



RESEARCH:

YOUNG PEOPLE & COVID-19 IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

A REPORT FROM THE CO-OPERATIVE

2022

oaktree



Human development is viewed as a tapestry of intertwined developmental trajectories

(e.g., psychological, physical health, cognitive) with critical transition points (i.e., times at which individuals change status or roles) and linked lives (i.e., webs of interpersonal relations), all of which are influenced by young people's daily ecological contexts, larger societal structures, and the broader sociohistorical context.

(Benner & Mistry, 2020, p. 3)



Introduction



While everyone has been profoundly affected by the pandemic, this generation of young people now face challenges unlike any other. They face overlapping crises – from physical and mental health emergencies to the climate crisis to economic hardships. They are in a world where their future cannot be taken for granted and radical changes to the ways we live are underway.

(Restless Development and the Development Alternative, 2022, p. 1)

... But young people are not passively accepting the world as it is.

(António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, in United Nations Youth Strategy, 2022, p.1).

Youth voices and experiences need to be heard.

Young people comprise over 50% of the current population in the Asia-Pacific, and these young people will be 100% of the region's future (Wilson, 2020). Yet, minimal research and resources have been invested into supporting this key demographic as it emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This publication presents the outcomes of a participatory, youth-led needs and strengths assessment and analysis conducted in 2022, intended to better understand the immediate and emerging needs and opportunities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will specifically explore how the pandemic has uniquely affected young people and highlight the distinctive power that young people hold as change-makers.

This research and its findings are designed to be a tool for advocacy, not to sit on the shelf. It seeks to give voice and space to young people across the Asia-Pacific — space to have their experiences heard, their ideas listened

to, and their drive for positive change recognised and supported. Encompassing diverse lived experience and shared perspectives, it is a powerful resource to instigate meaningful change, and gives backing and guidance towards the future that young people in the region envision and demand. The report also strongly aligns itself with the Youth 2030 Agenda — an ambitious system-wide strategy to guide the global community to work meaningfully with and for young people around the world (United Nations Youth Strategy, 2022).

This publication firstly outlines the principles and other components that have guided its overall outcomes. It explores existing literature addressing young people and COVID-19, and identifies and explains key themes that will be tested with field research. Drawing on first-hand research findings, it then evaluates how, and the extent to which, COVID-19 and its implications have impacted the lives of young people in the Asia-Pacific region. The report concludes by offering recommendations on how to best support young people moving forward.

**Written BY young people,
FOR young people,**

**this report hopes to champion the voice of youth
to induce constructive, systemic change.**

FOREWORD FROM ARNOLD FOUNDATION

I would like to start with an Acknowledgment of Country. I live, work, play and worship on the unceded lands of the First Nations Peoples. In my case it is the Boonwurrung People of the Kulin Nation. For millennia they have been the traditional custodians, caring for the lands and waters in the region surrounding Narm-Narm (Port Phillip Bay) in southern Victoria, Australia. However, the arrival of European settlers has had a devastating impact on them. Much of their land and culture has been lost to them through colonization; their families, communities, and connections to their ancestors have been destroyed; their children have been taken from them; they have suffered the injustice of racism, and economic, social, psychological, and spiritual deprivation. I lament these injustices and recognise their pain, and seek ways to promote reconciliation, mutual trust, and solidarity in our common journey. I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present, and emerging.

I am writing on behalf of The Arnold Foundation, which endeavours to promote the work of the late Marion Arnold. Marion Arnold dedicated her life to affirming the basic principles of peace, and social and economic justice. Her experiences engaging with the youth of Papua New Guinea and First Nations Peoples in Central Australia while she was a university student made a deep impression on her.

The Arnold Foundation is pleased to be a partner with the Oaktree Foundation in presenting the voices of young people in the Asia Pacific Region responding to the challenges and opportunities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This unique year-long study initiated by a team of young Oaktree researchers, provides a multi-dimensional approach. It surveys the current literature; it engages with youth participating in different social change organisations across the region and listens to their experiences of how the pandemic impacted on their lives; it identifies areas where services could be improved and provides recommendations to empower young people to create a better society. The report considers the impacts on health, including mental health and well-being, education,

employment opportunities, the variation of cultural and socio-economic consequences across genders, social growth, community, marginalisation, and government responses.

- To realise the potential that young people offer, both individually and as a society, greater investment is needed to provide employment opportunities, incentives and skills-training for young people.
- The pandemic has shown that young people have the commitment and creativity to build community but need greater opportunities to have their voices heard.
- COVID-19 is just one of many challenges facing humanity. Young people can play an important role in responding to these challenges and need to be included in disaster preparedness dialogues.
- Feelings of isolation were common during the pandemic. Social inclusion, communication and participation in an increasingly technological world will require greater access to online platforms. Support for young people to obtain the skills and training necessary for digital access will enable them to share this knowledge with the wider community.
- Many young people are already suffering the effects of the pandemic on their mental health. Mental health services need to be expanded and enhanced throughout the Asia Pacific Region to support them.

I wish to thank the team at Oaktree and their partners in social change organisations across the Asia Pacific Region who contributed to this report for providing us with such a useful database. Their perceptive insights provide us with valuable guidance in addressing the needs of youth to empower them to reach their full potential.

- Dale Hess (Arnold Foundation)

FOREWORD FROM OAKTREE CEO

When I joined Oaktree in January 2021, we were looking forward to a 'post-Covid' world. Of course, with the emergence of new variants, the COVID-19 pandemic was far from over. Moreover, there was an overwhelming realisation that things were not just going to go back to 'normal'. We were, and still are, facing a drastically changing world, with new challenges that require new solutions.

At Oaktree, we continuously work towards our vision of creating a just and sustainable world where every young person has an equitable chance to realise their full potential. In order to reach this vision, our programmes had to shift to better address the emerging needs and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on young people in our region. As a result, we embarked on this year-long research project to find out *how* young people were adapting to the new 'Covid normal', and *what* was needed to best support them. This project was designed to take into account a range of voices that reflect the diversity of the Asia-Pacific. It was run completely by our young volunteers, in conjunction with other youth organisations in the region.

The inclusion of youth perspectives is not merely an optional undertaking — it is a prerequisite for inclusive, sustainable, and effective development work.

We are living in a world where over half of the global population is under 30, and 9 out of 10 young people live in the Majority World. This project is testament to the insights and participatory potential of young people to inform decision-making in the region.

The nuanced insights that have been discovered through this research are largely due to the determination of our 'back-end hands'. Eleanor, Jeremy, Harry, and Yihan — thank you. Your tireless commitment to this project has resulted in research that will not only be useful for Oaktree's ongoing programmes, but for our region as a whole.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Arnold Foundation. Thank you for your belief in us and in the power of young voices to bring about much-needed reforms.

This document you are holding (or reading on a screen) is so much more than a report. It is a call to action. Young people across the Asia-Pacific have come together to create five actionable recommendations. It is now up to us to make this a reality.

- Thenu Herath (CEO, Oaktree)





COMMON TERMS & DEFINITIONS

- **Asia-Pacific region:**

The Asia-Pacific region is a part of the world defined by its proximity to the Western Pacific Ocean, typically including much of East Asia, South Asia and Oceania.



Geographically, it is characterised by its climate and terrain variability, with uneven population distribution and considerable linguistic and cultural diversity (AIMS International, 2022).

- **COVID-19:** The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Cases were first reported in 2019, and it remains a global health concern. COVID-19 was characterised as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation in March 2020 (WHO, 2022).
- **Research paper:** A piece of academic writing that provides analysis, interpretation, and argument based on in-depth independent research (Course Researchers, 2020).
- **For-purpose organisations:** Entities established to carry

out a benevolent purpose for the benefit of society.

- **Youth:** Oaktree defines youth and young people to be between 16–35 years of age.
- **Intersectionality:** Refers to the ways in which systems of inequality based on class, disability, ethnicity, gender (and gender identity), race, sexual orientation, and other forms of discrimination 'intersect' to influence (generally exacerbate) their experience of discrimination and marginalisation (Centre for Intersectional Justice, 2022).
- **Localisation:** The International Council of Voluntary Agencies defines localisation as a process wherein the power and responsibilities associated with development and humanitarian aid efforts are shifted *from* international actors and *towards* local and national actors (Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2019).
- **Decolonisation:** The intentional process of dismantling ongoing colonialism and its legacies. It seeks cultural, psychological, and economic freedom for Indigenous people with the goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty — i.e. the right and ability of Indigenous people to practise self-determination over their land, cultures, and political and economic systems (Gibbie, 2021).

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About Oaktree

Oaktree is a youth-run international development agency, the largest in Australia and powered entirely by people under the age of 27. Oaktree believes that every young person should have an equal chance to reach their potential, no matter where they are born.

The organisation exists to empower young people across the Asia-Pacific region to become agents of change and lead sustainable development in their communities.

How Oaktree Creates Change:

RESOURCE: We put resources behind young people who are leading sustainable development initiatives in their communities.

CONNECT: We connect youth-led organisations and promote skill-sharing between them.

ADVOCATE: We advocate and campaign to advance sustainable development and the rights of young people.

UPSKILL: We provide opportunities for young people aged 18–27 in Australia to develop the core skills necessary to lead, demand, and create social change.

About The Authors

This report was developed, researched, written, and edited over the course of 12 months by a team of four Oaktree volunteers under the age of 25. Throughout, the authors have taken the approach that they are just the 'back-end hands' of this platform which aims to give space to youth voices. In reality, this report is the co-creation of over 30 young people, whose lived experiences are embedded in what the authors present as a report from the co-operative.

OAKTREE VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF IN AUSTRALIA FEBRUARY 2022



The Back-End Hands



Eleanor Hewitt
Director of Research
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Part 1

Executive Summary

- This publication sheds light on the short- and long-term challenges and opportunities for young people across the Asia-Pacific region as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- It is the product of a year-long study comprising the perspectives of youth and youth-focused organisations across the region. Its findings reveal how the pandemic was experienced by Asia-Pacific young people, and highlight the role of youth as future change-makers.
- Using Life Course Theory (LCT) to frame its research, this paper identifies the ways in which COVID-19 has, and will continue to, affect all young people distinctly to other age demographics. It explores young people's strategic relationships with livelihood, technology, wellbeing, education, the local government, community, and diversity.
- This report proposes increased investment in the areas of youth entrepreneurialism, youth representation, disaster preparedness, digital access, and mental health to support young people now and into the future.



FURTHER CONTEXT

The Current State of Youth in the Asia-Pacific

The world currently has the largest youth generation in history. While the populations of many OECD countries are ageing, countries in the Global South are growing increasingly young (Oaktree 2021). The current standing of the region is as follows:



660 million youth aged between 15–24 live in the Asia-Pacific region, comprising **60% of the world's youth population**. (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia & the Pacific [ESCAP], 2022b).



During COVID-19, youth between 15–24 years of age have faced a **10.3% decline in employment**, compared to a 2.4% drop for adults (International Labor Organisation [ILO] 2021, p.1).



Before COVID-19: **eight out of ten** young workers in the Asia-Pacific were in **informal employment**; **more than 160 million** youth in the Asia-Pacific **were not in employment, education, or training** (nearly three quarters were young women). (ILO, 2021b, p. 1–2).

The pandemic has only worsened the situation with job opportunities drying up in an already competitive market, and online studies proving to be unreliable and disproportionately affecting those in rural communities.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to better understand the current and perceived, immediate and longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people across the Asia-Pacific region.

There has been minimal research dedicated to this subject. As a longstanding youth-led organisation in the Asia-Pacific region with a history of youth-led research, Oaktree is uniquely positioned to lead this work.

Grounded in rigorous research and evidence-based analysis, this paper should support evidence-based change. It will inform Oaktree and other actors, including for-purpose organisations and governments, on how to best support young people across the Asia-Pacific region in responding to COVID-19 and its associated consequences.

This research seeks to address **3 key knowledge gaps** surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. They are:

- 1. Lack of research into opportunities post-COVID-19;**
- 2. Lack of data that is youth-focused (about youth); and**
- 3. Underrepresentation of Asia-Pacific youth voices (by youth).**

INTENDED GOALS & OUTCOMES

Goals

1. Oaktree and relevant youth organisations engage in a process of mutual learning to better understand and respond to the rapidly changing COVID-19 context in the Asia-Pacific.
2. Young people directly informed Oaktree's international engagement planning and programming.
3. Young people actively take part in the identification of issues affecting them and their communities, empowering them to advocate for positive change.
4. Link with and expand networks of young people and youth-focused organisations across the Asia-Pacific.

Outcomes

1. Oaktree better understands the needs and challenges facing young people in the Asia-Pacific Region in light of COVID-19.
2. Oaktree can better respond to and address these new challenges and evolving needs through its programs.
3. This project demonstrates the value of youth participation and leadership in identifying the issues that affect young people and their communities.



About The Paper

This research paper comprises the input, thought, and perspectives of 22 youth-led organisations across the Asia-Pacific region, with data collated through an extensive literature review and qualitative interview process.

Research was conducted through two stages of data collection. First, desk-based research and literature review (Stage 1) and; second, a series of qualitative interviews to better understand youth perspectives (Stage 2).

Stage 1 was intended to better understand the literature and findings that already exist, and to provide a preliminary thematic breakdown against which the second stage could be designed. Whilst literature discussing the 'human' implications of the COVID-19 pandemic is readily available, research specifically addressing the experience of young people in the Asia-Pacific region in relation to this issue is severely lacking. Key themes extracted from the desk-based research are discussed in the *Literature Review*.

Stage 2 data collection was guided by these key thematic areas. The prominent areas identified in **Stage 1** were tested through a series of qualitative interviews with representatives from youth-led and youth-focused organisations across the Asia-Pacific. Participant organisations were identified through Oaktree's expansive network in the region. Throughout the process, youth were positioned as experts and stakeholders in their communities.

Findings emerging from this paper have been condensed into areas of focus, summarised in *Our Findings*.

These summaries explain the relevance of these areas to the lived experience of those interviewed, and by extension young people in the Asia-Pacific. Recommendations emerging from these findings are then presented in *Conclusion and Recommendations* — it is the authors' intention that these are used to promote and guide constructive support for young people in the region



OUR APPROACH

Youth Led and Youth Participation

Young people (16–35 years of age) have been at the forefront of this report. It has been youth-led at every stage, with research advisory support provided from experts outside of the youth demographic. The research process relied heavily on strong relationships and partnerships across the Asia-Pacific region, particularly with other youth-led and youth-focused grassroots organisations. Such a high level of youth ownership was achieved through a mutual trust to share, understand, and represent the varied lived experience of young people during COVID-19.

Localisation and Decolonisation

This research demonstrates that young people are experts in their own context and aims to shift power to youth as local change-makers across the Asia-Pacific. All aspects of the research process sought to adhere to Oaktree's development philosophy and Partnership Principles. A decolonised approach was applied to the research, ensuring diverse opinions were heard and participation was accessible. However, it must be noted that there was, and remains, a lack of published literature written by youth and/or authors from the Asia-Pacific. The authors also acknowledge that the legacy of colonisation continues to affect the Asia-Pacific region in deep and complex ways. While every effort was made, it is possible that, at times, this research paper may have fallen short of adequately fulfilling localisation and decolonisation principles.

Solidarity

Oaktree seeks to support youth-led organisations in the region to continue to amplify the voices of young people. Youth involvement and inclusion is valuable — young people possess the experience, expertise, knowledge, and skill to create positive change within and beyond their communities.

Oaktree's platform and partnerships across the Asia-Pacific enabled this research. Partner organisations and individuals involved in this research received monetary compensation for their contributions. The authors thank and acknowledge the input of those involved throughout the research process.

Collaboration

Collaboration has been at the heart of this research. Oaktree has worked to break down cultural, linguistic, and colonial barriers to ensure this paper reflects young people across the region.



ETHICS

The research process has been conducted in adherence to key principles of ethical research, including, but not limited to:

Informed Consent

All participants provided verbal and written informed consent prior to taking part in this research, and provided permission for their opinions to be published.

Voluntary participation

Participants were free from pressure or coercion throughout the research process. They could choose whether they participated in the research, and were provided the option to terminate participation at any point.

Anonymity

Participants were provided the option to remain anonymous at every stage of the research and publishing process.

Confidentiality

Information disclosed by participants that is confidential has not been published.

Do No Harm

The potentiality of harm to participants was considered through multiple dimensions, including legal, physical, psychological, and social. Appropriate measures were taken to ensure the minimisation and mitigation of these risks.

Social value

The research paper seeks to contribute to the COVID-19 knowledge-base in a meaningful way. It demonstrates that young people can, and do, actively lead social change.




LIMITATIONS

This paper is not without its limitations. Linguistic barriers, internet access, an exclusively virtual data collection process, and an all-volunteer research team were some constraints faced during this research. The authors wish to acknowledge two significant limitations, amongst others, which may have influenced the results. They are: (1) a small sample size; and (2) the lack of diversity of participants.

The results of this paper have been drawn from the analysis of 22 interviews from across the region. Because of this research methodology, this paper could not represent perspectives from every country, and may not accurately reflect the experiences of all youth at community, national and regional levels. The Asia-Pacific is incredibly diverse in culture, language, geography, with varying political and socio-economic contexts. While immensely valuable, it is important to note the information gained from these interviews cannot possibly represent the incommensurable nature of culture and context in the region.

The lack of diversity of research participants must also be acknowledged. At the time of their involvement, 96% of interviewees were working or volunteering in youth-led or youth-focused and for-purpose organisations. Their interest and involvement in such organisations, and capacity to be involved on a volunteer basis, may eliminate some elements of diversity in respondents. Individuals of higher socio-economic status (SES) are overrepresented in volunteer cohorts, as they generally have more time and capacity to commit to unpaid activities (Niebuur et al. 2018). As all data collection was conducted through online interviews, it is also assumed that all participants had at least some access to a digital device and relatively reliable internet connection.

The authors also acknowledge that the effects of COVID-19 continue to be experienced in vastly different and compounding ways on national, community, and individual levels — this paper's findings and analysis are by no means definitive or exclusionary.



The research paper seeks to contribute to the COVID-19 knowledge-base in a meaningful way.

The Life Course Affect

This research has been framed by the 'Life Course Theory' (LCT), which provides a theoretical basis on which the impacts of COVID-19 on young people in the Asia-Pacific have been discussed. Broadly, LCT identifies how later life outcomes can be directly determined by historical events, individual decisions, and opportunities in earlier stages of life (Benner & Mistry, 2020).

LCT analyses three major effects; Age, Period, and Cohort. Age effects are individual, often biological, sources of change. Periods and cohorts can be conceptualised as social contexts that affect individuals who reside within them (Hutchinson, 2014). This paper examines the unique effects of COVID-19 on people aged 16–35 (Age); living during the anthropocene, age of information and digital revolution (period); and belonging to the later millennials and Generation Z (cohort).

LCT also identifies 'critical transition points', described as 'discrete life changes or events within a trajectory', that have potential to change the course of a person's life (Hutchinson, 2014). Youth and young adulthood are identified as 'critical transition points', as during this time, many significant choices with the capacity to alter an individual's future life course are made.

LCT emphasises the powerful connection between individuals' lives and the historical and socio-economic context in which these lives unfold. Mitchell (2003) outlines six important realms to consider when applying LCT which we have related to the research in the following ways:

1. Socio-historical and geographical location

Behaviour and decisions do not happen in a vacuum. Events occurring in and around their respective historical and geographical location were deeply intertwined and affected an individual's development path.

2. Timing of lives

Considered in three ways; individual time (age and periods of time), generational time and historical time. LCT analyses how these three realms interact and affect an individual's life course trajectory (Peterson et al., 2001).

3. Heterogeneity or variability

A shared experience of age demographic or cohort. Also examines a range of influential differentiating factors such as social class, gender, family structure, religion, and ethnicity.

4. 'Linked lives' and social ties to others

Lives are interconnected and interdependent. An individual's life course trajectory is intimately affected by their network, chosen or otherwise (Elder, 2008).

5. Human agency and personal control

Individuals have agency to make decisions which can shape or break their social structure.

6. How the past shapes the future

An individual's later life outcomes are intrinsically linked to the conditions, experiences, decisions, and opportunities available to them in earlier stages of life.

Application of LCT is particularly crucial when discussing how COVID-19 has impacted youth in the Asia-Pacific. Considering that young people have simultaneously experienced significant age, period, and cohort effects amidst a 'critical transition point', it is expected their experience of the global pandemic will significantly affect their lives into the future in ways distinct from other generations and age demographics.



Literature Review

A thorough desk-based review was undertaken to evaluate and analyse existing literature to give context to Stage 2 data collection. The results of this analysis have been categorised into seven (7) thematic areas.

MENTAL HEALTH



The COVID-19 virus did not only attack respiratory systems; it has also intensified the global mental health crisis (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). Research by the WHO found the pandemic triggered a 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide (WHO, 2022a).

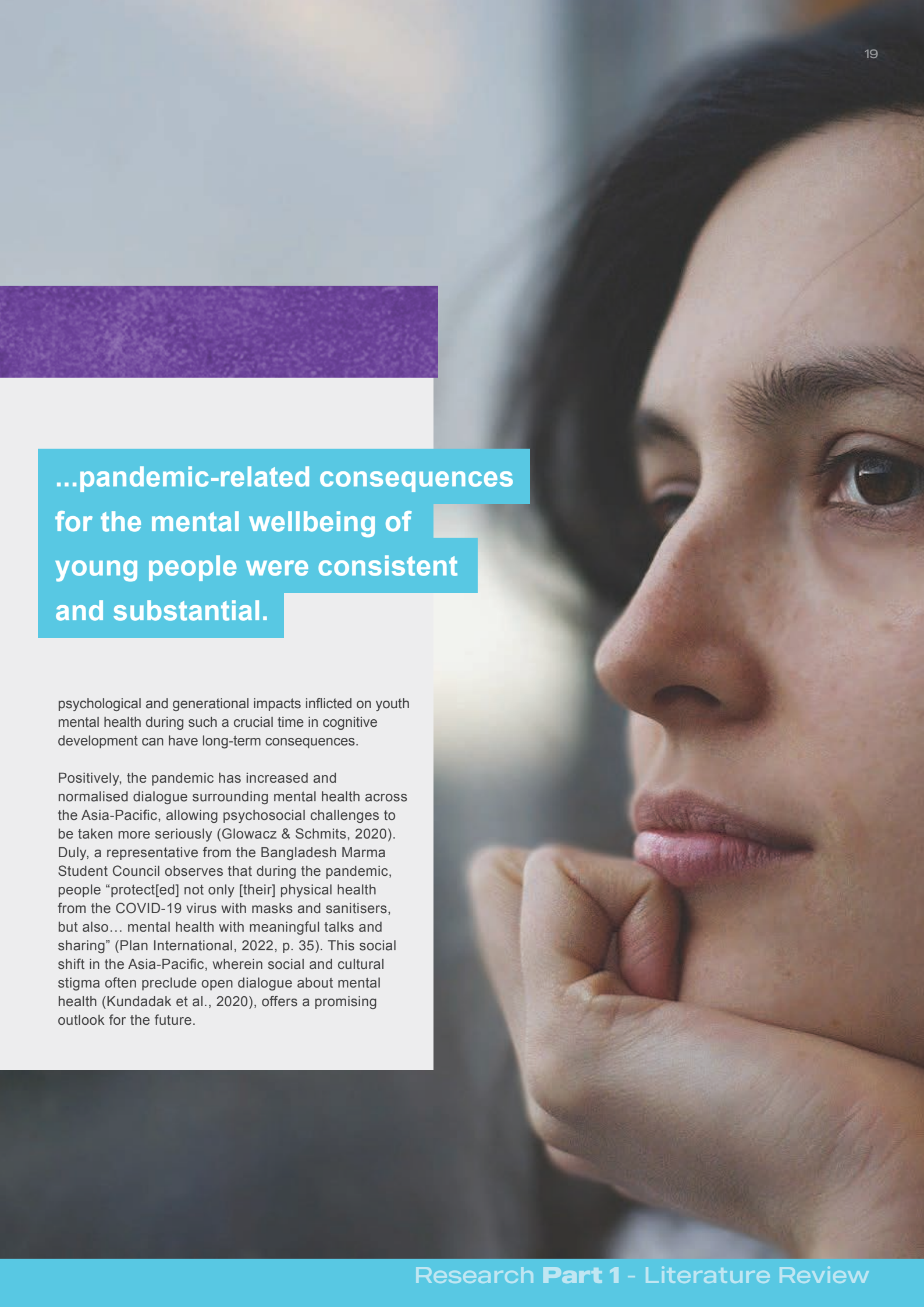
Globally, one in five young people have a mental illness, and this increases in areas affected by conflict, natural disasters, and disease (WHO, 2022a). As the Asia-Pacific region is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and rising sea levels due to the climate crisis, this is of crucial relevance to this research cohort. While mental health was a primary concern for young people even before COVID-19, young adults aged 18–24 reported higher rates of psychological distress in May, August, and October 2020, relative to pre-pandemic levels (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). It is clear, therefore, that pandemic-related consequences for the mental wellbeing of young people were consistent and substantial.

Aside from fear of COVID-19 infection, 'disruption of education' was identified as the most evident risk factor for depression among students in the region during the pandemic (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). Young people highlight struggles to cope with online classes, and an increased uncertainty surrounding their academic future, and potential career and job prospects (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). With physical campuses across all educational levels experiencing temporary closures, and quarantine measures prominent throughout the region over the pandemic, the mental health of students was severely impacted.

Educational institutes are not only places for academic enrichment; they serve as major sources of mental health support for children and adolescents (Ali et al., 2019; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). For some, they are also a 'safe haven' away from potential dangers at home and spaces of free expression. After this 'life-line' being rendered inaccessible for years, it is no surprise that youth mental health is in crisis.

It is also important to acknowledge that certain groups, particularly marginalised groups of young people, were often more adversely affected by the pandemic. Young females were more than two times as likely to report they were 'extremely' or 'very concerned' about coping with stress and mental health, relative to their male counterparts (Mission Australia, 2021). An even higher proportion of gender-diverse young people showed high levels of concern about their personal mental health and other associated issues (Mission Australia, 2021). The establishment of a COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund in India, and KHANA in Cambodia, further highlights the need for specialised support for youth in the LGBTQI+ space (UN AIDS, 2022).

COVID-19 also taxed the emotional well-being of caregivers and increased stress for many, limiting their capacity to attend to the socio-emotional and cognitive needs of children and youth (Kalil, 2013). Put simply, some parents and caregivers were often so overwhelmed with personal stressors (increased financial demands and domestic duties, mental health) that many did not have capacity to offer adequate psychosocial support to young people in their care. Through the lens of LCT, the



...pandemic-related consequences for the mental wellbeing of young people were consistent and substantial.

psychological and generational impacts inflicted on youth mental health during such a crucial time in cognitive development can have long-term consequences.

Positively, the pandemic has increased and normalised dialogue surrounding mental health across the Asia-Pacific, allowing psychosocial challenges to be taken more seriously (Glowacz & Schmits, 2020). Duly, a representative from the Bangladesh Marma Student Council observes that during the pandemic, people “protect[ed] not only [their] physical health from the COVID-19 virus with masks and sanitisers, but also... mental health with meaningful talks and sharing” (Plan International, 2022, p. 35). This social shift in the Asia-Pacific, wherein social and cultural stigma often preclude open dialogue about mental health (Kundadak et al., 2020), offers a promising outlook for the future.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND INCOME



As data surrounding the sweeping effects of COVID-19 become more readily available, it is apparent that access to employment and income has worsened for young people in the Asia-Pacific region.

Youth unemployment rates in the Solomon Islands have surged since pre-pandemic levels, from 23% to 40%, a figure which is virtually matched, and likely to continue rising, across the region (Heazle, 2021). South Asia saw the greatest decrease of working hours for young people in the world, with an average 13.5% reduction in the second quarter of 2020 (International Labour Organisation & Asian Development Bank [ILO & ADB], 2020). Data from the Republic of Korea and Thailand likewise reveal “young workers experienced a significantly larger loss of hours than adults” (ILO & ADB, 2020, p. 8). This is compounded by the fact that “youth are more likely to experience outright job loss” than adults (ILO & ADB, 2020, p. 8). Such trends are even more alarming when LCT is considered. Loss of employment for a young person can have drastic implications for their future, potentially limiting career pathways, deepening poverty cycles, and reducing opportunities for socio-economic advancement.

Tourism is a critical source of growth and employment for many Asia-Pacific countries, with young people comprising the majority of tourism-sector workers (Balasundharam & Koepke, 2021; ILO, 2021a). Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines saw a combined loss of over one million jobs in tourism — four times more than any other sector (ILO, 2021a). ILO Regional Director for the Asia-Pacific, Chihoko Asada-Miyakawa, described the pandemic as “nothing short of catastrophic” for the region, with “jobs and hours in the tourism sector likely to remain below pre-crisis numbers” despite government efforts to reopen borders (ILO, 2021a).

Heavy economic losses across the region have prompted researchers and policymakers to investigate measures to offset potential further job losses in the event of similar crises. Examining the impact of COVID-19 on Fiji and Vanuatu, Gounder (2020, p. 111) recommends greater regional economic integration, especially amongst small island developing states. In terms of domestic solutions, the ILO (ILO & ADB, 2020, p. 26) calls for direct engagement of youth in policy development at national levels and in social dialogue, as well as prioritising economic support for at-risk youth groups.

Loss of employment for a young person can have drastic implications for their future, potentially limiting career pathways, deepening poverty cycle, and reducing opportunity for socio-economic advancement.



GENDERED EXPERIENCE



Early and emerging literature has revealed stark dissimilarity in how the COVID-19 pandemic, and its related cultural and socio-economic consequences, have been experienced across genders.

This section explores how the LCT realm of heterogeneity was experienced during the pandemic for the cohort of young females and gender-diverse people. Across youth globally, females suffered more in terms of their “emotional life and personal circumstances” (Aristovnik et al., 2020, p. 23), in line with existing evidence suggesting women have greater physiological vulnerability to stress (Magson et al., 2020). Whilst this trend is not unique to the Asia-Pacific region, evidence suggests female adolescents’ experience of COVID-19 in many Asia-Pacific countries may be exacerbated by cultural and socio-economic stressors. Multiple studies observe young females, particularly those in low socioeconomic status households, are significantly more likely to suffer from additional domestic responsibilities and lost educational opportunities to compensate for COVID-19-related financial loss (see Al-Samarrai, 2020; Alvi & Gupta, 2020; Ahinkorah et al., 2021). Wang et al. (2021, p. 11) outlines the risk of further ‘reduced access to education and higher drop-out rates’

for girls in the Asia-Pacific, attributed to the preferencing of males for educational opportunities in some Asian cultures, and potentially increasing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy (Psaki, 2016; Alvi & Gupta, 2020). Among young people in the Asia-Pacific, there appeared to be negligible gender disparity in COVID-19 knowledge and health advice compliance — largely, high levels of knowledge, but low levels of compliance (Hossain et al., 2020; Fuady et al., 2021).

It is worth noting information on the impact of COVID-19 on gender-diverse and gender non-conforming individuals remains limited. By referring to existing and related studies, it can be assumed that these groups continue to face widespread difficulty in terms of access to essential service and social support (see van der Miesen, Raaijmakers & van de Grift, 2020). In particular, the psychological and healthcare outcomes of transgender and gender-diverse youth have been significantly exacerbated by the pandemic and its ongoing consequences (Hawke et al., 2021). There remains a need for a better understanding of the intersection between gendered experiences and other determinants of COVID-19-related disadvantage.



EDUCATION



Throughout the pandemic, access to education has been a significant challenge for all countries in the Asia-Pacific, with disparities and inequity across education systems in all countries being spotlighted.

By April 2020, over 1.5 billion students across all education levels worldwide had been affected in some way — the Asia-Pacific region is home to over 1.2 billion of these learners (UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2021). In fact, 99% of all schools in the Asia-Pacific were shut down at some point during the pandemic (UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2021).

Given the young population in the Asia-Pacific, the educational impact of COVID-19-related school shutdowns is of grave concern. This is not only in terms of lost learning outcomes. As the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2021, p. 4) highlights, the closure of education institutions created challenges in the region including “interrupted learning, nutrition, parents unprepared for homeschooling, unequal access to digital learning portals, gaps in childcare, increased pressure on schools and school systems that remained open, and rising dropout rates”. The key role that educational institutions play in the function of communities and society became more salient than ever before.

Whilst the ‘development status’ of countries in the Asia-Pacific region did play a role in their ability to adapt to new methods of learning, no country or school in the region was exempt from challenges. In its annual survey, Mission Australia (2021) found 46.6% of Australians between the ages of 15–19 felt there were barriers impeding them from achieving their study goals, with 62.3% reporting that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their education. Considering Australia is set to become the world’s 12th largest economy in 2023 (Australian Government Trade and Investment Commission, 2022), the pandemic’s impact on education in less wealthy Asia-Pacific states is likely to be more severe.

Education systems are critical to support the development of young people beyond the academic domain.

A significant factor affecting the education of Asia-Pacific youth is limited access to the technology and resources needed for online learning. Facing the global shift towards online teaching models, students from lower- and middle-income countries frequently did not have equitable access to digital spaces. A global study exploring the effect of access to technology on academic life found “a good internet connection (conducive to effective online learning) was reported by 59.9% students” (Aristovnik et al., 2020, p. 10). Correspondingly, students from Australia and New Zealand were most satisfied with their internet, compared to Asian students who reported

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OF ALL SCHOOLS IN
THE ASIA-PACIFIC WERE
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PANDEMIC

the lowest levels of satisfaction (58.2% satisfaction in Asia; 70.0% in Oceania) (Aristovnik et al., 2020, p. 10). It is clear that satisfaction levels were correlated with reliable internet service and vice versa.

Education systems are critical to support the development of young people beyond the academic domain. “Disruptions to education’ were the most prominent risk factor for the onset of depression among students in the Asia-Pacific during COVID-19 — a common theme throughout primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education (Balakrishnan et al., 2021, p. 49). For students, other education-related reasons commonly attributed to the deterioration of mental health include struggling to adapt to online learning, growing uncertainty around job prospects, and anxieties about their immediate academic future.

Indeed, communities and governments continue to have significant challenges in providing young people adequate access to education amidst COVID-19. ‘Educational interventions’ present an opportunity for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to increase social cohesion and build community resilience in times of crisis (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2021). It also is important to note that strong education systems will be fundamental to the recovery and future of every country post-COVID-19.



HEALTH



Research on the physical health impacts of COVID-19 have mostly been centred around the elderly. Relative to other age groups, the rate of COVID-19 related death for young people is significantly lower (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022).

As of June 2022, there have been 4.4 million COVID-19 deaths, of which 0.4% (~17,200) are estimated to be of young people under the age of 20 (UNICEF, 2022). Whilst the pandemic does have a lower risk of serious health consequences or death for young people, its health implications for youth have still been substantial.

Due to its varied human geographies, COVID-19-related health implications for youth in the Asia-Pacific vary more considerably than in other regions. Some Asia-Pacific countries, such as Tuvalu, were exposed to the pandemic much later than the rest of the world and experienced more modest consequences (Pedro, 2022). Other countries, such as Indonesia and India, have faced exceptionally severe public health outcomes, oftentimes exacerbated by high population sizes and density, and compounded with widespread economic disadvantage (Allard, 2021). In addition to geography and population, other key elements which influenced the pandemic's impact on young people

include a lack of medical resources and infrastructure, and the inability of the governments to support sufficient virus testing capacity (Fitzgerald & Wong, 2020).

Despite COVID-19 presenting an opportunity to achieve greater healthcare equity for all vulnerable populations (Hooper, et al., 2020), it is evident that this was not achieved. In a 13-country case study presented in the *International Journal for Equity in Health*, social, racial, and regional healthcare inequalities became more apparent throughout the pandemic (Shadmi, et al., 2020). In the Asia-Pacific region especially, a lack of general access to public healthcare services has the potential to cause more widespread devastation for people of lower SES (Fitzgerald & Wong, 2020).

It is worth noting the pandemic did result in limited positive health outcomes for small groups. In some instances, COVID-19-related consequences have led to more time to exercise and cook healthier and more nutritious meals, thereby contributing to a healthier overall lifestyle (Aristovnik et al., 2020). In terms of broader health implications, therefore, while COVID-19 had less of a physical impact on young people as a demographic group, its effects were largely dependent on access to health care and SES at an individual level.

STRUCTURE OF MARGINALISATION



Exploring intersectionality beyond ‘age group’ is critical to understanding the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Marginalisation refers to the relegation of individuals or groups to the ‘fringes’ of society, which generally decreases their access to rights, resources, and opportunities, and thereby reduces their ability to fully participate and flourish in society (In Work Project, 2021).

Across the Asia-Pacific, cultural and socio-political power dynamics frequently deny young people, particularly those belonging to marginalised groups, voice and agency in decision-making processes. When examining the overall impact of COVID-19 — beyond people’s access to “the systems put in place to deal with illness” (WHO, 2010, p. 1) — it becomes clear that COVID-19 further exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities that marginalised people face in every country. Such vulnerabilities include higher rates of homelessness, mental health illness, and substance abuse among marginalised groups, as well as increased levels of stigmatisation towards these groups (Baah et al., 2020).

This lack of readiness to address structural marginalisation has led to young people receiving insufficient support from governments throughout the pandemic (Baird et al., 2021, p. 1182). **Young people, especially those of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are rarely involved in the making of decisions that affect them.** Correspondingly, research by Dalzell (2020) and Razik and Baker (2020) found young people from these backgrounds felt unfairly targeted by the government’s

approach to control the second wave of COVID-19 in the state of Victoria¹. Residents (many of whom were youth predominantly from refugee and migrant backgrounds) living in public housing towers reported receiving no notice and limited information when their buildings were locked down by local law enforcement (Baird et al., 2021). Aside from exacerbating the personal circumstances of those affected (due to loss of income, mental trauma, etc.), these occurrences can also reinforce racial stereotypes and prejudice against minority communities.

Simultaneously, the outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in a significant rise to anti-East Asian sentiment throughout the region. Elevated levels of racism and Sinophobia during the pandemic have compounded negative social and mental wellbeing outcomes. During the COVID-19 peak in February 2020, the Australian Human Rights Commission recorded more complaints under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 than at any other time in the past 12 months, with reports largely filed by young people of Asian ethnicity (Tan, 2020; Furlong & Finnie, 2020). Analogously, protests in Indonesia which claimed the COVID-19 virus was ‘invented’ in China ultimately forced Chinese holidaymakers to leave the country at the early stages of the pandemic’s outbreak (Amnesty International, 2020). It is reasonable to predict that the recurrence of discriminatory behaviours in physical and online spaces will continue to have negative implications for the wellbeing of culturally and linguistically diverse youth.

¹ In Australia.



SOCIAL



Socialising is vital to positive youth development and a critical aspect of LCT. Due to the enforcement of restrictions on movement and other public health measures, social isolation increased for many young people across the Asia-Pacific. The experience of COVID-19-related social isolation varied across the world, with some communities experiencing shorter lockdown periods, while others, such as those in Argentina and Australia, enduring lockdowns for up to 262 days (Boaz, 2021).

Youth experience rapid cognitive and social growth in adolescence (from the onset of puberty through the early 20s), unlike in any other period of development or adulthood (Benner & Mistry, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, young people, as with the rest of the population, were subjected to movement and social gathering restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, which reduced and even precluded opportunities for physical-social interaction (Benner & Mistry, 2020). For young people, this decreased ability to socialise has increased feelings of isolation and worsened health and wellbeing — over one third of youth report that the pandemic has negatively impacted their friendships (Mission Australia, 2021).

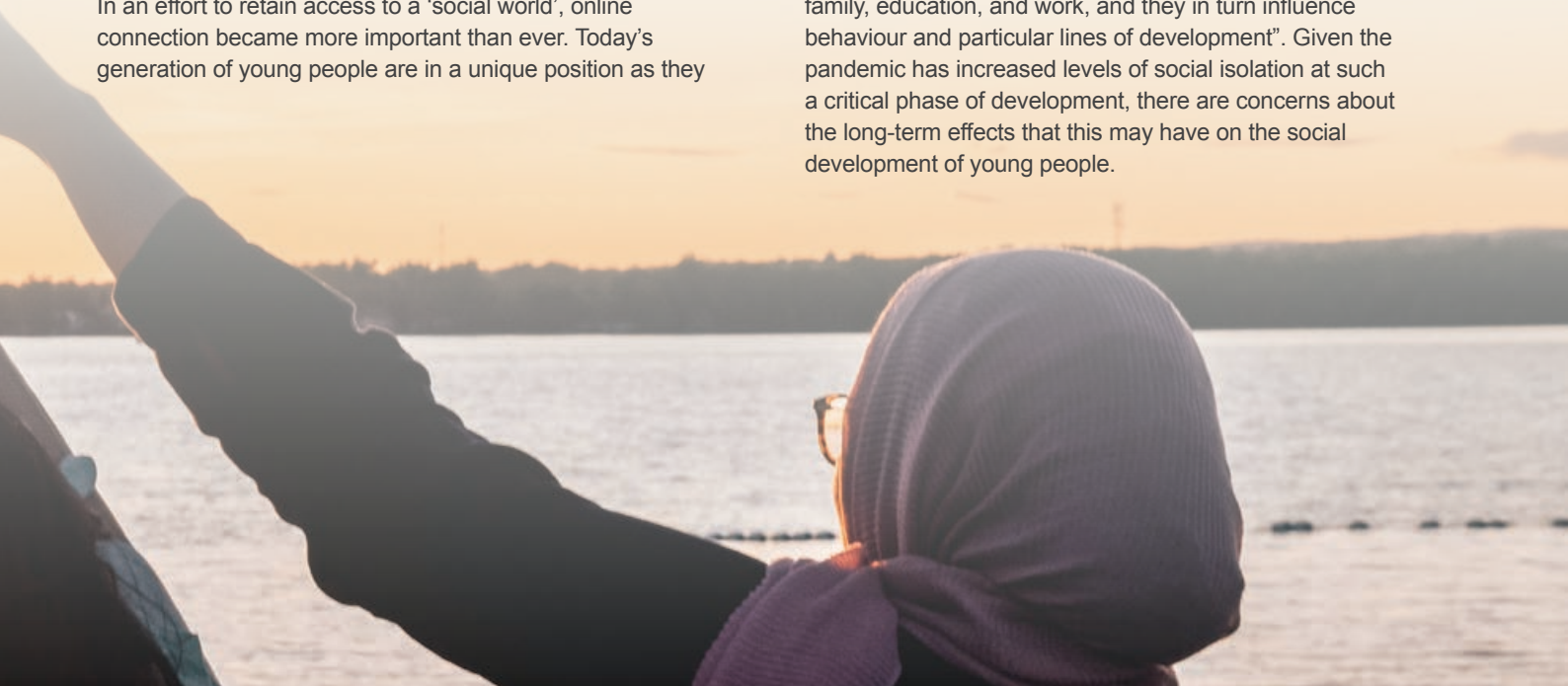
As LCT recognises, the COVID-19 pandemic experience does not exist in a vacuum as individuals navigate socio-historical events alongside others in their social worlds (Elder, 2008). However, the pandemic has limited the ability of many to interact with their 'social world', leaving many young people to navigate an already stressful and uncertain time with reduced social support.

In an effort to retain access to a 'social world', online connection became more important than ever. Today's generation of young people are in a unique position as they

were the first generation to have been raised in the internet age (Thompson, 2021). Their familiarity with the internet and other digital technologies enabled them to adapt more readily to online forms of communication (e.g. social media, instant messaging, video calling). However, while online communication can facilitate social connection, young people are concerned about the impact of the resultant increased screen time on their wellbeing (Mission Australia, 2021). Research also suggests that the benefits of online social spaces were also disproportionately distributed due to inequitable access to technology (Hooper et al., 2020). As previously noted, only 58.2% of students in Asia reported having a reliable internet connection, leaving many without the ability to socialise and access support through a screen (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

The pandemic had some benefits for young people who found attending school stressful, or who preferred an online-based learning and social environment (Viner et al., 2021). Additional time with caregivers and family also strengthened familial and community bonds for some, which served as alternative sources of social support. However, this was not a universal experience. Some young people report increased stress due to poor home environments, and school closures continue to deprive students of a "... major source of mental health support for children and adolescents" (Benner & Mistry, 2020).

Similarities have been drawn between the experience of young people during COVID-19 and those raised during Great Depression in the 1930s, with Elder (2008, p. 2) noting "historical forces shape the social trajectories of family, education, and work, and they in turn influence behaviour and particular lines of development". Given the pandemic has increased levels of social isolation at such a critical phase of development, there are concerns about the long-term effects that this may have on the social development of young people.



Part 2

Our Findings

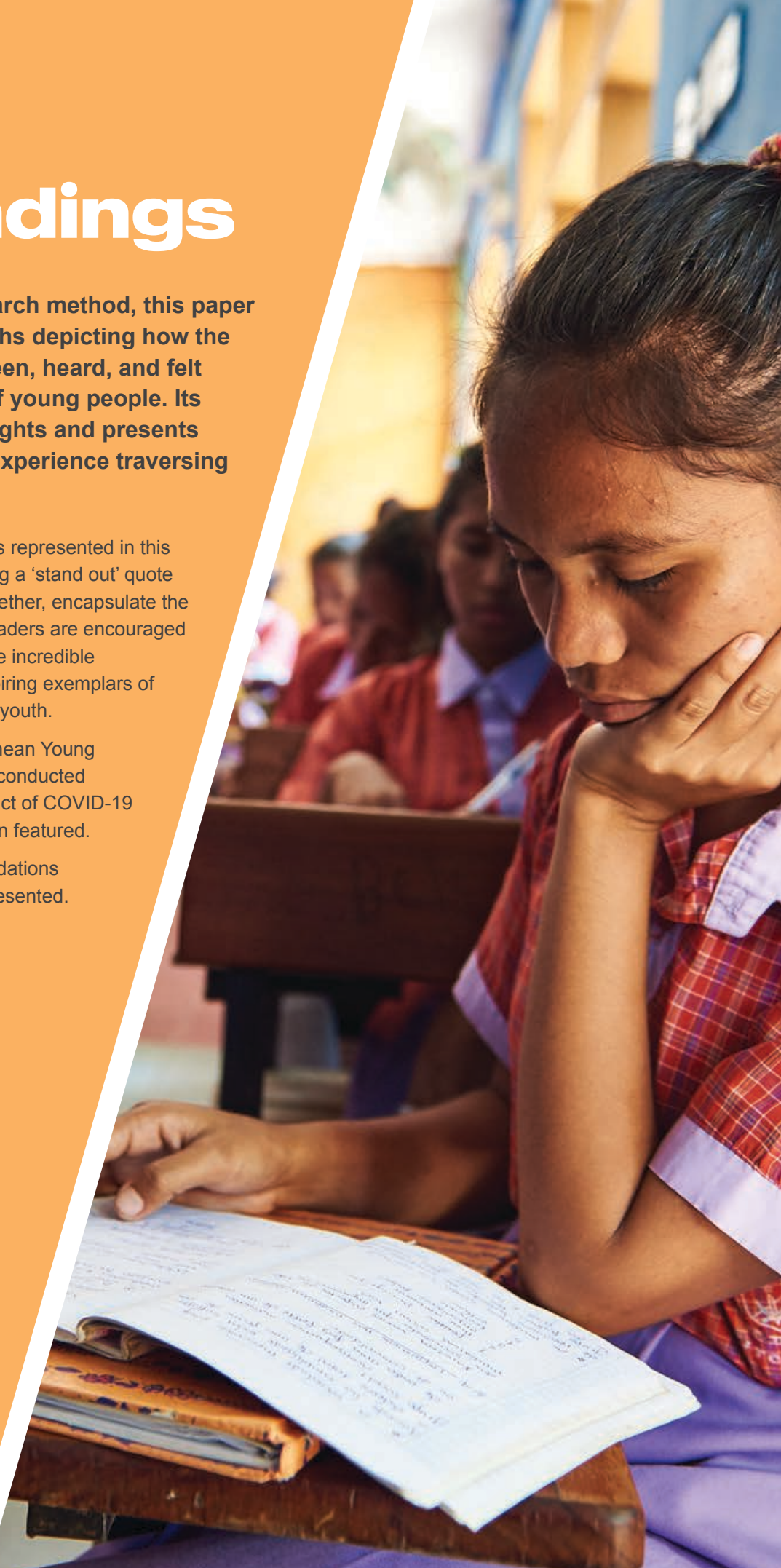
By using a qualitative research method, this paper uncovered rich and full truths depicting how the COVID-19 pandemic was seen, heard, and felt through the perspectives of young people. Its remainder unites these insights and presents the pandemic as a shared experience traversing national borders.

First, the co-operative organisations represented in this paper are introduced, each featuring a 'stand out' quote from their representative/s that, together, encapsulate the youth experience of COVID-19. Readers are encouraged to take the time to learn about these incredible organisations — their work are inspiring exemplars of the collective power of Asia-Pacific youth.

An in-depth case study of Kampuchean Young Leaders' Action (KYLA), who have conducted independent research into the impact of COVID-19 on youth in their community², is then featured.

Finally, the findings and recommendations emerging from this research are presented.

² This project was partially funded by Oaktree. A portion of the grant received for this paper was dispersed to enable KYLA to expand and extend their important research.



THE YOUTH CO-OPERATIVE



MAGIS TIMOR-LESTE

A community group of young people aged 18–35 who gather to share spirituality and leadership based on the teachings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, with a core focus on community service.

“

The time window is precious, because of age, and the pace [and] movement of life.



Y-PEER

Y-PEER is a groundbreaking and comprehensive voluntary youth-to-youth initiative.

It is a network of youth-led and youth-serving civil society organisations, governmental organisations, community-based organisations, institutions, youth activists, young people, youth advocates and trainers working together on youth-related issues.

[Youth had] more responsibility in family. The pandemic taught us to take better care of those closer to us.

Y-PEER BANGLADESH

People feel a sense of pride having gotten through the pandemic.

Y-PEER PHILIPPINES

Youth are building up our lives... the pandemic started to change our lives in ways that we couldn't even imagine at the beginning.

Y-PEER SRI LANKA

Youth are living in the middle of three revolutions; the green, industrial and digital.

Y-PEER BHUTAN



KYLA

Invests in and supports young leaders to advocate for greater opportunities for young people to realise their full potential.

The pandemic gave me the opportunity to learn new things.



PASIFIKA FOUNDATION

Inspires and strengthens young Pasifika families.

[COVID-19] sparked entrepreneurship in the Pacific. Youth created new strategies like working from home, [for] delivery services, and [started] small businesses.



INDONESIAN YOUTH FOUNDATION

Supports public diplomacy between Indonesian youth and the world to spread insight and knowledge about Indonesia, and unlock participation in the international community.

The harm of 'toxic productivity' in the pandemic... With more time it felt like you have to achieve more, pushing young people to exceed limits.



A-SEAN AUSTRALIA STRATEGIC YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

Empowers young people aged 18–29 from across ASEAN and Australia to engage with each other and the most pressing issues of today.

I think our group was uniquely affected because we were in a period of transition, [with] most of us either in university or early [in our] careers. As such, how we've interacted and proceeded with our careers and lives has only ever been in a COVID-19 environment.



TIMORIANA ASSOCIATION:

Timoriana is a youth-led environmental research and advocacy organisation. It promotes fair, responsible, and just social-economic development in Timor-Leste, and works to encourage environmental advocacy amongst youth and community members.



FAIR WEAVE CAMBODIA

A local brand offering consciously made handwoven textiles for the home and body.

Support [is] needed especially for those that live in the countryside, compared to urban youth.



AUSTRALIA-PACIFIC YOUTH DIALOGUE (APYD)

Builds and nurtures a robust relationship between youth in the Oceanic region to address regional issues collaboratively.



RAINBOW PRIDE FOUNDATION FIJI

Advocates for LGBT persons so that they are respected and can live with dignity, free from discrimination, persecution, and violence; and for the upholding of their human rights.

The pandemic forced young people to capitalise on the skills they had and build upon them.



UNITED STATES (US) EMBASSY YOUTH COUNCIL

Grapples with critical issues facing Fiji and the United States of America, plan engagements and undertake projects on topics of mutual interest.

■ The Youth Co-operative participating countries



JUVENTUDE INOVATIVO

Works by the motto; “Creative brain, innovative hands and action is the solution”

“

Young people who live in remote areas [need] to be able to...access equal rights, equal opportunities, and be fair, so that they can actively participate in decision making.



ROTARACT CLUB OF DILI

A youth volunteer organisation for poor communities and other young fellows.

[There is no] reliable access to the internet in much of the nation... Those without internet have been somewhat left behind.



CONSERVE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES LANGUAGES ORGANIZATION

An organisation led by indigenous people with the goal that indigenous youth have the capacity to produce and use high-quality media with the participation and encouragement of their elders.

Poor students cannot take care of [their] family, so they drop out of school and are now afraid to come back to school... If they cannot go to school as young people, in the future that is going to cause a lot of problems.

Challenges [of the pandemic] transcend all aspects of human life without exception... They go beyond solely a health concern.



IGNITE4CHANGE

A community organisation in Fiji that focuses on the empowerment of rural communities and vulnerable groups.

Old people are getting really... out of touch, particularly on the issues that are really hurting young people. I look forward to the day that a young person is elected, I hope they will make a change.

[There is a] need to initiate programs to help youth leaders [and] advocates to create change for the better.



ALUMNI FOR SOFT-SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Works to bridge the gap between critical thinking and life skills in Cambodian generations, in order to advance self-sustainability and lead a meaningful life.

[There will be] more risk in the future... [Young people are] concerned about accidents, future pandemics, and especially natural disasters as they happen every year.

As young people are less established in their careers, it was easier to send young people home... rather than old people.

Two contributors have chosen to remain anonymous.

KYLA CASE STUDY

Participatory Research Unit – Barriers to youth employability and access to economic resources

Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the prospect of unemployment is a significant source of anxiety for young people in Cambodia today. This is especially true for those at a stage in life where they are seeking to enter the workforce. As a young person interviewed by KYLA stated: “We fear for when we graduate. We fear we will not have a job because we have never worked and we have no experience. The fear until graduation is a difficult fear to deal with”.

About the Research:

The Kampuchean Young Leaders’ Action (KYLA) operates across seven districts in Kampong Cham and Tbong Khmum provinces in Cambodia. The organisation provides training and skills development for young people to build their capacity to become active members in their communities and pursue their personal ambitions. In 2022, KYLA conducted a research project (case study) to assess barriers to economic participation for young people, interviewing 380 people from across the two provinces. The results emerging from KYLA’s

research have been collected from a diverse sample size including representatives from the Technical and Vocational Education Training, local authorities, commune chiefs and councils, village and sub-village chiefs, and youth of varying employment status and personal circumstance.

The problem:

Overall poverty levels in Cambodia have experienced a reduction over the past decade, whilst economic growth has increased largely driven by the expansion of exports and ongoing construction (World Bank, 2019). Unsurprisingly, however, COVID-19 has resulted in the reversal of some of this progress. The World Bank reports that the national poverty rate has increased by 2.8% since 2020, equating to roughly 460,000 Cambodians falling back below poverty income thresholds (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, 71% of the population still lives below USD \$3 a day, placing a majority of the country only narrowly above the international poverty line.

The pandemic outbreak also resulted in significant disruptions to education. Before 2020, school



participation and educational attainment in Cambodia were at their highest levels. However, the physical shutdown of educational institutions due to public health orders — schools were closed for 250 days across 2020 and 2021 — led to a substantial 'learning loss', with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and UNICEF calling for increased investment in education to support students who had fallen behind (Dara, 2022).

Despite the overall trend toward increased educational attainment signifying a positive cultural shift beyond the impacts of the pandemic, young Cambodians are still struggling to find meaningful employment. The domestic job market continues to lag behind, resulting in students frequently unable to find opportunities to apply and develop their skills and knowledge after graduation. Hence, educated youth with the potential to contribute to Cambodian society are increasingly moving abroad to find employment opportunities simply unavailable in the Cambodian labour market. If not properly managed, this phenomenon can stunt economic growth and prosperity, a major concern for Cambodia as it seeks to attain upper middle-income status by 2030 (World Bank, 2022).

Findings:

Interviewees in this case study were prompted to answer the question: "What are the factors that impact young people's access to employment opportunities, vocational training, soft skills training, and economic resources?". The findings were surprising. Factors such as stress, limited access to essential supplies (e.g. food, digital hardware, internet access), or difficult personal circumstances (e.g. substance abuse, domestic violence) were generally not cited as common barriers to economic participation. Rather, according to KYLA's research, the main inhibitors of employment for youth were poor working conditions; and a lack of relevant job opportunities, knowledge of how to find such opportunities, guidance after graduation from secondary education, and motivation from family. These can be broadly separated into two significant issues — the first, an employment market that is not equipped to accommodate the influx of educated young people; and second, a lack of accessible support systems for young people after they complete their education.

82% of young people interviewed in this case study were unemployed at the time of participation. Of those that



were employed, KYLA found that the main occupations of working young people at any level (i.e. full-time, parttime, seasonal, etc.) of employment were online salesperson (45%), shop/retail workers (29%), and working on a farm/as a farmhand (16%). Of employed respondents, 81% reported they were in the lowest pay bracket, earning below USD \$81 per month — well below the minimum monthly wage in Cambodia of USD \$155.

Furthermore, 77% of respondents stated they were 'not satisfied' with their current work. This is reflective of a growing proportion of the youth population who feel unhappy and undervalued at work, and that they lack opportunities for professional development and career progression.

However, this case study also identified young people have a strong desire for meaningful employment that challenges their skills and abilities. Youth want to forge a career, build their skills, and add value to the communities in which they live. It is worth noting 52% of participants stated they were more interested in technical work as compared to jobs in other fields — a lack of on-the-job opportunities to acquire technical skills, and avenues to find such opportunities, were frequently flagged as key barriers to pursuing this interest.

While statistics are able to corroborate that there exist clear barriers to young people's economic participation, they fail to capture the intense emotive experience of unemployment or perceived future unemployment. By gathering qualitative responses, this case study sought to depict the psychosocial impacts more clearly. For instance, a participant compared the feeling of being unemployed to that of having a disease, in that the impacts are not isolated to one aspect of an individual's life but spread throughout all areas of life. Another interviewee shared a useful insight into how young people's sense of self is being affected, reflecting on the pervasive feeling that, "because of the job market in Cambodia, we are not enough."

It is evident, therefore, that crucial investment in young people and the development of Cambodia's domestic labour market is required. Young people need guidance to become 'work ready' and aware of the post-COVID-19 employment opportunities available to them, and Cambodian employers need support to adapt to the changing face of work and offer meaningful opportunities for young people to develop professionally.

Conclusions:

This case study has revealed that factors inhibiting the economic participation of youth may not be principally attributed to personal circumstance (such as limited access to food, mental health challenges, substance abuse), but rather centre around job market and

professional support deficiencies. In post-COVID-19 Cambodia, young people are strongly demanding constructive action be taken to bolster their domestic employment opportunities, so that they can see a sustainable future for themselves in Cambodia. Positively, these barriers can be mitigated through effective public policy intervention which provides support for young people beginning their careers, as well as employers to better harness and use the skills that young workers possess.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure young people are able to complete at least a twelfth-grade education.
2. Inform parents of young people about the importance of education.
3. Increase opportunities for young people to pursue appropriate educational and career opportunities.
4. Increase young people's awareness of the employment opportunities available to them. Possibilities include the establishment of job boards in local communities, vocational training institutions and encouraging the involvement of local leaders and business in such initiatives.
5. Collaborate with existing educational institutions and for-purpose organisations to create opportunities for young people who are unable to pursue higher education.

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YOUTH AND LIFE COURSE THEORY

The ‘pandemic experience’ of young people is unique to their age group as they encountered this life-altering event amidst an internal and intrinsic ‘critical transition point’ in their lives, from youth to adulthood. Youth are also being forced to navigate the uncertainty of COVID-19 “in the middle of three revolutions: the green, industrial, and digital” (Y-PEER Bhutan), which has left them to grapple with the reality of an unpredictable world, and wonder if they will be left behind. Consequently, many young people have had significant challenges and experiences that are not adequately documented and explored in current literature.

Precluded by COVID-19 and its impacts, many ‘once in a lifetime’ experiences associated with ‘coming of age’ are unlikely to occur at future points in young people’s lives. It is therefore unsurprising that sentiments of loss and mourning were recurrent among those interviewed. When reflecting on the psychological and emotional experience of COVID-19, 52% of research participants highlighted feelings of loss, mourning, and grief. This reflects themes including: a mourning of the present; as well as a loss of youth, of adventure, of an envisioned future, and of the experiences they assumed would be a natural part of their life trajectory.

Articulated by interviewees, the nature of these ‘life losses’ surround the denial of opportunities to: experience university life, travel, be part of an in-person workplace, take part in youth activities, make memories with friends, contribute to cultural practices, build careers and pursue employment opportunities, and freely express themselves as young individuals. Whilst acknowledging the effects of COVID-19 were felt across all age groups, some research participants

“**These are our best years!**

-Y-PEER Sri Lanka

expressed they felt as though young people were more affected due to the pandemic having greater consequential impacts on their lives than that of their older counterparts.

Furthermore, the pandemic also forced many young people to make ‘big decisions’ which have irrevocably changed their life course and trajectory. Reflecting on the pandemic thus far, an interviewee remarked, “the time window is precious... the pandemic took two years and now some youth can no longer continue their studies” (MAGIS Timor-Leste). Participants also observed many young people had been pressured, be it directly or indirectly, to make significant life decisions, observing similarly-aged peers who had been forced to: marry early and become parents, move back to rural hometowns with lesser socio-economic opportunities; or had been pushed into careers and employment out of necessity. It is worth noting many of these significant life decisions can be associated with an increased likelihood of exposure to ongoing poverty and greater financial dependence on others.

Culture is also a significant influence on the life course of young people. The Fijian cultural pillar of *Solesolevaki*,



52%

OF RESEARCH
PARTICIPANTS
HIGHLIGHTED FEELINGS
OF LOSS, MOURNING,
AND GRIEF

which is a practice of communal giving and contributing to the collective good, community wellbeing, and quality of life for *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijians), offers a pertinent example. A 'traditional' LCT trajectory would predict and expect a community member would begin participation in this cultural ritual in young adulthood. However, as the pandemic caused many young people to lose current (and potentially future) sources of income, many young Fijians remain unable to take part in *Solesolevaki* and have faced cultural stigmatisation as a result. Accordingly, an interviewee observed "social and traditional cultural systems oppress you — because you are not contributing, so others look down on you" (Rainbow Pride Foundation).

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the life course of many youth across the Asia-Pacific, and continues to create a legacy of unique consequences and challenges for this demographic. However, there are lingering sentiments of hopefulness and resilience.

62%

OF THOSE INTERVIEWED
MENTIONED...COVID-19
HAD MADE THEM BETTER
PREPARED TO ADAPT TO
A RAPIDLY CHANGING
WORLD

62% of those interviewed mentioned that the experience of COVID-19 has made them better prepared to adapt to a rapidly changing world, and optimistic to find positivity and hope in future opportunities. Throughout the pandemic, many young people seized opportunities to become more politically active and engaged in social welfare initiatives. For many young people, these activities increased their sense of self-value within their communities which is an important process in the transition from youth to adulthood to establish their utility and value within their communities. Truly representative of the stoutheartedness of youth, an interviewee asserted: "we won't let Covid control our lives anymore" (Y-PEER Sri Lanka).

YOUTH AND LIVELIHOODS

The COVID-19 pandemic saw sources of income vanish, and employment opportunities decline, across the Asia-Pacific. Feeling inadequately unsupported by their governments throughout the economic stagnation, many households and individuals were left with anxieties and uncertainties about the future. For many Asia-Pacific communities reliant on tourism and agriculture as economic backbones, high levels of unemployment in these sectors were particularly damaging to local livelihoods.

This research has revealed two key areas related to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on youth unemployment in the region: interruptions to education and work-based learning; and lower SES as a compounding factor of disadvantage. Coupled with widespread interruptions to educational delivery, many students also struggled to access internships and work placements during their tertiary studies. Citing the increasingly paramount importance of work experience to employers, young people in the region reported a growing fear surrounding the negative impacts of COVID-19 on their employability and working futures. Interviewees also noted those of lower SES and those residing in rural areas generally experienced more severe economic consequences as a result of COVID-19 public health orders. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement and gatherings prevented agricultural communities from selling and transporting their produce to surrounding localities, significantly inhibiting their ability to generate a steady flow of income. Supply chain disruptions on a global scale also resulted in difficulties for the shipment of goods, both domestically and internationally. Rural communities, therefore, found themselves not only geographically isolated, but also isolated from the economic systems on which they rely to survive. Of course, these financial repercussions were felt more severely by poorer demographics.

This research has revealed two key areas related to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on youth unemployment in the region: interruptions to education and work-based learning; and lower SES as a compounding factor of disadvantage.

Positively, amidst such glaring setbacks to employment and income opportunities, seen across much of the Asia-Pacific was a rise in youth entrepreneurship.

Young people pursued online avenues to further their education and gain work-based learning to make the most of COVID-19 lockdowns. Additionally, adapting to the imposed reality of a digital world, many businesses and organisations were forced to “literally redesign how [they] were running businesses” (US Embassy Youth Council). Young people joined this surge in online entrepreneurialism, building sustainable businesses and establishing an online presence to last beyond the pandemic. As ‘digital natives’, youth were able to leverage their creativity to stand out in already saturated online markets and social spaces. An interviewee observed “a rise in young people... creating [online] pages” (AYPD) and gaining popularity through new and innovative ways of public outreach.

YOUTH AND TECHNOLOGY



Across the Asia-Pacific, the ‘digital revolution’ accelerated upon by the COVID-19 pandemic underscored issues surrounding internet access, technological competence and the associated financial costs of shifting to online-based activities.

This ‘digital divide’ was particularly pronounced across rural-urban lines, with areas outside major cities frequently lacking the infrastructure to support reliable cellular telephone and internet connections. Those living in rural and isolated communities were less likely to possess the technological hardware necessary for online-based education or business. Individuals and families of lower SES also faced greater obstacles (predominantly financial) to technology and internet access, regardless of their location of residence. Additional financial burdens associated with online education were also largely passed down to families, who often had difficulty meeting the cost of increased internet access, printing, and other utilities necessary for home-based learning.

As government efforts across the region were largely concentrated on containing the spread of COVID-19, little support for this ‘digital shift’ was afforded to the general public. Lack of clarity surrounding government support for the transition to online-based learning led to widespread confusion, and sometimes resulted in young people having to terminate their education, particularly true for those with reduced financial capital or internet access.

Summarily, lower SES and rural location of residence were significant predictors of lower technological access and competence for young people overall.

In terms of opportunities, youth across the Asia-Pacific are optimistic for the increased technological and internet literacy of the younger generation, especially those currently schooling or newly entering the workforce. While acknowledging the implications of the ‘digital divide’, increased youth engagement and literacy in multimedia was widely identified as a positive consequence of COVID-19 lockdowns. During periods of restricted mobility because of COVID-19 lockdowns, online spaces were often used to mobilise resources and services support for local families, communities and diaspora, as well as provide a valuable space to build solidarity. Noting that “misinformation spreads faster than information itself” (AYPD), young people have also — through media outlets, companies, schools — become more sensitive to misinformation, and thus better equipped to identify it.

Those interviewed observed a rise in youth advocates using social media as a platform to facilitate dialogue (with leaders and experts, as well as among other young people) about community issues, mental health, and politics, among other topics of interest. Significantly, however, increased use of social media also led to an increase in discrimination and bullying for certain marginalised groups, particularly LGBTQI youth.

YOUTH AND WELLBEING

The negative implications of COVID-19 affected the wellbeing of young people severely and in ways not previously explored. Amongst young people in their communities, those interviewed observed an increase in eating disorders, exposure to domestic violence, and marriage and pregnancies (for young women especially). Interviewees also mentioned rising numbers of youth participating in risk-taking behaviours, including unhealthy alcohol and drug consumption, smoking, and disruptive social behaviours. The dangers of such experiences and behaviours extend far beyond their immediate risks, and can cause detrimental outcomes beyond ‘youthhood’.

Mental health was a significant and recurring challenge for youth during COVID-19. Owing to prolonged periods of social isolation and lockdowns, research participants frequently expressed the significant extent to which activities previously considered ‘normal’ and ‘everyday’ contributed to their personal wellbeing. Such activities, including attending classes, congregating for religious practice, participating in team sports, and simply spending time at work and with friends in-person, became increasingly important to an individual’s psychosocial fulfilment. With these social activities removed, an interviewee remarked the greatest challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic was “having to meet [with only] oneself during this time” (Anonymous). It is therefore unsurprising that 100% of youth interviewed consistently identified increased levels of stress, fear, uncertainty and/or anxiety because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prolonged phases of uncertainty due to the unpredictable nature of COVID-19 and poor public messaging — e.g. school closures, mistranslation of public health information, lack of information surrounding lockdowns — were especially mentally taxing for youth at crucial stages of education.

For people belonging to marginalised groups, social isolation often disconnected them from the communities and safe spaces wherein they could freely express themselves and be supported. Many young people who are reliant on these networks for genuine connection “lost... outlet[s] for social life” (US Embassy Youth

Council) which allowed them to exist without pressure for social or cultural norms. One participant described the transformational power that moving from rural areas to a city can have for LGBTQI+ youth, as they can more easily find members of the same community and “be who they are” (Rainbow Pride Foundation). With many returning to rural hometowns due to COVID-19-related financial factors or to assume caregiver duties, some young people were forced to “lose pieces of their identity” to ensure their safety and acceptance, thereby undermining their self-identity (Rainbow Pride Foundation). Pandemic lockdowns and quarantine measures also forced some young people to live in unsafe environments for prolonged periods. As explained by an interviewee, “being forced to live with [a] family that does not accept your sexuality or identity.. causes misunderstandings, and verbal and physical abuse that makes you [feel] tiny and insecure” (Rainbow Pride Foundation).

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In terms of their personal physical health, at large, those interviewed did not highlight experiences of significant hardship. Young people recognised that other demographics in their communities were more susceptible and negatively affected by the COVID-19 virus itself. Accordingly, a consistent theme across all interviews was the inability of existing health infrastructure to cope with increased patient caseloads and provide the specialist care necessary for those experiencing severe COVID-19 symptoms. It is worth noting those requiring unrelated medical support, especially specialist services (such as those required by transgender youth), frequently faced considerable challenges to accessing vital healthcare, thereby risking further harm to their wellbeing. Duly, throughout the pandemic, the wellbeing of young people was impacted beyond exclusively physical health ramifications.

The response of young people to the physical restrictions of COVID-19 was innovative and adaptive.

For young people with access to reliable technology, online spaces became crucial ‘safe havens’ where they could freely express themselves and be accepted by a welcoming community.

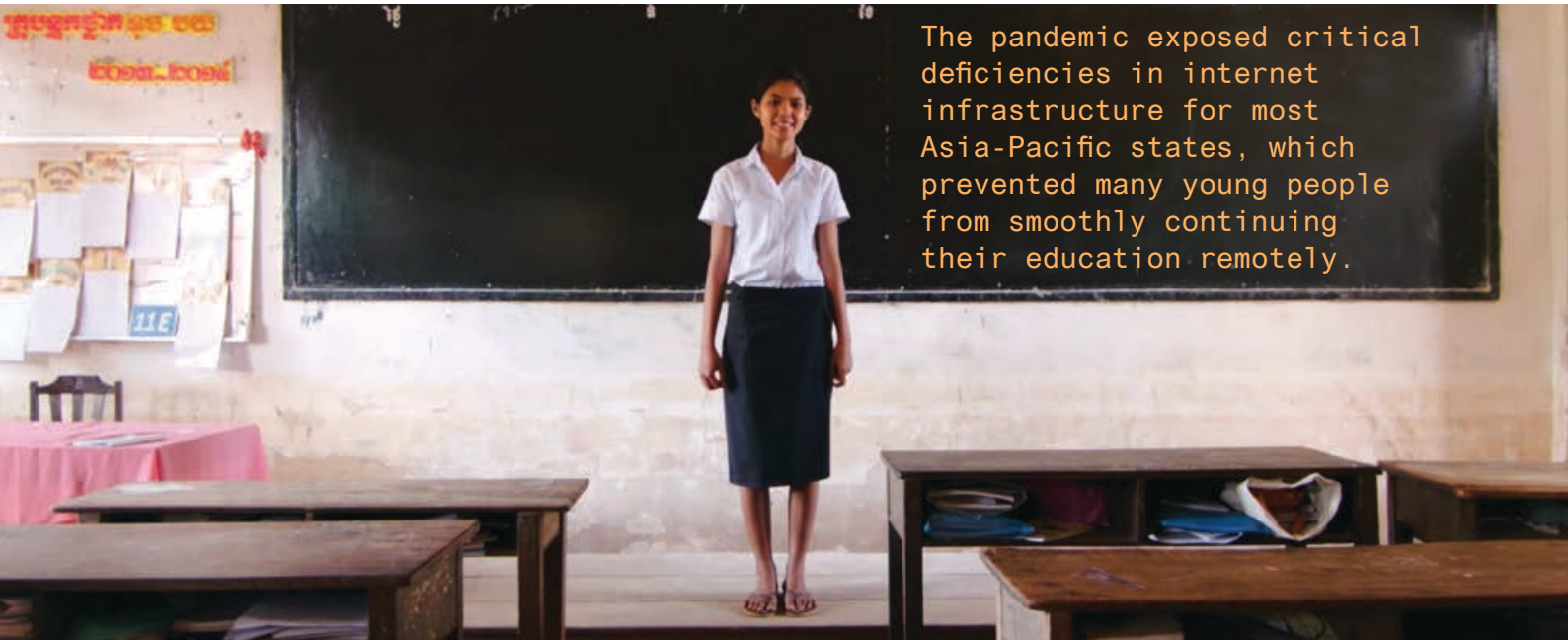
... the pandemic presented some young people with positive opportunities to spend more time with their families, slow down the pace of life, and prioritise their personal health.

Belonging to the 'technology native' generation, over 90% of those interviewed increased their use of online social platforms — i.e. chat rooms, video conferencing, gaming, social viewing platforms — to facilitate interpersonal communication. Whilst not an equal substitute for in-person social interaction, online platforms presented young people an opportunity to expand their social circles beyond physical boundaries. Several interviewees mentioned forming friendships with others in different countries whom they would not have otherwise met. Outside of the digital realm, the pandemic presented some young people with positive opportunities to spend more time with their families, slow down the pace of life, and prioritise their personal health.

Another positive outcome of the pandemic has been greater attention on the importance of mental wellbeing. Speaking to the increased prominence of psychological health across all levels of society, an interviewee expressed optimism that **“mental health [has] finally become a driving factor in every agenda” (Ignite4Change)**. This gradual prioritisation of mental health is particularly evident from interviewees based in Fiji, who highlighted the government had expanded access to free counselling sessions across the entire country, not just in major cities.



YOUTH AND EDUCATION



The pandemic exposed critical deficiencies in internet infrastructure for most Asia-Pacific states, which prevented many young people from smoothly continuing their education remotely.

Rapid surges in the spread of COVID-19 greatly strained education systems across Asia-Pacific states. The largely cumbersome shift towards online learning, and low levels of reliable access to technology, left many young people disadvantaged and unmotivated in the pursuit of their studies.

In the vast majority of circumstances, educational providers' transition to online education models was disorganised and inequitable. Accordingly, education-related difficulties were highlighted as a "key personal challenge" of COVID-19 by 62% of research participants, with 100% of respondents observing struggles with education as a widespread consequence of COVID-19.

It is important to understand the varied (and often intersecting) ways in which the pandemic posed a challenge to young people's education.

Technological disadvantage and difficulties, increased psychological stressors and domestic responsibilities, financial disadvantage, a decline in study options and work-based learning, and a loss of in-person instruction and interaction, were among the factors contributing to increases in academic underperformance and termination.

The pandemic exposed critical deficiencies in internet infrastructure for most Asia-Pacific states, which prevented many young people from smoothly continuing their education remotely. In particular, youth residing in remote communities were significantly more likely to lack adequate technological hardware and internet access. Interviewees based in Timor-Leste, for instance, noted only the capital city of Dili and its

surrounding municipality had a reliable and consistent internet connection. This reduced technological access in rural areas has seen many young people left behind their city-dwelling counterparts in terms of education, further deepening the socio-economic divide between rural and metropolitan areas. Some interviewees shared stories of children ascending mountains in order to receive the internet and cellular reception necessary to participate in online classes and download their worksheets and exams (Pasifika Fiji).

Interviewees also noted their exam results, and that of their peers, declined during the pandemic, but exclusively due to difficulties surrounding technology. Reduced face-to-face connection with classmates and peers led to students

of all youth age groups quickly becoming demotivated with virtual modes of learning. Accordingly, the inability to interact in a face-to-face educational environment, and increased distractions and lack of supervision at home, were common

reasons pertaining to decreased academic performance cited by interviewees. Duly, "education isn't just about learning, it is growing with a class and growing with your friends" as well (Anonymous).

However, some young people highlighted positive changes to their education which did not exist prior to the pandemic outbreak. Increased flexibility with online learning, more time for recreation due to reduced travel times, development of technological literacy, and having to "think outside the box" (AYPD) and be innovative, were cited as possible beneficial outcomes. It is presumed that these skills will allow young people to better adapt to the digital 'future of work'.



Education isn't just about learning, it is growing with a class and growing with your friends.

YOUTH AND GOVERNMENTS

Governments “should take care of young people because [they] are the future” (Y-PEER Sri Lanka). Young people are significantly underrepresented in government — in 2020, people under 40 years of age represented 34% of the population, but only 22% of parliamentarians globally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

In the absence of official reported statistics, it is reasonable to assume youth representation in Asia-Pacific politics is pales in comparison to the 60% of the overall population they comprise (OECD, 2021). Therefore, the concerns of young people, particularly those belonging to marginalised groups, are frequently overlooked by decision-making bodies — a common sentiment among research participants. 62% of interviewees expressed they felt there was a significant gap in youth perspectives and input in policy-making, and that there exists a lack of youth-focused policy at all government levels. Unsurprisingly, state-led efforts to curb the spread and immediate consequences of COVID-19 were largely oriented towards the short-term and non-youth demographics, such as the elderly, younger children, and the older workforce.

Research findings about the perceived effectiveness of domestic government responses to COVID-19 were mixed. Governments across the Asia-Pacific implemented a broad range of pandemic-related support programmes: distribution of essential supply rations, one-off cash transfers, free vaccinations, improved internet access and support for online learning, and investments in training and education (i.e. for key industries; tailored internships). However, interviewees largely noted these initiatives were rarely sufficient. The most positive evaluation of government response emerged from an interviewee in Bhutan, who cited the Bhutanese *Druk Gyalpo* (king) and the *DeSuung*³ programme as playing crucial roles in lifting public morale during the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout the pandemic, *DeSuung* ‘guardians’ provided a range of pandemic support services to their community, with young people also encouraged to take part in the programme. This, combined with the presence of the King throughout the nation, positively influenced young people’s impression of the government response.

However, the vast majority of interviewees highlighted an absence of targeted support for young people in pandemic



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³ *DeSuung*, meaning ‘Guardians of Peace’, is an initiative of Bhutan’s fifth Dragon King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. Established in 2011, it is intended to promote the spirit of volunteerism, the positive influence of ethics, and values of community service, integrity, and civic responsibility in Bhutanese society. (Ping, 2021)

responses. Interviewees specifically identified substance abuse prevention, access to education (especially for online learning), and professional and career development as areas in need of youth-targeted support. Youth also noted a general lack of age-disaggregated data across areas indirectly impacted by COVID-19 led to young people and vulnerable groups being overlooked at the policy level. Correspondingly, an interviewee noted that despite the noticeable rise in discrimination against LGBTQIA+ youth during the pandemic, “the government failed to provide support or make policies that were inclusive for [the community]” (YPEER Sri Lanka).

An interviewee duly emphasised the need for meaningful youth representation in politics, noting those in governments “are getting really old and out of touch, particularly on the issues that are really hurting young people” (Ignite4Change).

Another noteworthy theme highlighted by young people was the dire need to increase national disaster management capacities. Interviewees expressed consistent criticism of the lack of government preparedness for not only COVID-19 (and other disasters), but also its cascading and compounding effects. As state pandemic responses fixated “on bringing the economy back up, there wasn’t much focus on... cascading effects” (APYD) and their impact on large swathes of the population. In many Asia-Pacific countries economically reliant on tourism, particularly Pacific states, large numbers of young people in the tourism and travel sectors lost vital employment due to a virtual ‘standstill’ international travel. The vast majority of COVID-19’s indirect consequences for youth, discussed in this report, still remain unaddressed.

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YOUTH AND COMMUNITY

Community continues to play a significant role in the lives of young people throughout the Asia-Pacific. Interestingly, the youth experience of ‘community’ during the pandemic varied considerably. Research participants expressed mixed opinions when asked to evaluate how they felt their “sense of community” and community interaction was impacted by COVID-19. 52% of interviewees highlighted positive outcomes for their community, highlighting increased unity, bonding through shared experiences, and helping one another.

Some interviewees recounted, “when one person got Covid, the whole community would help” (Y-PEER Sri Lanka); and, “in such an experience you have to come together — it unites you” (Anonymous). Conversely, 48% of research participants observed a greater sense of division among community members, with fears and rumours posing a challenge to solidarity. The pandemic negatively affected social bonds in some communities which are reliant on physical interaction to access essential goods and support (i.e. in markets or local community groups). For many communities unable to shift businesses and income streams online, COVID-19 also resulted in economic difficulties.

As discussed in *Youth and Wellbeing*, the internet was crucial to how youth experienced and coped with the challenges of the pandemic. Many young people, particularly those belonging to marginalised groups, found a great sense of community and belonging in online communities, which were often an ‘escape from reality’. Communities traversing borders and divisions also formed in online spaces. The internet also provided opportunities for existing communities to come together. Catalysed by youth entrepreneurship, a Fiji-based interviewee recounted young people were able to use their digital skills to stream funerals online and grieve together for the *Reguregu*⁴ (Rainbow Pride Foundation) — an important cultural practice in Fiji. Whilst not the perfect substitute for physical participation, online methods were crucial to the mourning process and served to strengthen community ties.

During the pandemic, in-person community interaction remained a firm presence in young people’s lives. Many interview participants contributed to community activities and capacity-building through the pandemic.



Many interview participants contributed to community activities and capacity building through the pandemic.

This involvement varied considerably, with interviewees participating in the translation of COVID-19 health information, volunteering as community ‘gatekeepers’ and *de facto* healthcare workers, and writing concept notes and applications for community support funding.

This highlights a notable positive opportunity emerging from the pandemic, as many youth felt they became more valued in their communities.

Those interviewed mentioned that their adaptability and proficiency with technology led to the wider community relying on them to support others to navigate the ‘new’ online world. Many also felt that young people became stronger advocates throughout the experience of the pandemic.

Culture has a significant influence on the efficacy of youth activism and the representation of youth voices at all levels. Therefore, the role of young people at the community level is largely contingent on socio-cultural context. It is impossible to draw definitive conclusions on how COVID-19 impacted communities as a whole.

As such, these findings speak more to the complexities of each community ecosystem as they respond and meet challenges in diverse ways. As noted by a research participant, “every time we engage, we have to remember we are respecting the elders, the traditional custodians of the land...even though we have our own opinions we have to understand the hierarchy...and to share not only our passion but our *compassion*” (Ignite4Change).

⁴ In Fiji, when a person in the community dies, related clans come together in religious and social gatherings to share their sorrow and reaffirm social connections in what is called the Reguregu (Vave, 2021). This forms an important part of Fijian collectivist culture.

Conclusions & Recommendations

1.

INVESTING IN YOUTH ENTREPRENEURIALISM



With youth unemployment rising at nearly five times the rate of adults (ILO, 2021, p. 1), young people adopted creative and innovative methods to start businesses and generate income throughout the pandemic. Youth are 1.6 times more likely than adults to be engaged in entrepreneurial activity, therefore aligning with the UN's Youth 2030 Agenda we recommend that in order to maximise their social and economic potential, greater investment is needed to support these endeavours into the future (World Youth Report, 2020).

The loss of employment and employment prospects throughout COVID-19 brought about an entrepreneurial spirit across the Asia-Pacific, with a surge in youth-run online businesses and 'startups'. Some research participants from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea reported starting up their own online businesses during the pandemic, indicative of the need for more investment and policy to ensure the flourishing of this 'new economy'. Many of these new enterprises aimed to achieve the same objective — pandemic recovery. Accordingly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2021, p. 23) reported 74% of youth-led enterprises surveyed in the Asia-Pacific have contributed to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. Demonstrably, youth leadership is powerful in the Asia-Pacific, and the tangible positive outcomes of youth entrepreneurship cannot be ignored.

COVID-19-related restrictions on movement saw people become more likely to shop locally and invest in local economies. This extended to online participation and traffic as well. Lockdowns resulted in people spending increased amounts of time online, with internet bandwidth rising by 35% in 2020 alone (Liu & Fan, 2022, p. 7). Youth entrepreneurs capitalised on this trend. Local youth-run businesses utilised online platforms to expand their networks and cater to markets demanding the goods of other companies which had not yet developed an online presence (Pasifika Fiji). Current responses from Asia-Pacific governments have been limited, with most in the form of financial aid to critical sectors (ILO, 2021b, p. 2). There have also been attempts to support the employment of young people at national levels (ILO, 2021b, p. 2). Responding to consistent calls for greater youth employment support, the Indonesian Ministry of Education implemented an online internship course for

university students in an attempt to offset the decline in entry-level job opportunities. It is worth noting places in the course were extremely competitive and the programme itself faced accusations of nepotism (IYF Indonesia)⁵. However, while the Indonesian initiative fell short of expectations, the significant levels of interest it generated highlights that young people are proactively seeking job opportunities — businesses should be incentivised to look to youth as a viable option for employment.

It is difficult to predict whether the limited responses already put in place will have any lasting benefits. Greater investment in terms of financial resources, professional development, and training should be a matter of priority. With constructive and visible support from governments, youth entrepreneurship across the Asia-Pacific can produce a domino effect, inspiring others to learn and innovate. Technical and vocational skills training (especially in a work environment), business development workshops and mentorships, and professional 'soft skills' training, are possibilities for direct youth engagement in this regard. Engaging and supporting existing in-country professional networks would allow for such initiatives to be catered towards local context. Importantly, short-term investment also has the potential to create long-term benefits. Increased education to encourage entrepreneurship will create great opportunities for young people to not only enter the workforce, but also create jobs — 70% of all jobs are from micro, small and medium sized enterprises (UNDP, 2019, p. 17).

More also needs to be done to create a business environment conducive to the employment and professional development of young workers (Rinne et al., 2022). Recommendations for this include the provision of incentives for organisations to hire and train young people (i.e. employment subsidies), and equipping human resources and management staff with the resources to better support younger employees. Indeed, greater investment and resourcing is needed to foster this 'new economy' in the Asia-Pacific and ensure its flourishing beyond the backdrop of COVID-19. With adequate support and investment in the capabilities and skills of young people, the booming youth population across the Pacific has the potential to go from a regional risk to a demographic dividend.

⁵ Not necessarily the view of the research participant or organisation.

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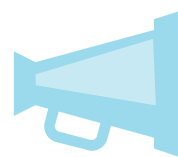
74%

OF YOUTH-LED ENTERPRISES SURVEYED IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY EFFORTS.



2.

INCREASING YOUTH REPRESENTATION & VOICES



With over 750 million youth under the age of 24 residing in the region, young people have a crucial role in building a sustainable, equitable, and resilient Asia-Pacific (United Nations, 2018). Challenges across the Asia-Pacific are increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. Even before the pandemic, the region faced frequent ecological disasters, food insecurity, forced displacement, and geo-political instabilities (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

Amidst the intersecting challenges posed by COVID-19, however, youth “continue to fearlessly challenge the status quo” and place their communities “at the centre of recovery efforts” (Restless Development and the Development Alternative, 2022, p. 13)

The response of young people to the pandemic has exemplified their expertise, innovation, commitment to community, and resilience in times of crisis.

Youth-led organisations in particular filled critical gaps in the humanitarian response to COVID-19 at micro- and meso-community levels, significantly enhancing the ways in which communities were able to manage its impacts (Blom et al., 2021). For every challenge posed, young people created new ways of living — pioneering online learning, creating digital spaces for social interaction, and forging new career pathways when existing opportunities vanished. Youth are not merely spectators in their communities, they can be incredible assets and resources for all of society.

Young people are already ‘putting in the work’. The co-operative organisations represented in this paper are powered by young volunteers making a positive

difference to the communities in which they live. Their achievements exemplify the deep understanding youth have of the critical issues faced by their generation, and their responsiveness in meeting these challenges. Governments and other decision-making bodies should recognise the expertise and passion that exists within these groups, and seek their input when creating policy at all levels of society. Increasing financial and training support to allow youth-run organisations to continue their work *independently* presents a propitious opportunity to maximise the societal benefits of their work. The myth that supporting the work and voices of young people is somehow ‘risky’ needs to be abandoned. Investing in youth, “is not just a moral obligation, it is a compelling economic necessity” (Woollcombe, 2007, p. 3).

It is not that youth voices are lacking in abundance or expertise — that the issue is one of credibility or scarcity. Young people want to be heard, but the platforms don’t exist, or at least are not as accessible as they need to be. In line with the United Nations

In line with the United Nations Youth 2030 agenda, there needs to be greater representation of young people in places of power, particularly in the development of youth-focused policy.

Youth 2030 agenda (United Nations Youth Strategy, 2022), there needs to be greater representation of young people in places of power, particularly

in the development of youth-focused policy. Those interviewed often expressed they felt as though there was deliberate ‘gatekeeping’ in political institutions which prevented young people from contributing and existing in these spaces. To have policies truly reflective of and responsive to the needs of all people, youth must be present at all stages of the decision-making process — after all, they are the majority of the population.

“

Investing in youth 'is not just a moral obligation, it is a compelling economic necessity'.

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3.

INCREASING PREPAREDNESS
FOR FUTURE DISASTERS

Owing to the steady increase in disaster risk globally (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2022), there is now unprecedented urgency to prepare for future disasters. Along with ongoing actions to contain the spread and fallout of COVID-19 at local and national levels, appropriate foresight must be afforded to how the negative externalities of future threats, overall, can be minimised.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inability of health systems to cope with increased caseloads and demand for specialist health services. Interviewees consistently voiced concerns that national health systems were lacking in access, patient capacity, and specialised medical staff and equipment. This was especially true for those living outside of major cities, who frequently faced significant barriers (primarily transport and financial) to accessing hospitals and specialist services. Where medical facilities could receive patients, some interviewees observed a widespread reluctance among their communities to use in-person services, attributed to a fear of contracting COVID-19. More needs to be done to alleviate healthcare access inequality, particularly across rural-urban and high-low SES lines. Put simply, “when we develop our [health sector], the people will live healthy lives” (Timoriana Association).

Increasing preparedness for future disasters, however, extends beyond solely increasing investment in the health sector. For instance, interviewees from Timor-Leste noted national and local governments “did not have capacity” (Timoriana Association) to manage the co-incidence of a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases and flash flooding across the country in early 2021, resulting in delayed and insufficient relief efforts. Considering its vulnerability to climate-related threats (Uchiyama, Ismail & Stevenson, 2021), climate change is an especially pertinent concern for the Asia-Pacific. Critically, the 2022 Asia-Pacific Disaster Report observed the region has experienced a significant regression in progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate Action) since 2021 (ESCAP, 2022a). The projected exacerbation of already substantial climate change-related economic losses across the Asia-Pacific will likely impede regional development overall (ESCAP, 2022a). Widespread unemployment, poverty, and simultaneous overpopulation

of urban areas and exodus of skilled labour are among the predicted cascading implications of climate change in the region (Salem, 2020). For low-lying communities and states, such as those in Kiribati (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2011) and the Solomon Islands (Albert et al., 2016), rising sea levels pose an existential threat to culture, identity, and statehood.

The negative effects of carbon already-released have not yet manifested, and the extent of its cascading effects have yet to be realised (Albert et al., 2016; Wallace-Wells, 2019). Resilience building, particularly with regards to climate change, should not be considered as haphazard preparation for uncertain threats, but rather a vital exercise to safeguard against future disasters that are imminent, if not incipient.

The risk climate is constantly evolving. As such, a long-term orientation and evidence-based approach should be taken when preparing for future disasters. Every effort should be made to ensure shared responsibility and participation across all sectors and segments of society. Alongside bolstering pre-disaster and response capabilities at the local and national level, collaborative management of the knock-on effects of any disastrous event will be critical for regional stability and prosperity. Enhancing data-sharing across sectors — viz. agriculture, healthcare, energy, environmental and geosource management — can allow for disaster risk reduction to be better informed and thus more likely to succeed. It also creates the potential for greater regional interoperability and coherence in times of crisis.

As the research findings highlight, mental health services, reliable telecommunications infrastructure, and employment and income support are essential in the aftermath of disasters. There remain glaring deficiencies in these areas across the Asia-Pacific. Targeted investment in psychosocial services, critical infrastructure (particularly in rural areas), and key employment sectors, are potential avenues to improve support for not only young people, but broader society as well.

In the context of this paper, perhaps most significant is the need to include youth in disaster preparedness dialogue. However, “meaningful engagement is not just

3.

one step” (US Embassy Youth Council), and should extend beyond consultation and into all stages of the disaster management process. Throughout COVID-19, young people have demonstrated the significant value they can bring as political advocates, fact-checkers, humanitarian volunteers, spokespeople, translators, and mobilisers of aid. Their expertise presents a crucial step towards a more inclusive and ‘whole-of-society’ disaster management *modus operandi*, should it be recognised.

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4.

IMPROVING DIGITAL ACCESS FOR DISADVANTAGED DEMOGRAPHICS



We live now in a heightened digital world wherein access to technology is a human right as crucial as access to education (Article 26), to employment (Article 23), to public services (Article 21), and to an adequate standard of living for health and wellbeing (Article 25) (United Nations, 1948). Underscored in the peri-Covid era, a lack of access to the digital space has cascading implications which impinge on the individual fulfilment of the articles outlined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. For young people, more so those residing in more remote areas and of lower SES, the shift towards a more technology-based 'way of life' at the height of the pandemic was often difficult and disempowering (Sun, 2020).

More needs to be done to ensure all Asia-Pacific people have access to the opportunities of the online world. Left unresolved, people living in rural areas and/or of low SES will face increasingly detrimental systemic disadvantage as the 'digital shift' accelerates (Vassilakopoulou, 2021). Without the ability to place their footprint on the 'digital map', young people especially will lose opportunities across all aspects of their lives (i.e. education, employment, and social domains) and be unable to fully access fundamental human rights. Essentially, those without reliable access to technology and the internet are prohibited the opportunity to choose the lives they want to live (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

With young people increasing their presence online during COVID-19, digital spaces and online communities present an opportunity for youth voices to be heard and valued. It is essential that decision-making bodies

pay attention to youth activism in online spaces and provide avenues for constructive dialogue to occur — with caution and conjunction with other consultation methodologies. Online platforms can facilitate two-way communication enabling governments to better understand the experience and views of young people regardless of physical distance, and despite cultural, socio-economic, and political barriers restricting youth participation in decision-making arenas (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010). Targeting online communities can also promote engagement with specific demographics, though this must only be done in a manner respectful of and sensitive to socio-cultural context. This may be especially beneficial to the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes intended to benefit people from disadvantaged or minority groups.

Online platforms can facilitate two-way communication, enabling governments to better understand the experience and views of young people.

As opportune implementers of digital technology, youth have a pivotal role in ensuring the development and implementation of technology that benefits all individuals and communities. When provided with adequate access and support, young people generally understand and implement technological

solutions with greater proficiency, relative to their older counterparts (Valaitis, 2005). Upskilling and training young people in 'in-demand' fields of technology, and providing opportunities for them to share their skill and expertise with other professionals and communities, can present immense benefits for society at large. Improving digital access for young people, therefore, does not only have advantages for their own professional skills development, but also allows youth to have greater authority and utility within their communities.

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Without the ability to place their footprint on the ‘digital map’, young people especially will lose opportunities across all aspects of their lives.



5.

INCREASING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



While not yet fully realised, the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on youth mental health are already severe. As crisis events, particularly those of significant scale, frequently result in negative mental health outcomes for those affected, it is reasonable to predict the effects of COVID-19 will bear psychosocial implications for many beyond its lifespan (WHO, 2022a). Available data (see *Mental Health*) indicates increased levels of anxiety, depression, psychological trauma, and other negative mental health implications among young people worldwide. Many young people in the Asia-Pacific are already coping with disadvantageous personal circumstances and the implications of climate change. By denying physical access to social support structures (community, school, sport, religious practice, employment) and containing people to their homes, COVID-19 represents yet another intersecting multiplier of psychological burden for many young people across the region.

Fit-for-purpose research is required to ensure that youth across the Asia-Pacific have meaningful, informed, and timely access to mental health support.

Indeed, “the information we have now about the impact of COVID-19 on the world’s mental health is just the tip of the iceberg” (Ghebreyesus in WHO, 2022a, para. 3). Research into COVID-19-related mental health consequences should account for the experiences of young people and, where relevant, produce youth-disaggregated data and youth-specific recommendations. This data and evidence will be crucial to inform policy and improve the systems in which young people live and work.

Mental healthcare systems across the Asia-Pacific must be ‘scaled up’ and expanded to better support the existing and future needs of all young people. More attention should be afforded to the mental wellbeing of youth within educational institutes, workplaces, and existing healthcare systems, with relevant personnel provided the training and support to better understand their responsibilities to

ensuring the overall wellbeing of young people (Jorm et al., 2010). Such spaces should also take into consideration an individual’s personal circumstances and allow for flexibility and understanding where possible. Mandating teachers and employers undergo mental health first-aid training in circumstances when ‘general’ first-aid training is required can have positive benefits for schools and workplaces, as well as reinforce the importance of psychological wellbeing. Improving avenues for the digital delivery of training can also increase the accessibility of mental wellbeing resources for more isolated communities (Jorm et al., 2010).

The importance of mental health support should be reflected in government policies and budgets. While the support needed for young people will differ depending on social and cultural context, youth-specific mental health services co-designed by youth with lived experience and with self-determination at its core would allow for more holistic and flexible care on an individual-needs basis (State of Victoria, 2021).

A progressive and proactive response is needed to support the bravery and vulnerability of today’s young people as they continue to lead the mental wellbeing agenda.

A progressive and proactive response is needed to support the bravery and vulnerability of today’s young people as they continue to lead the mental wellbeing agenda. This report supports the results of the *Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System*⁶ (State of Victoria, 2021) and the framework provided by Fiji’s *Mental Health Decree*⁷ (Chang, 2010). A human rights approach should be taken to guide the design and improvement of youth-targeted mental healthcare services. The rights of patients, treatment in the least restrictive environment, community-based care and rehabilitation, and adherence to international laws and conventions, are critical pillars to an effective mental health response (Chang, 2016). Existing mental healthcare referral systems must be streamlined to reduce turn-aways and extended wait times, and adopt a holistic view of mental wellbeing encompassing education, peer-support, self-help, and employment domains (State of Victoria, 2021).

⁶ Victoria, Australia.

⁷ Fiji. Note: The Mental Health Decree had major downfalls in its planning, budget, regulations, implementation, and training of personnel, and also adopted a ‘top-down’ non-consultative approach (Chang, 2016). However, its framework provides excellent key pillars for the delivery of mental healthcare.

“

Fit-for-purpose research is required to ensure that youth across the Asia-Pacific have meaningful, informed, and timely access to mental health support.

5.



Concluding Remarks

Throughout history and generations, young people have continued to shape and reshape the world with their characteristic boldness, bravery, and innovation. Notable young leaders, such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg, have changed the course of history — but they are not alone. Today, millions of young people in the Asia-Pacific are creating positive change within their communities from the ground up. It is these young people for which this report serves as a platform to share their lived experiences, work, and stories.

In a region wherein youth are the majority, the perspectives they hold are meaningful and important. Young people are busting down the doors which exclude them from spaces of power and decision-making. They are demanding their voices be heard, because the consequences of decisions made now will inevitably be felt most by today's youth in the future. This is particularly true with regard to climate change.

Communities across the Asia-Pacific are already living the consequences of climate inaction, and young people are being left to pick up the pieces. Youth must have a part in making and shaping the policies that are making and shaping their futures.

Power is achieved by standing and taking action as a collective. A result of contributions 'from the co-operative', this report is testimony to the unity and solidarity of young people across the Asia-Pacific region, and emblematic of how the incoming generation of young people will place their priorities on local, national, and regional levels. The authors hope that this research, limitations considered, will give power to young voices from the Asia-Pacific region. Amidst the previously 'unimaginable' COVID-19 crisis, young people have created new ways of living and proven themselves as invaluable assets in the face of disaster — this is a story of youth resilience that deserves to be shared and supported.



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