and information overload:**
	+ It affects perceptions and understanding (by keeping people in a filter bubble of content based on their "likes" and shares), as well as their mental and physical health.
	+ Social media algorithms have even more power, with many people relying on digital information. Social media companies need to work at local, regional and global levels to improve the impact of algorithms, including when it comes to mis/disinformation and volatile/hateful content and information.

**PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT**

* **Youth Resilience and Psycho-Social Impacts:** Young people who are emerging into independence and adulthood are likely to feel various levels of immediate and lasting traumas as a result of the pandemic: economic instability, food insecurity, loss of education and the physical and emotional supports that come from the school and after-school settings, physical isolation from their peers.[[3]](#footnote-3) Adding to the crisis, there have also been documented increases in child marriage and GBV.[[4]](#footnote-4) Adverse mental health outcomes impact short-term learning gains and long-term ability to participate in the education system or seek gainful employment.

**ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS TO PREPARE FOR THESE POSSIBLE FUTURES**

* Remove barriers to deepen collaboration across sectors and to collaboratively design solicitations in a way that more profoundly reflects local priorities.
* Focus on actions that address barriers to entry.
* Streamline information gathering for NGOs

## 2. Policy

*Recommendations for changes in USAID policy and priorities, considering the risks and opportunities presented by a world reshaped by COVID-19.*

* **Education**: Recognizing that the pandemic has forced school systems into virtual learning and that some of these changes will be here to stay, work with ministries of education in developing long term plans for distance and blended learning.
* **Accelerated or Alternative Education Systems**: More than ever, support Governments' policies around flexible entry and transition pathways for out-of-school youth or overage learners into accelerated education systems to help them catch up with their education. Emulate programs developed in crisis environments to help design policies in this regard.
* **Data:** Invest in collecting & disseminating information on the impact of the pandemic on youth.
* **Social Safety Nets:** Integrate cash- and food-based assistance to youth and families into USAID's project portfolio, especially in youth-focused programs related to economic growth, livelihoods and employment.
* **Assistance to National and Sub-National Government Entities:** Offer technical assistance to governments on pandemic-related data, policies, and programming.
* **Resilience:** The pandemic has only highlighted the importance of USAID's Resilience Policy, which should be a continued focus for the Agency, especially when it comes to youth programming.
* **Youth Voice:** elevate youth voice in local, regional and national discussions to identify policies and programs relevant to the youth situation.

## 3. Program

*Below are recommendations on program adaptation in light of the pandemic.*

* **Prioritize interventions to support youth and marginalized groups to navigate this difficult period**
	+ Focus on strengthening local, cross-sectoral systems in tandem with directly providing interventions. Whenever possible, support local, youth-led groups to provide direct responses.
	+ Support learning and knowledge-creation to understand what kind of agility/innovation is needed to address COVID-19 impacts and how USAID and implementers can be agile/innovative. Prioritize agile interventions led by youth, capitalizing on current youth-led efforts to address the COVID-19 effects. Explore mechanisms to scale existing youth-led efforts for a more significant impact.
	+ Prioritize skill-building for agility and resilience to support youth to overcome the difficulties they face and be leaders who contribute to development outcomes.

**EDUCATION**

* **Offer multiple channels for delivering distance learning.** Youth in different contexts need to be able to access education across a spectrum.
* **Strengthen accelerated education programs** and institutionalize them at the national and local levels to offer continuous pathways for learning for those who have dropped out of the system during the pandemic.
* **Address the digital divide:** We need to take steps to lessen the digital gap and increase access to devices and affordable connectivity for the most vulnerable youth populations.
* **Address enrollment issues in higher education:** Schools that rely on school fees are being forced to let go of teachers and staff or even close due to the considerable drop in school fees.
* **Pay specific attention to adolescent girls and young women, and the added impact on them:**
	+ **Safeguard vital services:** Make schools access points for psychosocial support and food distribution, work across sectors to ensure alternative social services and deliver psychosocial support by phone call, text and radio.
	+ **Leverage teachers and communities:** Work closely with teachers and communities to ensure inclusive methods of distance learning are adopted and call for continued investments in girls' education.
	+ **Adopt appropriate distance learning practices**: In contexts where virtual classes are less accessible, consider low-tech and gender-responsive approaches.
	+ **Consider the gender digital divide:** In contexts where digital solutions to distance learning and the internet are accessible, ensure that girls are trained with the necessary digital skills.
	+ **Ensure return to school:** Provide flexible learning approaches so that girls are not deterred from returning to school when they re-open.

**EMPLOYMENT**

* **Invest in learning and development of career support for emerging opportunities in the 'future of work.'**
	+ Prioritize digital skills for all children and youth; and improving infrastructure for affordable digital access.
	+ Explore innovative models to leverage virtual tools for cross-cultural youth learning, collaboration and collective leadership.
	+ Help youth to navigate changes in the world of work, including skills for professional freelance and gig work alongside policy to expand access to social supports for freelancers.
		- Support career development that incorporates the growing gig economy, self-employment and entrepreneurship.
		- Directly support youth to be self-employed within a career track.
		- Support youth to reskill to switch sectors, jobs and/or work globally.
* **Youth Self-Employment and MSME Recovery:** Offer support to struggling MSMEs that offer a source of employment for youth.
* **Youth-Inclusive Value Chain Support:** Identify & address disruptions in value chains that impact youth directly.
* **Youth livelihoods:** Provide cash- and food-based assistance to youth and their families who need temporary help to weather this crisis.

**ENGAGEMENT**

* Support **young leaders and young growth entrepreneurs:**
	+ Prioritize interventions to support youth leadership development. Strengthen their networks.
	+ Improve access to funding for young leaders and entrepreneurs.
	+ Support young entrepreneurs to connect into more extensive supply chains, including global markets
* **Youth Engagement in Policy Dialogue regarding the Pandemic Response:** Youth should be offered avenues to exchange information with communities and governments about how the pandemic has affected them and potential solutions.

## 4. Operations

*Recommendations on USAID's operational structure to support their priorities and allow them to respond effectively to humanitarian and development needs.*

**Embed technical support into government ministries:** Embedding experts in departments of education with expertise in functional areas such as remote learning and accelerated learning can support short and long term strategies as countries recover.

* Elevate USAID's Young Professionals in USAID Missions
* Expand Open Source Local Development.

## 5. Budget

*Recommendations on streamlining and flexibility in USAID's appropriated resources.*

* **Flexibility in Award Mechanisms:** Flexible award mechanisms between USAID and its implementing partners will allow programs to adapt and respond to changing circumstances, respond to requests by government and other stakeholders as they arise, and pivot based on new data and evidence that is generated over time.
* **Investment in Data, including Remote Monitoring & Evaluation:** Activity budgets should allocate sufficient resources in the collection of data to inform appropriate responses to the pandemic.
* **Partner with Combatant Commands:** Capitalizing on Africom's engagement and USAID's relationships, hosting a joint webinar seeking input for new investments on the continent, including the private sector, could be a highly impactful initiative.

## 6. Human Resources

*Recommendations on improvements to the HR process in light of COVID-19.*

* Encourage open and flexible communication between USAID staff and implementers.
* Require Youth Development 101 Training for all USAID Staff.

## 7. Conclusion

The above examples of emerging trends and suggested solutions highlight how essential it is to engage youth in the COVID-19 response. To tackle the effects of the pandemic, not only as a public-health crisis but cross-sectorally, we must both look out for and involve youth when preparing our programming. The most effective way to do so is to focus our attention on the **education, employment, and engagement of youth** to ensure we do not face a "lost generation" as the result of this pandemic.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We have already seen inspiring examples of youth taking the initiative to better their communities: producing masks, volunteering to deliver food, helping neighbors, developing new treatments for disease. Prioritizing them across sectors in the post-pandemic recovery effort will draw new stakeholders into the endeavor and invest in leaders of the future. Failure to engage youth will not only slow recovery but also undermine the stability and prosperity of societies worldwide.

1. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/learning-poverty> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Internal EDC survey conducted among education project participants in Zambia, Mali, Liberia, DRC, Rwanda, and Honduras. Data can be made available upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/08/youth-or-consequences-put-youth-at-the-center-of-covid-19-recovery/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)