

How are Youth Employment programs adapting to COVID-19?

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This Brief is part of the [Solutions for Youth Employment \(S4YE\)](#) Knowledge Brief series focusing on the design and implementation of youth employment programs.

In this Knowledge Brief, we highlight different ways in which youth employment projects in S4YE's community of practice, the [Impact Portfolio](#), are adapting their strategies and delivery models in response to COVID–19. Based on recent and ongoing discussions with our partners, we see six main trends that programs are using to maintain operational and programmatic continuity. These include scaling of virtual operations, crowdsourcing ideas from youth, accelerating remote learning, encouraging youth voice, increased support for micro, small and medium enterprises, and leveraging new growth opportunities. Overall, we see a deepening and widening of the ways our partners are using digital technology to be effective and to reach more youth in these challenging times.

1. Impact of COVID–19 On Youth Employment

In only a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted livelihoods for millions of young people worldwide. The increase in unemployment as a result of COVID-19 is expected to exceed the unemployment rates from the 2009 global financial crisis.¹ The ILO estimates that more than one in six young people have stopped working due to the pandemic.² Education and training opportunities for youth have been interrupted, creating long-term implications for post-COVID recovery.

The economic effects of the pandemic can aggravate the existing vulnerability of young people in labor markets. Being unemployed at a young age can have long-lasting “scarring effects” in career paths and future earnings.³ Young people with a history of unemployment face fewer career development opportunities, lower wage levels, poorer prospects for better jobs, and ultimately lower pensions.⁴ Young people also are more likely to work in non-standard employment, such as temporary or part-time work, facing a higher risk of job and income loss.⁵ Furthermore, young people have limited financial assets. They are at an increased risk of falling below the poverty line if their income suddenly stops or declines.⁶ These economic effects are likely to impact youth in various ways ranging from their access to housing to paying back school loans.⁷

¹ United Nations (2020), “Protecting and mobilizing youth in COVID-19 responses” https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2020/05/PB_67.pdf

² ILO (2020), “ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition Updated estimates and analysis” https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf

³ OECD (2020), “Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience” https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

⁴ OECD (2020), “Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience” https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

⁵ OECD (2020), “Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience” https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

⁶ OECD (2020), “Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience” https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

⁷ OECD (2020), “Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience” https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

2. How are Youth Employment programs adapting to COVID-19? *Trends from S4YE’s Impact Portfolio*

[Solutions for Youth Employment \(S4YE\)](#) is a multi-stakeholder coalition, housed within the Jobs Group of the World Bank. It aims to provide leadership and resources for catalytic action to increase young people engaged in productive work. One of the four pillars of S4YE’s ecosystem⁸ is a network of 44 high-potential and innovative youth employment projects, [Impact Portfolio \(IP\)](#). Through the IP, *practitioners learn, showcase, and support the scaling of innovative youth employment interventions.*

Since the pandemic developed, several IP projects have adapted by modifying their existing programs or launching new initiatives. Overall, we see a deepening and widening of the ways our partners are using digital technology to be effective and reach more youth in these challenging times. We see an increase in *digital capacity building* of IP partners to improve program delivery to youth and of SMEs/microenterprises led by youth. Projects are working on closing the digital divide and *expanding access to virtual skilling*. Projects are also working on helping youth overcome *specific barriers to access* digital jobs and start new businesses and linking them with appropriate opportunities. This knowledge brief highlights a few of these ‘adaptive’ trends⁹. Based on our recent consultations and surveys with IP projects, we see six main trends in how projects are adapting to maintain programmatic & operational continuity. Table 1 lists these trends.

Table 1: Key trends in IP projects to adapt to COVID-19

| | |
|--|---|
| Scaling of Virtual Operations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased investment in hardware and ‘fit to purpose’ software options • Developing guidelines for remote work • Recreating program components in a virtual format |
| Accelerating remote learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pivoting to scale online learning • developing mobile learning applications to reach underserved youth • Scaling solutions through low tech approaches like radio learning |
| Crowdsourcing ideas from youth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase use of hackathons and innovation challenges to crowdsource new solutions from youth, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enabling youth-led ‘micro’ ventures ○ Bolstering national health care systems ○ Helping green enterprises grow ○ Youth Hackathon in FCV region |
| Encouraging Youth Voice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating safe spaces to encourage youth voice • Using digital platforms to amplify youth concerns |
| Increased support for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services like helplines, crisis counseling, and emergency financial support • Continued learning & mentorship for young entrepreneurs • Special interventions to develop the digital capacity of small businesses and to support vulnerable youth (refugees, migrants, and women) |
| Leveraging new opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities in the health sector (care professional and health-related online work) • Opportunities in the retail sector (delivery and operations) |

⁸ The S4YE ecosystem consists of a [Private Sector Advisory Council](#), a network of 35 companies; a network [of World Bank youth employment projects](#) which have a combined commitment of 17.47 billion USD for 150 lending operations in 69 countries and a [Youth Advisory Group](#) to integrate youth voice into technical activities and decision-making. The fourth pillar of this ecosystem is the [Impact Portfolio \(IP\)](#), described above.

⁹ *Forthcoming*: S4YE will soon publish a separate brief summarizing trends in private sector efforts to support Youth Employment as a result of COVID-19.

1. SCALING UP VIRTUAL OPERATIONS

As a result of the pandemic, most IP projects limited their staff movement and transitioned to working online. Projects achieved these transitions through 1) increased investment in hardware and ‘fit to purpose’ software options, 2) developing guidelines for remote work, 3) and recreating program components to fit a virtual format (Table 2).

Projects that train youth for outsourcing jobs (Box 3) like [RBK](#) and [Enablecode](#) reported relative ease in adapting to working online without much disruption. Their hardware and software systems were already in place due to the nature of their core business, and the staff was more familiar with using different online tools and hence required lesser capacity-building support.

Table 2: Transitioning operations to a virtual format

| Key areas | Actions |
|--|--|
| Increased investment in hardware and ‘fit to purpose’ software options | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardware: Across the board, projects increased purchase of laptops, internet packs, and power backups for their staff and beneficiaries • ‘Fit to purpose’ Software: Projects also increased the integration of tools for videoconferencing (e.g., Hangouts, Zoom, Skype); Workshops, Design Thinking, Polling (e.g., Mentimeter, Miro, Whiteboard); collaboration tools (e.g., Basecamp, Twist, Slack); program management (e.g., Trello, Podio) as per their staff size and budget. |
| Developing guidelines for remote work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing Capacity Building Support: Organized staff trainings and developed guidance manuals (E.g., Educate!) on remote work, including topics like personal and time management, scheduling, and email guidelines, managing remote work as a primary caretaker or parents. Accenture has come up with the Virtual Ways of Working Playbook, which provides practical advice to help non-profits worldwide adapt to working virtually. Projects also started regular meetings (E.g., daily standup calls in Harambee) for seamless information flow at all staff levels. • Adapting the HR Policies: Most IP projects started offering flexible working hours and adapted their HR policies to recognize work from home. |
| Recreating program components in a virtual format | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placements & Student Registration: Many projects, like Laboratoria, had to re-create essential components of their programs like student placement and make them work in a 100% virtual format. This also provided an opportunity to expand the organization’s reach as it was no longer limited to those who can attend in-person. Similarly, Anima in Uruguay developed a chatbot “Animin” to aide their registration process through WhatsApp, usually done through school visits and workshops (Box 1). • Learning: Many IP projects have scaled up remote learning. This is detailed below in the section on remote learning. |

Box 1: Using AI for identifying youth beneficiaries



[Anima](#) in Uruguay works with high school graduates on a dual education and apprenticeship model. Since face to face events were canceled due to COVID, Anima began integrating AI in its enrollment process and conducting virtual interviews. They developed a chatbot named “Animin” to aide their registration process through WhatsApp, usually done through school visits and workshops. Using the FAQ based chatbot, prospective students can gather details about the Anima program. For additional information, youth are redirected to the team. For its next stage in the selection process, the platform is being developed to share virtual challenges to identify the right beneficiaries for the interview stage.

2. ACCELERATING REMOTE LEARNING

IP projects are scaling up remote learning initiatives (e.g., online, radio, SMS). Earlier distance learning was considered a mode of learning exclusively for non-traditional students but has become more mainstream since COVID.

Many partners have developed online learning resources like [Educate!](#), [Harambee](#), [International Youth Foundation\(IYF\)](#), [Education for Employment\(EFE\)](#), Buildher, [Laboratoria](#) (in Spanish). These partners are not creating just “one-off” solutions but instead are adapting their new models to operate in perpetuity. Scaling of online learning has required IP partners to be creative, pivot, and do rapid testing (Box 2).

Box 2. How are IP partners pivoting to scale online learning?



Reworking curriculum & activities: Projects modified their curriculum to deliver information in bite-sized & ‘micro’ online modules, which are more engaging. Some of the modules are live while others are for self-paced learning, which offers more flexibility to learners (E.g., to learn after household chores). Content types include video tutorials, audio podcasts, presentations, interactions, games, scenarios, assessments, text-based job aids, and short online lessons. For example, [IYF](#) has modified its [Passport to Success](#) practicum into three short video-based assignments (with an option for live demonstration for those who desired). They have also added four required discussion forums and spread four short quizzes throughout the course’s modules to make it interactive.

Rapid design feedback: Many projects rapidly tested their online learning models and incorporated user feedback in an agile way to ensure that learning modules are flexible and engaging. For example, [IYF](#) conducted an ‘interactivity’ audit of the new e-learning modules of its [Passport to Success](#) skilling program to ensure a balance of reading, video, audio, and interactive exercises.

Staffing modifications: For example, to ensure that the social-emotional skills component of the program is effectively delivered online, [RBK](#) in Jordan increased staffing efforts from a ratio of 1:6 to 1:4.

Maintaining flexibility: Maintaining a relatively flat organizational structure and giving all team members plenty of latitude in administering the curricula helps facilitators improvise content more rapidly (e.g., [RBK](#)).

Increased psychosocial support: Most partners increased psychosocial support and coaching for both staff and learners to make up for the lack of in-person support by creating virtual talking circles¹⁰ (e.g., [RBK](#)), peer support groups, etc. Some partners have used WhatsApp to connect youth with mentors, support one another, and report well-being. Mobile data stipends are provided upon completion and reporting of tasks (e.g., [Harambee](#)). Some projects like [RBK](#) and [Gaza Sky Geeks](#) have supplemented their efforts with online mindfulness practice and yoga.

Projects are developing mobile learning applications to reach underserved youth. Projects are working to ensure that their education content is made interesting and works on mobile phones as well, in case students do not have laptops. A mobile app may be easier to scale than web-based platforms, particularly in areas with low connectivity. This approach is helping to reduce the digital divide. For example,

¹⁰ A restorative justice practice adapted for FCV areas. These “Circles” provide an opportunity for community members to come together to address harmful behavior in a process that explores harms and needs, obligations, and necessary engagement.

[Harambee](#) in South Africa has partnered with [Funzi](#), a mobile content delivery organization, and United Nations to co-create a new course on COVID for youth and make it available through mobile pedagogy. It is an extremely data-light (less than 10MB) four-module, 1-hour course to share precise and up-to-date information about COVID-19 and actions one can take to stay safe and informed. The UN intends to scale the jointly developed program across Africa.

Low tech remote learning solutions like radio learning (using story-based content) & SMS platforms are also being used by some partners to scale their efforts, especially for continued learning of rural and remote communities. For example, in Rwanda, [Educate!](#) has partnered with the Rwanda Education Board (REB) to convert practical secondary subjects (like Entrepreneurship and Science) to radio lesson scripts to be taught through local stations. Also, [Educate!](#) leverages SMS, robocalls, and remote mentorship for follow-up assessment, engagement, and guidance. These activities are supported by increasing family engagement within communities as parents and relatives are more likely to own a phone and keep their phone numbers active. This strategy enhances the quality of learning for youth because parents can help ensure that youth engage more actively during lesson times.

3. CROWDSOURCING IDEAS FROM YOUTH



Within the first few months of the pandemic, several IP projects developed crowdsourcing initiatives (like hackathons, innovation challenges) to support youth-led local solutions for community revitalization (Table 3). In addition to creating innovative solutions for an unprecedented crisis, crowdsourcing is also an alternate youth engagement strategy to keep them away from anti-social activities. This is particularly important for youth in fragile, conflict, and violence (FCV) affected areas as the pandemic has put a sudden halt to classroom training, closure of co-working spaces, etc.

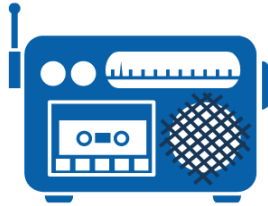
Most IP projects offered youth with seed money and mentorship support to develop and market their ideas. Additionally, in some cases, these crowdsourcing programs provided the opportunity to gain media coverage and pitch ideas further at more prominent global forums (E.g., [Oxfam](#)). Some projects expanded the scope and have partnered with government and international agencies to scale these ideas at a national and global level (like [Ventures Platform Foundation](#) & [Gaza Sky Geeks](#)).

Table 3: Supporting Youth-led solutions to COVID–19

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| Enabling youth-led ‘micro’ ventures | Asante Africa Foundation supported small initiatives in its intervention countries that help meet the needs of “essential” items like soap & sanitary pads. Using a bottom-up approach, they provide seed capital to those youth proposing to build out community-level solutions for making and distributing these items. |
| Bolstering national health care systems | Ventures Platform Foundation identified seven solutions through an innovation challenge to support the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). These include an online self-administered risk-assessment tool (COVID TRIAGE TOOL by Wellvis), an AI-powered crisis response hotline (MyServiceAgent), and a case management system designed to manage resource allocation by healthcare bodies (Caselink) |
| Helping green enterprises grow | Oxfam identified Salubata : a social enterprise that recycles plastic bottles into affordable sandals and shoes. Green Axis : a recycling enterprise empowering women and girls in eastern Nigeria through its <i>Nigerian Youth Innovation Challenge</i> . |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <p>Youth Hackathon in FCV region</p> | <p>Gaza Sky Geeks, in partnership with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNFPA, organized a <i>virtual hackathon</i> in which over 100 teams from Gaza and West Bank participated. Winning solutions included a mobile app to deliver medicines from nearby pharmacies and managing payments with insurance providers (YA SAYDALI), an online platform to facilitate the provision of therapy for those with mental health disorders in time of COVID(Hakini), and an online farmer marketplace for fresh groceries and food (Baladi).</p> |
|--------------------------------------|---|

4. ENCOURAGING YOUTH VOICE



Projects are creating safe spaces to encourage youth voice, to allow young people to collaborate and manage the impact of the crisis. S4YE’s consultations with its [Youth Advisory Group](#)(YAG) revealed that youth are besieged by fake news, anxious about basics (like food and water), and angry about the loss of income and difficulty finding work. Many young people are now being required to re-skill to adapt to a new working environment. The impact of mental health has also come into the spotlight, with many youth sharing experiences of anxiety and stress. Therefore, many IP projects are creating tools for youth to share their thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns.

Increasingly projects are using digital platforms to enable youth voice. Many IP partners now reach young people through digital channels like social media, WhatsApp, SMS, interactive voice recordings (IVR), and radio. These approaches are more cost-effective than traditional methods like printing, and projects use this outreach as a “barometer” to help inform their advocacy. This real-time interaction also empowers youth to check facts, raise awareness about COVID-19, support themselves and their communities. For example, [Empower Youth for Work](#) (EYW) has developed a podcast called [Power in the Pandemic](#) to share young people’s experiences during the crisis. The podcast highlights how youth from Pakistan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Canada, and Italy are harnessing their power to take localized action. Similarly, [Asante Africa Foundation](#) has enabled youth voice in East Africa through its [online blog series](#). Additionally, it has also been using radio programs to keep youth informed about COVID-19 and using WhatsApp to encourage youth to participate in challenges such as the UN’s [Safe Hands Challenge](#) to increase awareness of hygiene practices.

5. INCREASED SUPPORT FOR MICRO, SMALL, AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES



Small businesses account for more than half of global employment¹¹ and are among the most affected by the pandemic. Many of these businesses lack the cash flow and capital necessary to see them through extended periods of reduced or no sales. These tight margins of micro, small, and medium businesses have made them particularly vulnerable to the economic downturn.

Thus, many IP projects focused on enterprise development have developed initiatives to sustain small businesses, increase their digital capacity, and provide mentorship to young people, especially underserved populations.

- *Projects provide a range of new/adapted services, from helplines to crisis counseling and emergency financial support schemes.* For example, Solidaridad has created an emergency fund to help farmer incubators under its Cocoa program in Ghana to provide services to cocoa agribusinesses, maintain its core staff and farmhands, especially women, provide personal protective equipment for its workers, and disseminate COVID-19 safety messages to farmers and members of their communities.
- *Projects have continued learning activities for entrepreneurs* through Virtual Bootcamps & Virtual Upskilling Hubs (e.g., Venture Platform Foundation) or developing learning apps (e.g., Asante Africa Foundation provides business management skills through an 8-week gaming program). Projects are also making available E-books and materials for upskilling on topics like market trends.
- *To support refugee, migrant, and women-owned businesses,* Youth Business International(YBI) has recently launched the Rapid Response and Recovery Programme in partnership with Google.org, to provide grant support to businesses in 32 countries and volunteering time of Google employees for mentorship support and to help enterprises to adapt to new challenges.
- *Increasing digital capacity of small business:* While on the one hand, COVID-19 is accelerating digital commerce¹² on the other, it has exacerbated the digital divide between the bigger companies and the micro, small, and medium enterprises¹³. To overcome this, IP partners, like YBI, are training small businesses in e-commerce, digital marketing (leveraging social media and virtual channels), e-wallets integration, liaising with suppliers and delivery partners via virtual channels, and using social media tools for networking.

¹¹ Visa (2020), "Visa to Digitally Enable 50 Million Small Businesses to Power Recovery in Communities Worldwide" <https://usa.visa.com/about-visa/newsroom/press-releases.released.17176.html>

¹² Visa (2020), "Visa to Digitally Enable 50 Million Small Businesses to Power Recovery in Communities Worldwide" <https://usa.visa.com/about-visa/newsroom/press-releases.released.17176.html>

¹³ There are several barriers to digital adoption by small businesses, which include 1) high costs of digital implementation, 2) lack of skills of business owners to use technologies appropriately and ensure IT and data security, 3)in more rural areas, connectivity and low smartphone usage are the main challenges.

6. LEVERAGING NEW OPPORTUNITIES



The demand for retail and delivery services has increased in some regions due to COVID¹⁴. Grocers, pharmacies, and e-commerce marketplaces are sustaining consumer access to essentials—food, medication, toiletries, etc.— and striving to keep customers, employees, and suppliers safe. Many IP projects have capitalized on these new opportunities. For example, in Kenya, [Lynk](#) started a new business-line of commercial disinfecting and engaged many youths through its digital platform for informal workers. Similarly, [Educate!](#) in Kenya developed an e-learning training for motorcycle couriers and drivers (Boda Boda drivers) to respond to increased delivery needs at this time in partnership with supermarket chains (like Sindy) and other industries.

The health sector has seen an increased demand for care services. As a result, many projects have launched skilling programs for nurses, nursing assistants, and home healthcare workers. These programs cover personal protective equipment (PPE) use, non-invasive ventilation, infection control and prevention, and stress management under emergency conditions. For example, [Generation](#) has developed an online upskilling program on COVID management for healthcare professionals in 5 countries (France, India, Italy, Mexico, and Spain). In partnership with local clinical organizations (like nursing bodies, healthcare industry associations, etc.) Generation has developed nationally accredited activity-based learning modules and has upskilled more than 200,000+ healthcare workers.

There is also an increase in health-related online work, and some IP projects that use an ‘Impact Sourcing’ (Box 3) model have leveraged these new opportunities. In particular, [Digital Date Divide \(DDD\)](#) has reported an increase in three areas of online work: *Telemedicine*. E.g., E-lancing opportunities for developing online chatbots for basic medical advice, *Microwork* such as tagging MRI’s, X-rays, and *Data formatting and structuring*, which includes database cleanups, handwriting transcribing, etc. which is later used by hospitals, insurance companies.

Box 3. Business processing outsourcing jobs ¹⁵

- **Impact sourcing:** Impact Sourcing is a business practice where a company prioritizes suppliers that intentionally hire and provide career development opportunities to vulnerable people. Those service providers engaging in impact sourcing often employ people to perform outsourced online tasks.
- **Microwork:** is a form of online outsourcing that deconstructs a service or the development of a product into a virtual assembly line of simple, highly-repetitive tasks (e.g., data input, proof-reading, image tagging, and text transcription), which are then distributed to workers via an online platform.
- **E-lancing (Virtual Freelancing):** Jobs involving complex tasks (translation, coding, web/graphic design, software development, technical writing)

¹⁴ McKinsey and Company (2020), "[The next normal: Retail M&A and partnerships after COVID-19](#)"

¹⁵ Adapted from [Global Impact Sourcing Coalition](#). The Global Impact Sourcing Coalition (GISC) is a global network of businesses creating jobs for those most in need through global supply chains.

As seen from above, many S4YE IP partners have developed innovative strategies to continue engaging youth and linking them to opportunities despite the pandemic. However, continued funding support, availability of reliable internet, power outages, increased expenses due to the provision of laptops, data plans, and the overall global recession are a few of the many challenges these programs continue to grapple with. In the long run, the pandemic is likely to cause fundamental changes in the job market for many young people. Thus, practices adopted by youth employment projects, in general, must be flexible and dynamic enough to respond to the shifting needs of youth. The COVID-19 pandemic requires youth employment practitioners to develop integrated approaches and continuously monitor and coordinate adjustment to their projects. Undertaking these initiatives will help ensure that young people can reach their full potential and help Build Back Better.

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S4YE is a multi-stakeholder coalition that aims to provide leadership and resources for catalytic action to increase the number of young people engaged in productive work. S4YE’s partners include the World Bank Group, Accenture, The Rockefeller Foundation, Mastercard Foundation, Microsoft, Plan International, International Youth Foundation (IYF), Youth Business International (YBI), RAND Corporation, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Governments of Norway and Germany, and the UN Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth. The S4YE Secretariat is housed in the Jobs Group within the Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice at the World Bank Group.

This knowledge brief does not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank or each S4YE partner. For additional resources for youth employment, please visit <https://www.s4ye.org/s4ye-publications>