



COVID One Year In: Hearing from Young People, Grantee Partner Organisations, and Programme Officers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marginalised young people around the world—especially girls—continue to reel from the COVID-19 pandemic. One year into the crisis, EMpower wanted to hear first-hand from young people and our grantee partners, the local organisations in emerging market countries that work with them, about the impact of the crisis on their lives. So we undertook global surveys of our grantee partners and young people and separate participatory research in India to: ensure our grantmaking is responsive, and share the realities and on-the-ground recommendations of young people and local organisations with other funders, supporters, and wider audiences. We also sought feedback from our own program officers, who have deep knowledge of their regions, countries, and grantee partners, as well as a strong understanding of global trends in philanthropy and youth development.

As part of our inquiry, we surveyed 38 young people (ages 10–29) in 10 countries about how COVID-19 has affected them and what they most need moving forward. In addition to written responses, young people provided photos, videos, and drawings. And we surveyed 26 grantee partner organisations from 13 countries to find out how the pandemic has affected their work, how they are adapting, and how we and other funders could best support them.

In India, we trained girls to conduct participatory action research using an innovative approach that puts the power of research in the hands of girls so their insights are at the center. We engaged and trained 25 girl leaders from cities across India to interview 150 of their peers (ages 10–24) about how the pandemic has affected them and their families. We released a separate report “COVID In Her Voice” to share these findings.

Through this process, we aim to amplify the voices and perspectives of young people and the expertise of local organisations. This learning will inform our own work, and we hope that other funders and leaders in the field will find it similarly useful.

“We are just working and working in the house. No time to study... My parents don’t want me to attend meetings again and I am losing my friends.”

–Female, age 16, Ghana



What We Learned About Young People

Many of the negative impacts of the pandemic are common across cultures and countries. The crisis has exacerbated inequities, especially for the most marginalised, including: girls, indigenous communities, and very young adolescents. Restrictions on young people's mobility, their confinement with their family, and not being able to access school or work opportunities, or spend time with friends, deeply affects them. Many report mental health distress and emotional trauma. They are disillusioned about the future and are looking for a sense of purpose in their lives. Young people experience violence at home and in their communities.

The closing of schools and shift to online education has widened disparities in who can access learning. The digital divide is clear and growing: Those with less access to mobile devices and the internet, those with language barriers, and those with competing pressures on their time are faring worse. Many young people lack the skills or technology/equipment to navigate digital learning. Additionally, the lockdowns have compounded the chores, housework, and caretaking girls must do, often at the expense of their education and learning.

Young people have lost work opportunities or have been unable to make the transition from school to work. They are being forced to take undesired, informal, and unsafe jobs—if they can find work at all. Marginalised and low-income young people now have to compete against more experienced adults and those with more resources who can accept unpaid internships.

There are some positive aspects of the pandemic: some young people have been able to make healthy lifestyle changes (such as washing their hands), are learning new skills, and taking on leadership roles at home and in their communities in ways they may not have been able to before. However, overall the crisis has intensified needs and traumas among young people and in communities, and they will need ongoing support to repair the damage that COVID-19 has done and continues to do.

The Top 5 needs young people cite:



Mental health care so they can process their emotions and feel heard



Improved access to schools, including online learning (particularly for girls)



Income generation and vocational training for emerging work opportunities



Financial resources to meet their basic needs, such as food



COVID-19 prevention and sexual and reproductive health supplies

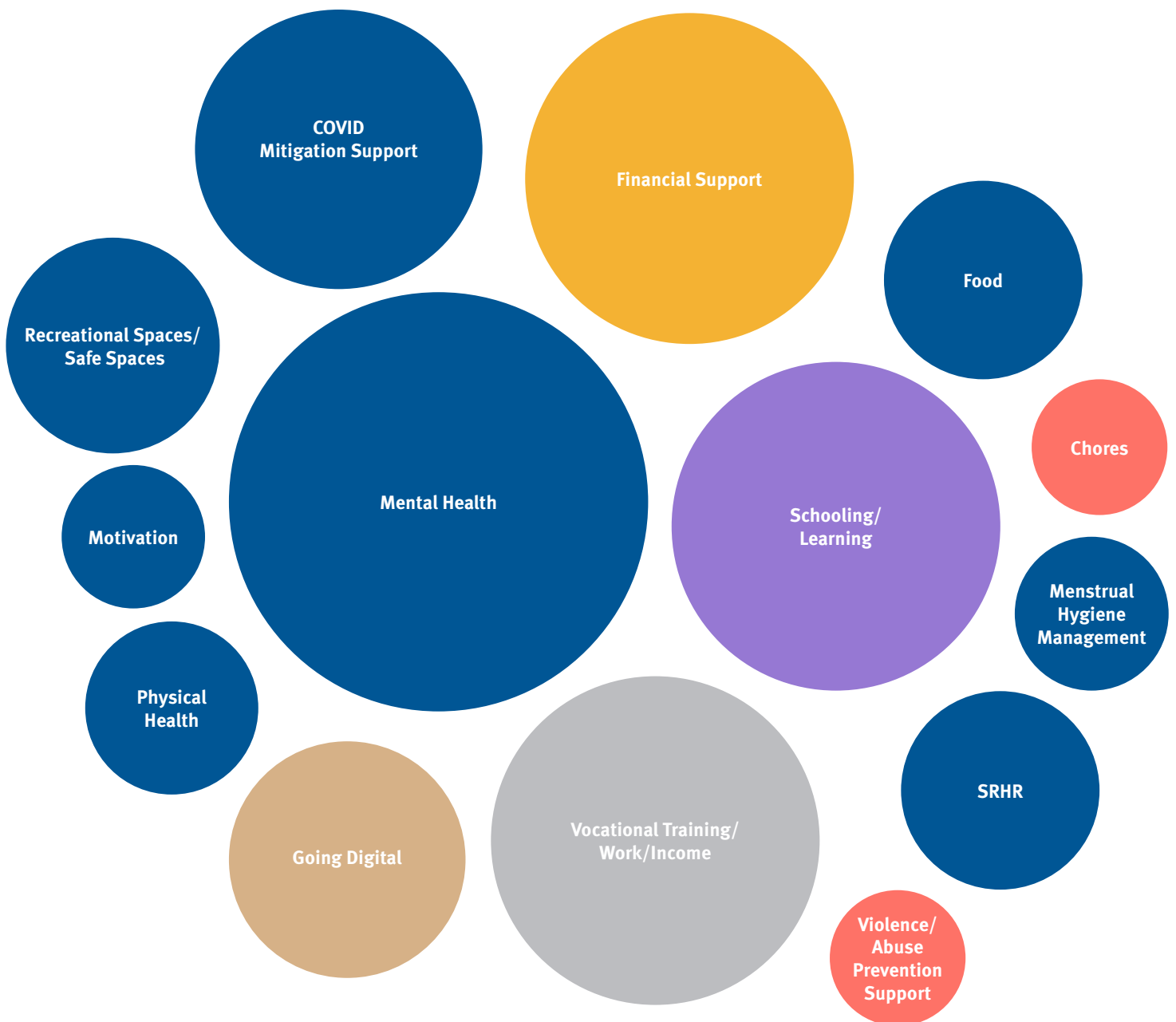
“I feel depressed and helpless, not wanting to do anything. I am constantly worried and scared like never before.”

–Female, age 16, India

Our grantee partners report widespread negative impacts on their communities, including: deepening poverty, food insecurity, and gender inequity. Verbal and physical violence and conflict have risen within families because of the stresses of sharing small spaces for long periods of time.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is quickly reversing hard-won rights, particularly for girls. Their access to safe spaces, support services, and sexual and reproductive health information and care has been severely curtailed in many places. Our grantee partners in India note increases in early and forced marriages of girls as young as 12.

Young People’s Reported Needs*

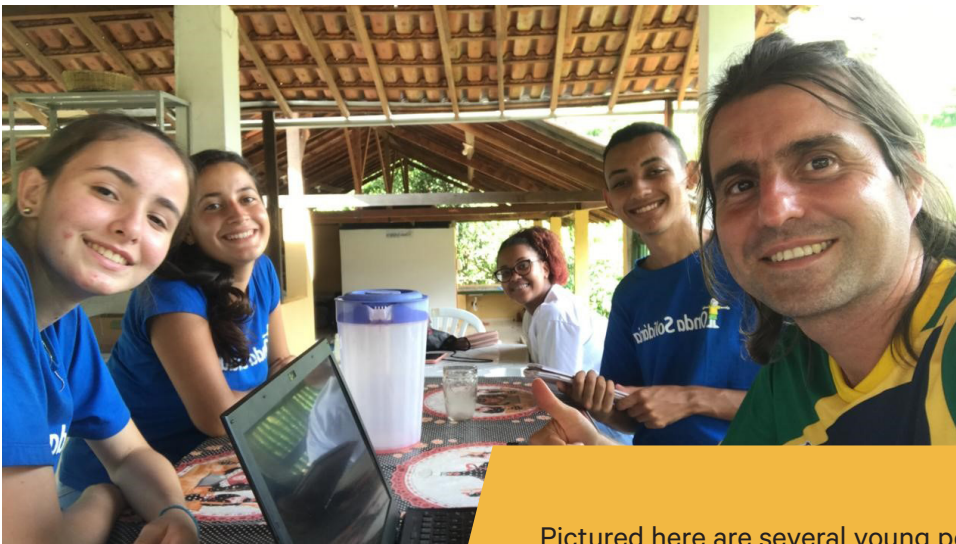


*Bubble sizes correspond with how many times the need was cited.

What We Learned About Grantee Partners

In light of these profound and myriad challenges, our partners have had to quickly pivot and adapt their programmes to meet this new reality. Many quickly shifted their programming online, making efforts to help bridge the digital divide for young people who lack access to phones, computers, or the internet. When and where restrictions have eased, they have moved the work outdoors, working with young people in smaller, socially-distanced groups. Many are expanding their work to meet the needs of young people in a more integrated way and working more closely with families and communities. Some are meeting basic needs—including food, water, and personal protective equipment—to ensure their survival. Mental health has emerged as a key need for young people and their families, but also for the staff at grantee partner organisations.

The pandemic has changed how our grantee partners work in dramatic ways. They are responding creatively and adapting on a daily basis, but they need more support to continue their critical work supporting young people, their families, and communities. The pandemic is likely to continue in much of the world for some time. Moreover, it is not the only crisis young people and the organisations that serve them will face and has only compounded the challenges they will confront. Looking forward, marginalised young people are at risk of falling further behind. We have to focus on mitigating the damage, so that we do not lose more ground on progress made—in advancing young people's human rights, health, education, and livelihoods—over the last few decades.



Pictured here are several young people who participated in the global survey from EMpower's Brazilian grantee partner, Onda Solidaria. We solicited youth voices regarding the effects of COVID-19 because we believe young people are best positioned to report on their needs and recommend solutions.

Recommendations

How Local Organisations Can Best Support Young People

Collaboration	Listen to young people and hear from them directly about what they are facing and need. Work with them to come up with solutions, both in the short- and long- term.
Basic Needs	Ensure their basic needs (such as food, water, and sanitation) are met.
Psychosocial Support	Provide and invest in much needed psychosocial support for young people, who are struggling with emotional trauma.
School	Make intentional and concerted efforts to keep girls in school, which has benefits far beyond their education.
Outreach	Boost efforts to keep very young adolescents and other harder-to-reach young people engaged in programmes, they shouldn't be left behind.
Technology	Provide marginalised young people with the necessary technology and internet access to fully participate in online learning.
In-person Programmes	Bring back in-person programmes with appropriate safety measures when possible.
Vocational Training	Support relevant vocational training—especially related to the digital economy—so that young people can keep up with the new job market, which can include work from home options, part-time or flexible work, and solopreneur opportunities for young people.
COVID Prevention	Provide supplies and community trainings for COVID prevention.
Health	Make accessible sexual and reproductive health information and services (especially menstrual hygiene products and contraceptives).
Gender Equity	Work with communities to build informed perspectives on gender equity that value girls, their decisions, and choices.
Safe Spaces	Develop safe and violence-free spaces for girls and young women.
Recreation	Provide recreational spaces for young people to de-stress and exercise.

How EMpower and Other Foundations Can Best Support Local Organisations

Flexible Funding	Increase flexible funding so that local organisations can respond and adapt to new realities and prioritise what they need most.
Fundraising Support	Help them fundraise, assist them in finding new donors and partners, and fund technology innovations.
Learning Exchanges	Support learning exchanges so organisations can reflect on and share what has and hasn't worked over the past year.
Mental Health Support For Staff	Invest in mental health care for staff at local youth-focused organisations, who are overwhelmed and experiencing burnout.
Integrated, Ecological Approaches	Support an integrated, ecological approach so that organisations can provide more holistic programming and better meet the emerging and interconnected needs of young people.
Digital Divide	Bridge the digital divide: assist organisations and build skills so they can continue to shift their programmes to virtual formats.
Organizational Strengthening	Invest in organisational and staff capacity strengthening.
Safe Spaces	Create safe spaces in communities (beyond schools and community centers) for organisations to run their programmes, and which will serve as hubs where young people's needs can be met.

How EMpower Will Use These Findings

In response to the recommendations and asks voiced by young people and the local organisations who participated in this research, EMpower commits to:

- Support these recommendations and address these needs, beginning with our spring 2021 grantmaking.
- Continue, and to the extent possible, increase unrestricted funding—offering our grantee partners more flexibility and multi-year support.
- Adapt and evolve our programming for at least the next two years, including grantmaking and co-learning, prioritising areas our grantee partners have identified.
- Share these recommendations and asks with other funders to amplify the voices of young people and local organisations in emerging market countries and to influence the broader philanthropic sector.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and thank all of the young people and staff at organisations around the world who contributed their time and thinking to this vital learning process. We are also extremely grateful for the dedication of EMpower staff who made it happen.

Alvaralice

Bahay Tuluyan

Brave

CREA

CYDA

East Bali Poverty Project

HK Unison

Khululeka

Kusi Kawsay

Mamelani

Medha

Melel Xojobal

NEWIG

NORSAAC

Onda Solidaria

Pamflet

Pléroma/Empujar

PNP

Pukllasunchis

Raoul Foundation

Roots of Health

SiKanda

Teach Unlimited Foundation

Teen's Key

Urbanet

VANGO

Waves For Change

“I always think that it will not be this way forever, this is a difficult time for us. Everything will be okay. So just stay safe, healthy, and believe that we can get through this time.”

–Female, age 21, Vietnam

EMpower supports and works closely with local, dedicated organisations in emerging market countries focused on solutions that integrate the voices and experiences of marginalised young people (ages 10-24).