Drivers of Recovery

Elevating the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda

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THE ISSUE

- Half of the world’s 1.2 billion youth (ages 15–24) live in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Youth in conflict-affected areas with high poverty rates face significant social, economic, and security challenges, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- When given increased access to vocational education and economic opportunities, youth can create jobs, have positive social impact, and reduce rates of violence and recruitment by extremist and criminal groups, leading to positive development and increased stability.
- President-elect Joe Biden has an opportunity to reinvigorate U.S. leadership on the youth, peace, and security agenda. An inclusive economic recovery from Covid-19 will require a combination of short- and long-term solutions to address youth-specific challenges.

Young people in developing countries have the potential to be drivers of economic growth, increased prosperity, and political and social change. As the youth population continues to increase globally (particularly those between the ages of 15 and 24 in developing countries), ensuring opportunities for a productive future is increasingly important. Securing young people’s greater access to healthcare, education, financial services, economic prospects, decisionmaking processes, and leadership and civic engagement opportunities is essential for countries to develop a productive labor force, maintain effective development efforts, and continue economic growth.

In an increasingly digital world, youth bring fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to long-standing and current problems, often deploying technological tools to disrupt yesterday’s stagnant strategies. Young people are leading Covid-19 response efforts in many communities and will be critical to both recovery efforts and future resilience.

While youth can be change agents, they are also vulnerable to external shocks, lack of economic opportunities, and conflict. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges faced by young people and limited their potential positive impact on development. It has worsened income inequalities and disproportionately affected marginalized groups such as low-income youth and women. Beyond economic barriers, youth in fragile contexts face threats of forced migration, human trafficking, and recruitment by violent extremist groups.
THE INTERNATIONAL YOUTH, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

International frameworks provide global standards and facilitate international collaboration. While not as developed as other international initiatives such as the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda (WPS), the International Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda (YPS) is a foundation upon which a more comprehensive strategic vision of the role of youth can be developed. In 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 to address the global youth population specifically in the context of peace and security. The commitment was reaffirmed in 2020 with Resolution 2535, which outlines five central pillars of action: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. These initiatives affirm that youth are both disproportionately impacted by conflict and are also key actors in building and sustaining peace. The YPS agenda proposes strategies the international community can use to enhance youth participation and partnerships in peacebuilding and community development, as well as to protect and prevent youth from becoming embroiled in violent conflicts and political instability.

The YPS agenda is supplemented by related international initiatives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD). The SDGs emphasize that “no one will be left behind,” and eight of its seventeen categories—zero hunger; quality education; gender equality; decent work and economic growth; reduced inequalities; climate action; peace, justice, and strong institutions; and partnerships and implementation—include a focus on addressing the needs of youth. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda supports the SDGs and outlines specific financial needs and requirements for development efforts, emphasizing that investing in youth is critical to achieving “inclusive, equitable and sustainable development for present and future generations.” Lastly, the UN Inter-agency Network on Youth Development focuses on leveraging the capabilities of UN entities to foster collaboration between youth and the international community, promote youth development, and facilitate youth community impact. The IANYD coordinates sub-working groups that specifically focus on youth participation, employment, the environment, peacebuilding, social media, youth policy, inclusive youth volunteering, and the development of a UN system-wide action plan on youth.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUTH POPULATIONS

As of January 7, 2021, the Covid-19 virus has infected over 87 million people and caused almost 2 million deaths globally; the associated health systems crisis has significantly disrupted economies, stalled global systems and trade, and markedly changed how societies function. The pandemic has disproportionately affected youth, women, people with disabilities, informal workers, low-income persons, migrants and displaced persons, and other marginalized groups. Although the overall Covid-19 fatality rate for young people is relatively low compared to other age groups, youth have experienced its significant repercussions on mental health and well-being, education, employment, and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless (as presented in the next section), youth have also become critical to providing innovative and effective response and recovery solutions for the pandemic.

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HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION

Marginalized groups in conflict-affected areas are less likely to have access to quality healthcare or accurate information regarding protocols for combating viral spread. Lack of access to healthcare, especially non-Covid-19–related treatments that students often received in school, can result in negative, reverberating effects such as decreased economic and educational opportunities. In addition, the pandemic has exposed the lack of development and investment not only in general healthcare but also in mental wellness resources, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Factors such as stress, social isolation, and disruptions in routine
and education have worsened the pandemic’s emotional and mental toll and have significantly increased rates of gender-based violence. Young people are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges, some of which can directly impact their future prospects.

Access to quality education is essential for young people’s prosperity, economic opportunities, security, and community impact. Many youth were already struggling to receive a quality education before the pandemic, and the lockdown policies—justifiable for public health reasons—have strained limited resources and resulted in many students being out of school, among other things. The consequences of poor access to quality education are significant: a recent study of 1,200 youth in Somalia revealed that those who had access to improved secondary education were half as likely to support political violence as those who did not.

Over 70 percent of youth have faced pandemic-related disruptions to their education, including those enrolled in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs. The effects are even more pronounced in remote or isolated communities; for instance, Kenya has closed most schools until January 2021. In June 2020, the World Bank estimated that the generation currently enrolled in educational programs will see a loss of $10 trillion in projected earnings due to Covid-19 and predicted that educational development goals in low- and middle-income countries will suffer setbacks. If achieving the fourth SDG, Quality Education, by 2030 was difficult before the pandemic, doing so might now be out of reach.

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As countries deploy technological and digital tools to create remote-learning solutions, many students face further reduced access because they lack the digital resources (such as access to the Internet and computing equipment) and physical spaces in which to learn effectively. Moreover, the practical skills learned in technical programs (for example, in healthcare or construction) are not easily imparted through remote learning. Only 18 percent of youth living in low-income countries have been able to study remotely, compared to 65 percent in high-income countries. Additionally, adjustment to remote learning’s new technology and tools, the lack of social interaction with peers and mentors, and the relocation of the classroom to the home have reduced learning quality. Stay-at-home protocols also place much of the teaching burden on ill-trained and stressed family members who need to monitor their children’s participation, progress, and focus—a problem even more significant for the many young people who do not have social support networks.

Lacking the protections and support offered by educational institutions, children are at increased risk of being forced into labor at a younger age and dropping out of their educational programs due to Covid-19–related income shocks. During the pandemic, children have been forced to work on cocoa plantations in West Africa, in mines in Kenya, and at tourist traps in Indonesia. Girls have higher dropout rates, increased domestic responsibilities, and a greater chance of being targets of gender-based violence. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that “at least 24 million students are projected to drop out of school due to COVID.”

Nevertheless, the pandemic presents an opportunity for the accelerated transformation of educational systems. About 130 governments worldwide have increased (arguably long-overdue) investment in “multi-platform remote learning,” efforts that are meant to be continued post-pandemic. When appropriately implemented, technology can be leveraged to make education more impactful, equitable, resilient, inclusive, and adaptable. In Nigeria, Nepal, and Jordan, radios are being used to provide young women with educational programming and ensure they return to school after the pandemic. As schools reopen, many governments and organizations in sub-Saharan Africa plan to continue using educational radio programming to reach more isolated communities and students.

Blended learning, which combines online and in-person teaching and learning strategies, could also be a way to keep students engaged. It allows teachers and students to actively track engagement and assignments, reduces costs of programming, and enables better communication, increased participation, and tailored learning possibilities. For example, during the pandemic, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) partnered with the Jamaican Ministry of
Education, Youth, and Information to create the Online and Blended Professional Development Initiative, which trained teachers in blended-learning strategies and tools in order to increase quality education for students in more remote or isolated areas. Post–Covid-19, blended learning can help minimize the learning divide and increase young people’s access to education opportunities and support networks. Continuing to invest in such enhanced and innovative educational systems is essential not only for economic development and security, but also for Covid-19 recovery efforts. Youth in fragile and conflict-affected areas will be particularly at risk of permanently dropping out of education and thus should be a key demographic to target.

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UNEMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
The global pandemic has had an immense impact on labor markets and entrepreneurship. In addition to limiting educational opportunities, Covid-19 has directly affected youth employment. In 2017 and 2018, the global youth unemployment rate was estimated to be 13 percent. During the pandemic, working youth have been among the first to be laid off, and unemployment rates among youth remain higher than for older age groups. Additionally, the pandemic has disproportionately affected the sectors in which youth predominately work, such as services, tourism, information and communication, transportation, manufacturing, and the informal sector. These sectors are less able to adapt to new platforms and digital markets. In addition, about 75 percent of all youth are employed in the informal sector or other non-standard forms of employment, such as seasonal and part-time jobs, and generally have poor job security, low wages, and limited opportunities for on-the-job learning or career advancement. This trend is particularly pronounced in fragile states: Mercy Corps estimates that 95 percent of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are employed in the informal sector and therefore do not have any legal or social protections in case of unemployment. In the first month of the pandemic, income among these young Africans decreased by 81 percent.

Covid-19 has also significantly impacted youth-led businesses and entrepreneurship. More than 70 percent of startups globally have had to terminate employee contracts, reduce operations and wages, or shift business goals to adapt to the pandemic. In the Asia-Pacific region, more than 86 percent of young entrepreneurs have reported that the pandemic and related health measures have negatively impacted their businesses, resulting in economic downturns, slowdowns, or even a complete cessation of activity. Reasons include reduced customer demand, disruptions in global and regional supply chains, limited government assistance, and decreased investment.

On the other hand, the pandemic has incentivized finding digital solutions, including moving marketplaces and economic activity online. This digital transition presents both a challenge in closing the digital divide (i.e., the proportion of people without access to digital tools, Internet, and mobile networks or who are not digitally literate) and an opportunity to create economies and businesses that will be more resilient in the face of future crises. For example, in Cambodia, the youth-led digital platform SEPAK has continued to support local businesses by providing an online platform to sell products at ethical prices, while also pivoting parts of production to sell and distribute masks. Meanwhile, Nigerian youth leader and entrepreneur Ifedayo Durosinmi Etti, who has launched digital tools and social media campaigns to address rising youth unemployment and programs exploring how to empower youth entrepreneurs, established the Covid-19 Innovation Challenge to help startups create digital and technology solutions for the pandemic.
RECRUITMENT AND FORCED RECRUITMENT BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS

Youth in fragile and conflict-affected areas are too often automatically assumed to be at risk of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist organizations (VEOs). While this is not universally true, it is worth analyzing how Covid-19 has increased this risk alongside some of the other challenges facing youth. With schools and training programs closing, cultural and recreational activities being suspended, and employment opportunities diminishing, some young people may be more susceptible to online radicalization or forced recruitment by extremist groups or gangs. When various social networks and safety nets are suddenly lost, violent groups can provide people a sense of community and purpose. Loss of education and job opportunities do not automatically translate to violent extremism or radicalization of youth, but can be contributing factors to increased antipathy toward national governments, particularly in fragile states.

The pandemic has led to increased disinformation and misinformation campaigns that spread violent rhetoric and threaten social cohesion, coupled with an “infodemic” that makes it more difficult to find reliable information about health. Meanwhile, fragile states have also seen a decrease in community policing, which no longer serves as an effective tool for countering violent and radical activities. In areas where national or local governments have failed to provide for their citizens, VEOs and criminal groups have been able to gain ground and expand control despite increased obstacles to illicit activities (for example, Covid-19 response measures stalling drug trafficking in Central America’s Northern Triangle). Moreover, the little foreign aid that had been aimed at addressing violent extremism is now being rerouted to health and pandemic relief efforts.

Afghanistan presents one example of an environment in which violent groups can easily recruit youth. The country has a history of using child soldiers, ranks ninth in the 2020 Fragile States Index, 90 percent of its population lives under the poverty line, and the central government is weak. Covid-19 has likely contributed to the increased radicalization of youth by straining existing governance systems and creating increased opportunities for corruption and abuse by security forces (such as police violently enforcing Covid-19 response and quarantine measures)—common factors associated with VEO recruitment.

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUNG WOMEN

Young women have disproportionately felt the negative effects of Covid-19. The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges to women’s economic empowerment and the sustainability of women-owned businesses. Young women traditionally face greater barriers to economic empowerment than young men, including less access to financial, educational, and political networking opportunities and greater societal constraints. Covid-19 both impacted industries and sectors where young women predominantly work and limited their educational opportunities. During the pandemic, women and young women have faced losses in income, increases in unpaid domestic work, and increases in other obstacles to economic participation and prosperity, including lack of childcare, limited access to general healthcare, and rising gender-based violence.

Women’s unemployment rates during Covid-19 have been higher than for men; as of July 2020, women represented 54 percent of all global unemployment even though they constitute only 39 percent of the global workforce. Additionally, preexisting gender divides in poverty, pay, and digital and financial inclusion have worsened during the pandemic.

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DRIVERS OF COVID-19 RECOVERY EFFORTS

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered global approaches to development and governance. In particular, the pandemic has reshaped social interaction and the use of digital tools
and platforms, providing opportunities for people to shift elements of their lives and jobs online. Governments now see potential in introducing widespread technology to support healthcare, education, and communication systems across populated and isolated regions. For example, countries such as El Salvador have introduced online learning platforms and resources, and Ghana has made it easier to use mobile banking. Development of digital infrastructure across sectors and services such as healthcare, education, and marketplaces is increasingly important to economic and social resilience and sustainability. Closing the digital divide by increasing access to digital resources and social media platforms, offering digital literacy programs, and promoting digital freedom of expression will be central to response and recovery efforts. Youth populations are more attuned to the digital world and thus, despite the heightened challenges discussed above, potentially more prepared against external shocks like Covid-19.

Although young people represent one of the demographics hardest hit by the pandemic, many have become central in leading efforts to respond to—and recover from—the pandemic. At the multilateral level, IANYD (in partnership with various youth organizations) released a Joint Statement on Covid-19 and Youth in April 2020. The statement calls for the international community to promote youth participation and leadership in Covid-19 response efforts that aid the most vulnerable (seniors and at-risk populations), protect human rights, and address economic and food insecurity. In addition, the African Union Office of the Youth Envoy (AU-OYE) formed the African Youth Front on Coronavirus to bring young people and their innovative solutions into countries’ decisionmaking process for pandemic response efforts. Considering that the median age on the African continent is 19.7 years, AU-OYE notes the importance of having youth take both planning and leadership roles in addressing the pandemic.

Ongoing youth development efforts, such as the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) YouthLead project, present even more opportunities for youth to pivot their energies to Covid-19 response. YouthLead, which launched in 2018 to help empower young changemakers, focuses on facilitating youth leadership in communities by providing support and resources to promote young people’s “service, activism, advocacy, education, and entrepreneurship.” YouthLead sponsors and promotes projects in a range of partner countries from Bangladesh to Zambia. The initiative also includes the YouthLead Ambassador Program, a peer advisor program, and the Youth Advisory Group (YAG). These efforts should take on renewed importance during and after the pandemic. Youth are at the forefront of Covid-19 responses, demonstrating leadership in preventing violence and finding innovative ways to increase educational opportunities and access to healthcare and information. As with other movements, such as the Climate Strike initiative, digital engagement, solutions, and activism have been central to youth response and activism efforts. Youth have leveraged social media and other digital platforms to spread accurate information and awareness regarding virus response, available resources, and relief efforts for people in need. The World Bank Youth Advisory Group has used social media and youth-led businesses to identify the best community practices and solutions to the challenges posed by Covid-19. In Mali, UNICEF has partnered with young leaders to provide training in journalism, activism, and digital skills; during Covid-19, this has enabled Malian youth to lead campaigns against misinformation regarding the pandemic. Youth are also filling in educational gaps. For example, Byju’s, a youth-founded and youth-owned Indian online education platform, eliminated enrollment costs to increase access to education for students unable to attend school due to the pandemic. Removing these costs also allowed the platform to grow significantly. Other examples of youth initiatives during Covid-19 include combating misinformation in Peru and South Sudan, producing and distributing healthcare supplies in Cameroon, and providing community support in Kenya and Syria.

Ultimately, the Covid-19 pandemic has showcased the power of youth to take the lead in peacebuilding and addressing underlying global inequalities, weaknesses in governance, and roots of conflict. Young people recognize that the pandemic presents opportunities to build more resilient communities rather than simply return to the inadequate and unequal systems that existed before Covid-19.

### Ultimately, the Covid-19 pandemic has showcased the power of youth to take the lead in peacebuilding and addressing underlying global inequalities, weaknesses in governance, and roots of conflict.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR U.S. LEADERSHIP

To prepare youth populations for future economic and health-related shocks and to ensure an inclusive post-pandemic recovery, the United States should help implement short- and long-term multidimensional programming that encourages active participation in education, the economy, and communities. To promote such engagement, this programming must also give youth access to basic services, including a regular supply of food, improved sanitation, healthcare services (including reproductive healthcare for women), and digital tools (such as the Internet or mobile networks).

As part of elevating a reinvigorated YPS agenda, the Biden administration should consider the following more specific actions:

1. **Develop a Youth, Peace, and Security strategy.**
   The Biden administration has an opportunity to align its foreign policies with a broader and reinvigorated YPS agenda by formulating a strategy that pairs support for youth economic development with meaningful civic engagement, psychosocial support, and educational and leadership opportunities. Such a strategy should identify priority regions for development programming, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and the Northern Triangle (where the Biden transition team has already pledged to spend $4 billion to reduce violence, develop human capital, increase scholarships and exchanges, and increase economic opportunities).
   When developing a YPS strategy, the Biden administration could look to replicate many of the successful aspects of the Women, Peace, and Security strategy, including its whole-government approach, which developed interagency priorities and effectively put all government entities on the same page.

2. **Support youth-owned businesses and those that employ youth as part of Covid-19 economic recovery funding at home and abroad.**
   As U.S. development agencies provide foreign assistance to stimulate economic growth in fragile states hit particularly hard by Covid-19, these funds should support youth entrepreneurs whose small- and medium-sized businesses not only provide jobs but also have a social impact. Investing in youth entrepreneurs—especially young women—will mitigate skill and job shortages and ensure a sustainable economic recovery from the pandemic and future crises. This should be part of a wider effort to reinvest in multilateral platforms that address youth inclusion, including UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), to distribute burdens across likeminded donors and enhance collective action on the four SDGs.

3. **Facilitate local economic development and growth.**
   The U.S. should improve the investment environment in struggling communities, support financial infrastructure and institutions, and encourage more public–private partnerships focused on youth, particularly those that support businesses owned by young women. Reinforcing communities’ larger financial and economic structure will assist in elevating youth entrepreneurs and provide more formal job options for youth. Efforts should increase access to finance and economic assets such as loans, cash transfers, financial safety nets, financial literacy training, and digital financial tools such as continuity and risk assessment tools.

4. **Reduce the education gap and provide training programs for parents on the importance of youth entrepreneurship and education.**
   Beyond making tailored funding available, programs helping developing countries recover from Covid-19 should also encourage youth entrepreneurship and increase educational quality and opportunities, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET). With many students losing access to education and struggling to adapt to remote learning, it will be difficult for students, particularly girls, to return to the classroom without support from their parents. Efforts should increase investment in multidimensional entrepreneurship and skills-training programs. This can include digital and financial literacy, as well as leadership and job-specific training. Above all else, education needs to be able to withstand similar future disruptions.

5. **Include youth in Covid-19 recovery and stabilization efforts.**
   Elevate and fund youth leadership, peacebuilding, and involvement in global Covid-19 response and recovery efforts. Participate in, provide funding for, and (where appropriate) lead multilateral efforts to increase youth development and elevate the YPS agenda. Invest in communities and peacebuilding efforts that aim to
prevent violent extremism and violent conflict. Prioritize investment in and support to women-led peacebuilding efforts and young women-owned businesses and initiatives. This should be done in part by implementing the relevant components of the Global Fragility Act, which focuses on youth as a marginalized group and requires the U.S. government to factor violence against children and youth into its country selection process. The mandated Global Fragility Strategy should specifically address how the U.S. government will empower youth alongside other marginalized groups.

6. Add an information and communications technology (ICT) dimension to youth development programming, including but not limited to education. Prioritize addressing the digital divide in education at all levels. Help design educational models that will be able to withstand future pandemic-related economic and societal shocks and that incorporate digital learning into curriculums. Ensure students have access to the appropriate resources to remain in school, whether from home or in person. Invest in digital infrastructure and promote comprehensive data gathering and analysis to better determine how to elevate youth education, entrepreneurship, and leadership.

7. Support, strengthen, and leverage the Youth, Peace, and Security Act of 2020. The bipartisan YPS Act, if enacted, would lead to an interagency approach that seeks to effect intergenerational change by breaking cycles of violence and protecting the physical and economic security of youth. The YPS Act rightly includes the codification of a Youth Advisor Office at USAID, mandating training on YPS for foreign service officers, and developing an advisory group of experts. However, the act could be strengthened by including specific funding for youth programming and by clarifying the role of the Department of State (which, unlike USAID, is not specifically codified). Although the bill would amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to include microgrants for youth-managed training and technical assistance, it does not include resourcing for youth programming. Additionally, there is room to include an even wider interagency approach, including (but not limited to) the Peace Corps, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Health and Human Services.

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