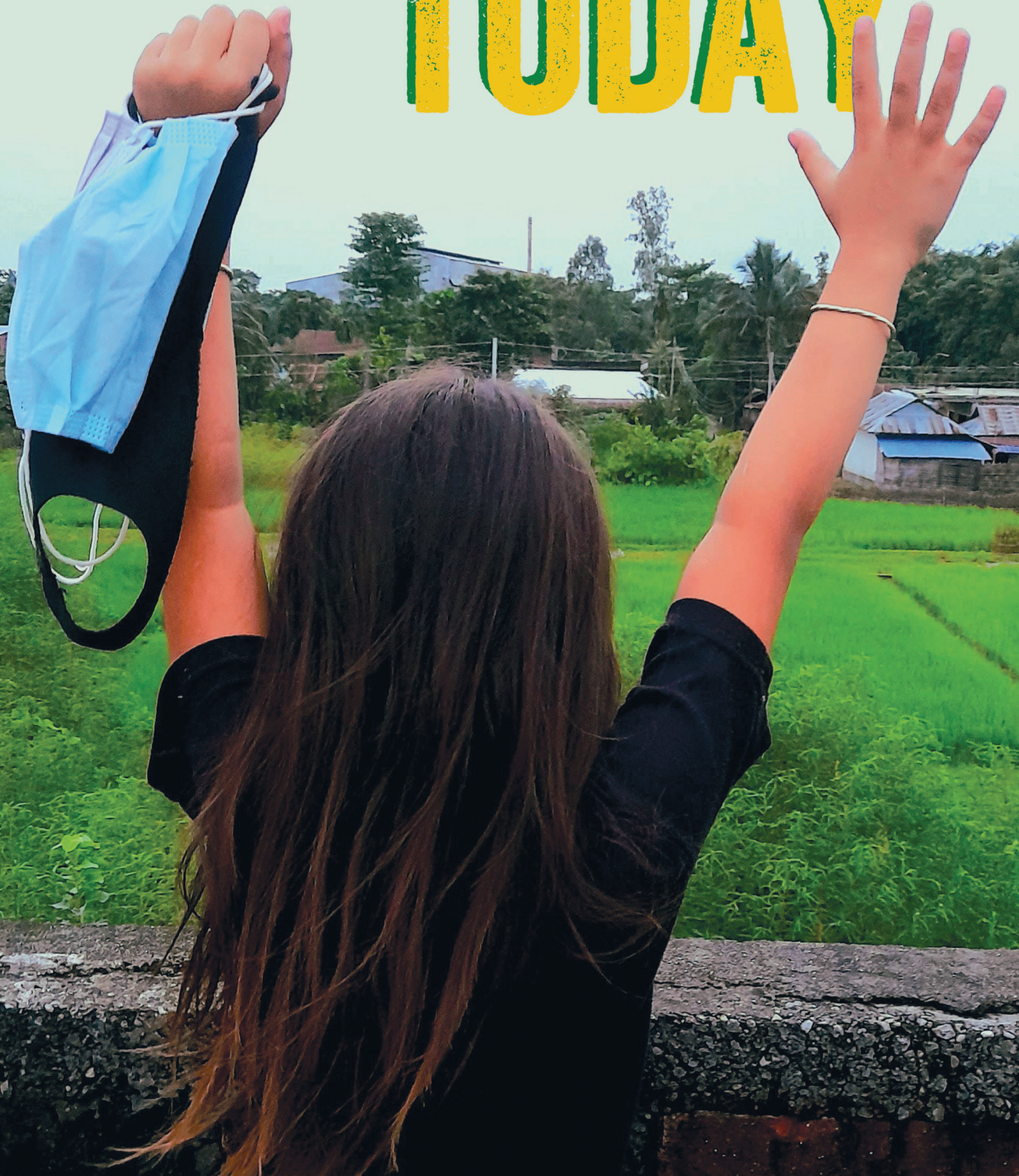


BETTER TODAY



**LIFE THROUGH LETTERS: EXPERIENCES AND DREAMS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ASIA PACIFIC**

“

“Even now, we all are affected by COVID-19 seriously, but we still can stand and adapt ourselves with this situation just like the rice husk stands straight in the darkness at sunset.”

Sreylin, Cambodia

- 8 DEAR FRIENDS,**
- 12 WHEN THE WORLD HITS PAUSE...**
- 32 ...WE REFUSE TO STOP!**
- 36 TO CHANGE THE WORLD, WE MUST BEGIN WITH OURSELVES**
- 42 TO FIGHT THE PANDEMIC, WE MUST SECURE EQUAL ACCESS TO
EDUCATION**
- 46 TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND, WE MUST MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER**
- 54 WE STRIVE FOR A BETTER TOMORROW...**
- 66 ...WITH PLAN INTERNATIONAL ON OUR SIDE**
- 71 COME, JOIN US!**

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PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS

OUR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS



Youth representatives throughout Asia Pacific were invited by Plan International to join interactive online workshops, where they shared their own experience during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the workshops, they came together to produce this report from a series of photo voices and letters, which they wrote for each other and for themselves in the future, capturing their thoughts and feelings for the historic catastrophe. This “Better Today” report aims to share with readers a new lens to view the COVID-19 pandemic through.

INTRO DUCTION

Two years ago, in December 2019, when we first heard of the COVID-19 pandemic, no one would ever imagine how radically it could change our lives. The impacts have been extremely severe, countless humanitarian efforts have been conducted to combat the virus, and many of us have crossed our fingers, waiting for a better normal that could come soon. 2021 taught us the danger of prediction when the new variants of COVID-19 once again destroyed all our efforts. The pandemic and its associated crises are posing huge challenges, raising many unknowns and imposing wrenching trade-offs. These crises are global, but their impacts are deeply local, and the Asia-Pacific region experiences it first-hand.

In the news we are encouraged to see all the global, regional and national responses by the governments and various organizations. There are local efforts by the agents of change that also deserve the spotlight - young people. Plan International advocates for youth-led movements and seeks to ensure that girls and young women experience significant improvement in their ability to make decisions that concern their lives and engage in collective action to shape the world around them. In two years, the pandemic has negatively affected our progress on gender equality and girls' rights, but young people decided not to surrender. Plan International is proud to accompany them in the journey supporting community recovery.

In this report, we will see the global pandemic through different lenses of young people. There are inevitably various hardships, even loss and pain from the devastating negative effects that COVID-19 brings to the region. But the spirit here is apparent, that youth activists in Asia Pacific won't wait for the storm to pass, instead they fight the pandemic hard and start to build a better today. Stepping out of the "battle", young activists in the region are invited to come together, listen to the personal stories and experiences of their peers in a series of Focus Group Discussions, write each other letters that are full of empathy and encouragement and see the world they long to visit through a collection of photo voices.

The young people we spoke with hope this report will be a source of inspiration for readers.

HERE IS THEIR INVITATION TO "THE DANCE IN THE RAIN" WITH THEM.

Dear Pemerintah,

Terimakasih atas berbagai usaha yang dilakukan Indonesia. Sama semangat & upaya kita.

Namun, alangkah lebih baik jika
perhatian bukan anak muda,
tapi kaum intelektual.

DEAR
FRIENDS,

membutuhkan literasi & pendidikan

di berbagai jenis literasi. Terutama

literasi berbasis gender. Sayangnya, **peperangan**

literasi yang ada belum berbasis gender & tidak
berpikir pada kebutuhan khusus.

Harapannya pemerintah bisa mendengar dari masyarakat

“How are the other young people living their lives during COVID-19?” This is the question I have asked myself from the first day of the outbreak as I was frustrated with transitioning from on-site to virtual work. Many of us are experiencing severe fatigue and dysregulation brought on by trying to keep ourselves motivated, resilient, and productive during this time.

In fact, the COVID-19 has brought about a sense of fear and anxiety around the world. Especially for young people, the impacts are not limited to health issues but the economy and social development which is attributed to disruption in education, physical activities, and opportunities.

A harsh reality means unprecedented challenges for everyone. The youth activists showcase the power of our voice, participation is critical for inclusive, equal, and better societies in general, and fighting against the COVID-19.

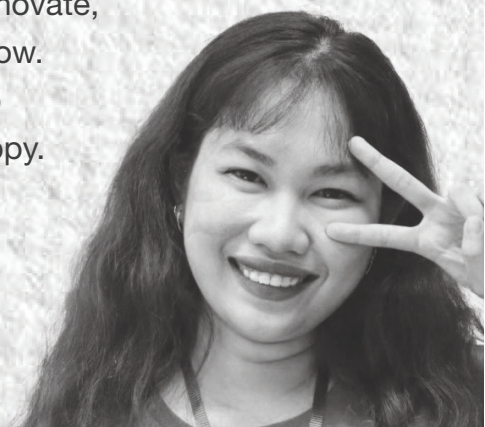
Working on this report helps me to learn about how young people in different countries have been affected by the pandemic and lockdown. This is also the opportunity for us to reflect on what we've done so far and how we overcome the restriction through this difficult time.

I was fulfilled by the passion and creativity when working with youth activists from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal and Vietnam. From strangers to friends, the regional workshops were the bridges to connect us all together. We shared personal stories, laughter and tears and delivered them through the letters and photo voices. Our friends are disseminating the stories they are creating in 'youth-led movements' by developing many new ways to contribute to the community.

We will either find a way or make one. In every corner of the world, young people keep driving a positive impact and change in their community. As a result, we adapted quickly to changing the circumstances by taking the first step for ourselves then supporting the community and spreading the hopes for a better normal tomorrow. I've learned to be grateful and enjoy the little things in life, applied all the lessons learned to adapt and take initiatives to move our on-site social projects to online. We became excellent in virtual events, and virtual collaboration, bringing greater flexibility when working together.

I hope this report inspires you to see young people as responsible, resilient, and resourceful in times of crisis as they truly are. You have a choice to innovate, to succeed, to keep doing your best, and to trust in the better tomorrow. I strongly believe that the pandemic will end soon so we can return to our activities as before. I wish that everyone can stay healthy and happy.

- Tien, youth participant from Vietnam -



For over 80 years, Plan International has committed to advancing children's rights and equality for girls and is active in 78 countries across the world. We work with supporters and partners to address the root causes of the challenges that vulnerable populations face. Currently, COVID-19 is the cause of several obstacles extending beyond health and into socio-economic issues that require an immediate response. In Asia Pacific, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a unique set of circumstances that threaten to unravel much of the work we have already accomplished in advancing equality for vulnerable groups in the region, particularly for girls and young women.

Witnessing the youth movement in the region throughout the pandemic in the past two years, we are confident that our journey for gender equality is unstoppable come rain or shine. Youth advocates are a powerful force for collective action. They are impact multipliers, who amplify and strengthen the work that Plan does far beyond what the organisation could achieve on its own.

“Better Today” is the manifesto of youth activists, who won't settle for a world negatively affected by the pandemic nor passively wait for a better future. In this report you will find various initiatives led by young people, from taking care of their own well-being to supporting the communities around them. According to Mahatma Gandhi, it is struggle that develops strength. Young people in Asia Pacific are struggling but they are also growing stronger. Their creative ideas have inspired us and strengthened our beliefs about the values we pursue.

Plan International ensures our responses to this pandemic address the specific experiences and needs of young people in Asia and the Pacific. We have already seen the 'Better Today' through the youth movement, and it's our pleasure to join, support and champion their efforts.

- Krista Zimmerman, Director of Influencing and Programs, Plan International, Asia Pacific -



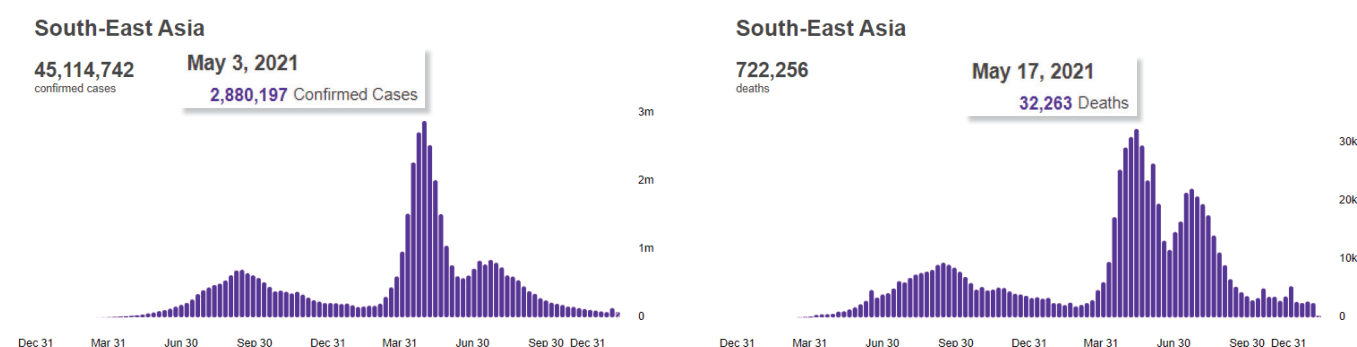
WHEN THE WORLD HITS PAUSE...

COVID-19 IMPACTED
THE DEVELOPMENT OF GIRLS
AND YOUNG WOMEN
IN ASIA PACIFIC

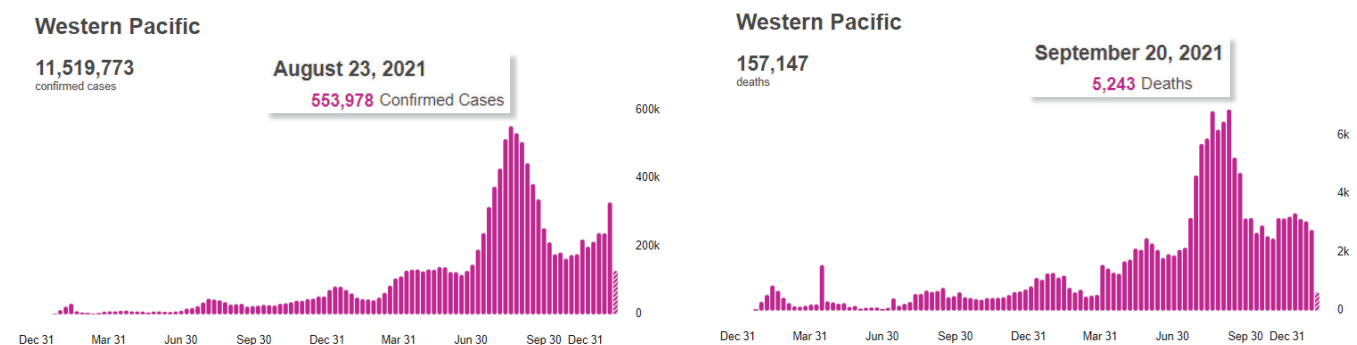
Peaceful neighborhood during the pandemic.
I miss the chaos, sound of vehicles, people
chattering and wandering, children playing, and
shops. It has been silent for nearly two years now.
- Sreylin

Photo credit Anjana

Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the world in general and the Asia-Pacific region in particular has gone through tremendous challenges. The year 2021 has witnessed the intensive impacts of COVID-19 with new variants spreading across the world, making the situation much more severe than that in 2020. Statistics from WHO indicate that the South-East Asia Region went through its height of the pandemic in the middle of 2021 while Western Pacific Region's peak happened later in August [1].



Weekly epidemiological update on COVID-19 cases and deaths in the South-East Asia Region (by 31/12/2021) (Source: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard [3])



Weekly epidemiological update on COVID-19 cases and deaths in the Western Pacific Region (by 31/12/2021) (Source: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard [3])

In 2021, countries in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region, including South East Asia and the Western Pacific countries, have experienced mixed effects from the pandemic. South-East Asian countries overall account for 16% of cumulative reported cases and 13% of cumulative reported deaths of the whole world but they were recently witnessing a gradual decline in cases and deaths. Conversely, the Western Pacific countries see an increase in newly reported cases and a similar number of new reported deaths despite accounting for only 4% of cumulative reported cases and 3% of cumulative reported deaths globally [2].

Worryingly, in the second year of COVID-19, several new variants with profound impact on diagnostics, treatments, or vaccines, increased transmissibility, and increased disease severity like Gamma, Delta and Omicron, which were categorized as Variants of Concern (VOCs) by WHO, have spreaded worldwide and caused huge surges in cases and deaths [4], requiring countries to continuously maintain preventive measures and improve healthcare capacity to prepare for the worst. After two years fighting restlessly against COVID-19, “negative impacts on social, mental and economic wellbeing” are omnipresent worldwide when Omicron started gaining its foothold [5].

This dire situation projects a worrying picture of the region, laying severe impact on the youth, as reflected through their shared observations and worries.

There still needs to be significant investments in vaccination to the general population that also considers access to vaccination for children, which has been rolled out at different speeds across the region. While some countries like Cambodia have vaccinated most of their population, several others have only just started to administer their national mass vaccination programs (as of January 2022). [6]

According to the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) estimation, compared with a non-COVID-19 scenario, the pandemic drove 75 million to 80 million more people in 35 developing members of ADB into extreme poverty as of 2020[7]. ADB also stated that despite earlier significant, albeit uneven achievements, progress in areas such as hunger, health, and education have been stalled due to COVID-19.

**WORLD BANK EXPERTS ESTIMATED THAT
THERE ARE 20 MILLION
EXTREMELY POOR PEOPLE IN ASIA PACIFIC IN 2021,
6 MILLION HIGHER
THAN THE PRE COVID-19 PROJECTION. [8]**

With most of social and economic lives moving online, the COVID-19 pandemic also leads to increased use of digital technologies in education and work [9] in a time when offline activities and travel is limited to facilitate pandemic prevention measures. The adoption of digital technologies has changed lives fundamentally.

A majority of APAC region residents live in highly vulnerable areas and experience more natural hazards than any other part of the world while grave humanitarian crises stemming from armed conflict and civil unrest threaten several localities [10]. At the same time, girls and young women are particularly at risk during the critical period of adolescence as it is a time when many decisions detrimental to their education, career paths, personal life, and their future in general are made while sexual violence and gender expectations may threaten to curtail their freedom and development. It is alarming that the COVID-19 pandemic, like other calamities, disproportionately affects girls and young women, especially those from marginalised communities and with disabilities.



Photo credit
Sanjoy Mitra Tanchangya

*The days of uncertainty
are increasing day by day.
Rolled from month to year.*

- Newma

HEALTH AFFECTED

AS OF JANUARY 24, 2022,
THERE HAVE BEEN **62,862,995 CONFIRMED CASES OF COVID-19**
IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND WESTERN PACIFIC,
INCLUDING **893,271 DEATHS**, REPORTED TO WHO. [11]

The pandemic has claimed numerous lives and left many others suffering, leaving tremendous health impacts on people, including girls, across the region. Youths shared about the negative effects of the pandemic on their lives as part of their letter writing exercise.

“

“The recent COVID-19 pandemic has claimed many lives globally, and it is truly tragic that so many people have suffered or are still suffering in various ways.”

Newma, Bangladesh to Ukheng Mimi, Bangladesh

Importantly, besides the tragic impacts of COVID-19 on people’s lives and deaths, mental health of physically healthy young girls has also been adversely affected by the pandemic. Plan International’s research into the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of girls and young women in 14 countries shows that stress and anxiety were common among respondents [12]. The lengthened pandemic causes anxious feelings such as fear and uncertainty, longing for social activities and friends, and pessimism about feasible solutions or the potential end of the pandemic.

“

“I know that in the future, human beings will have to face more catastrophes due to global warming, climate change, capitalism, and making classes by dividing rules. Thus, people will suffer more. So where is the end of it? Is there a solution to overcome this?”

Newma, Bangladesh to herself in the future

“

“The situation in Cambodia right now is not really predictable, even the number of people who get infected decreases than few months ago but at least 400-500 people are confirmed to be COVID-19 positive and around 10 people are died daily, especially the new transformation virus which is known as Delta have spread in the community, so the opportunity that we could back to use our normal lives is still unpredictable.”

Sreylin, Cambodia to Phuong Anh, Vietnam

Travel restrictions and remote learning and work also put more stress on girls. And girls report increased online gender-based violence, which significantly harms their mental health, well-being and dull their spirit.

“

“The COVID-19 is getting worse everywhere, especially in Vietnam. Vietnam has been facing a complicated outbreak of the virus since May this year. We have strict curbs on movement, and cannot go out and order food. The total number of dead has been recorded increasing every single day and seems like people getting upset when staying at home for so long.

From the beginning, I struggled with working from home. It’s pretty hard for me to implement all my execution plans. I was stressed when staying home for the whole month and kept reaching out to talk to people.”

Tien, Vietnam to Maya, Indonesia

“

“Nearly two years adapting my personal and teaching life around COVID, things are still challenging for me. It takes much more energy and time to maintain connection and discipline in an online class. What should I do when the feeling check-in of a class is so negative? How can I train senior teachers, who are set in their way, to use digital teaching tools? What should I do when my students don’t even have enough devices and proper Internet connection to study? Is my teaching necessary for them during this hard time? These questions stressed me out for a long time and at some point, I even wanted to give up. As optimistic as I am, I could not be hopeful after being confined in my room for months.”

Phuong Anh, Vietnam to Sreylin, Cambodia

Online abuse and violence affects girls so severely, they do not have any other choice other than keeping themselves out of online spaces that are otherwise vital to their lives in the face of the prolonged pandemic.

“

“There are so many young women and girls who have reported it to the youth-led-movement that my friends and I worry about how bad the gender-based violence online affects them. I face so much gender-based violence online. That is also one of the reasons why I stopped using social media for a while. I sometimes want to be that “good influencer”, but I consider my mental health is also important. That dilemma keeps coming to my brain and never stops. But then, I wish that I can finally deal with it and come back to being active on social media and speak up about “gender inequality issues” again.”

Maya, Indonesia to Tien, Vietnam

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEMS ARISE

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are not limited to health issues but extend to socio-economic problems that can be aggravated if not addressed properly. Young people's education, work and lives are adversely affected by the pandemic as preventive measures including lockdowns and school closures are implemented frequently, exacerbating issues including unemployment, food insecurity, limited access to health and nutrition services, various forms of gender-based violence against and abuse of women and children, particularly girls, and early pregnancy and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM). Ubiquitous sufferings arouse negative feelings of various degrees to people, especially youth.

While the sufferings are universal, girls are more adversely affected by the prolonged pandemic. Travel restrictions and social and physical distancing limit girls' opportunity to meet friends (Newma, Bangladesh; Muna, Nepal) as well as stop several social activities from happening. The young people saw this as a lost opportunity to explore the society that they would otherwise enjoy if COVID-19 had not happened.

Preventive measures and lockdowns cause a lot of economic challenges during the pandemic. These economic shocks pose a serious threat to the youth's work and business activity. According to a joint analysis by Save the Children and UNICEF, the COVID-19 pandemic has made 150 more million children live in multidimensional poverty without access to health, education, nutrition, water and sanitation and housing services. [13]

“

“During these two years, I already saw a lot of people suffer because of this pandemic, they lost everything they had, and you also lost several things you had.”

Azil, Indonesia to himself in the future

“

“I remember the time when we were in the breakout room, and you shared about the obstacles in your country and believe me that happens here as well. I know it is sad that inequality happens almost everywhere in this world.”

Maya, Indonesia to Morokot, Cambodia

“

“But don't you remember the first six months of COVID 19 in Indonesia? You are stressed out, everything is changing and you're not ready for that. Remember the day when our parents had to close the restaurant that they built for 15 years, it is hurtful to realize that we are losing the battle.

Living day by day seems so hard at that time, even at some point we don't know what to eat the next day because our parents run out of cash.”

Azil, Indonesia to himself in the future

Lockdown, mobility restrictions and other prolonged preventive measures also affect school activities. School closures alone have affected up to 1.6 billion children and young people worldwide. [14] As of March 2020, 743 million girls were out of school due to closures, including 111 million in the world's least developed countries [15]. Children in Asia and the Pacific are also affected when preventive measures keep them from going to schools. More severely, online schooling is not easily accessible for everyone due to lack of finance, equipment, and access to online schooling of both educational institutions and students. Besides that, the burden of work that students must carry on when staying at home can also adversely affect their online education quality. According to Ten-Ten, chairperson of the local youth council in Western Samar (Philippines), children are often subject to taking care of household chores and helping their parents with farming.

“

“A lot of your friends cannot continue their education because they cannot pay the tuition fees”

Azil, Indonesia to himself in the future

“

“I would like to grab your attention on how COVID-19 has impacted children's education. Our schools and colleges in this Municipality are closed since the first lockdown was implemented due to the pandemic. Many private and government schools and colleges initiated online classes. However, the community-based schools and colleges are not equipped to do so. Financial constraint is another reason for the community-based schools and colleges for not being able to operate online. Because of this, the students are unable to continue their studies despite their will. There has been a huge impact on their education. This has also affected their mental health. Since the pandemic is spread all over, the situation is the same everywhere. Nevertheless, the children are more engaged in online games rather than their education. It has changed the attitude of the students and diverted them from their studies.”

Muna, Nepal to Mayor

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE INCREASED

Online working and studying are also not equivalent to normal working or school settings. With an abundance of online distractions available like games, the home environment makes studying and working online more distracting and requires more effort from both sides to maintain connectivity, the sense of working together and discipline.

“

“It takes much more energy and time to maintain connection and discipline in an online class.”

Anh, Vietnam to Sreylin, Cambodia



Photo credit **Phuong Anh**

- *Phuong Anh*

An empty classroom at a secondary school during COVID. I wonder if my students are doing ok now.

“

“I could not believe that my friend was sending me messages using filthy words. It was very painful and stressful. It took me about a week to realise that this was not acceptable and that I ought to do something about it.”

“Several of your friends also quietly suffer from domestic violence, the problem that you don't realize exist before it happens”

Azil, Indonesia to himself in the future

However, online platforms have also been utilized for information searching and help seeking. [17] This should be promoted as it is impossible to bar people from online platforms.

It is also alarming that the danger of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) has also increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Girls are forced out of school to enter early marriage due to economic necessity. Plan International estimated that 13 million more girls have been put at risk of CEFM, and adolescent pregnancy is likely to increase due to COVID-19 [18]. Letters from girls also reported self-initiated marriages.

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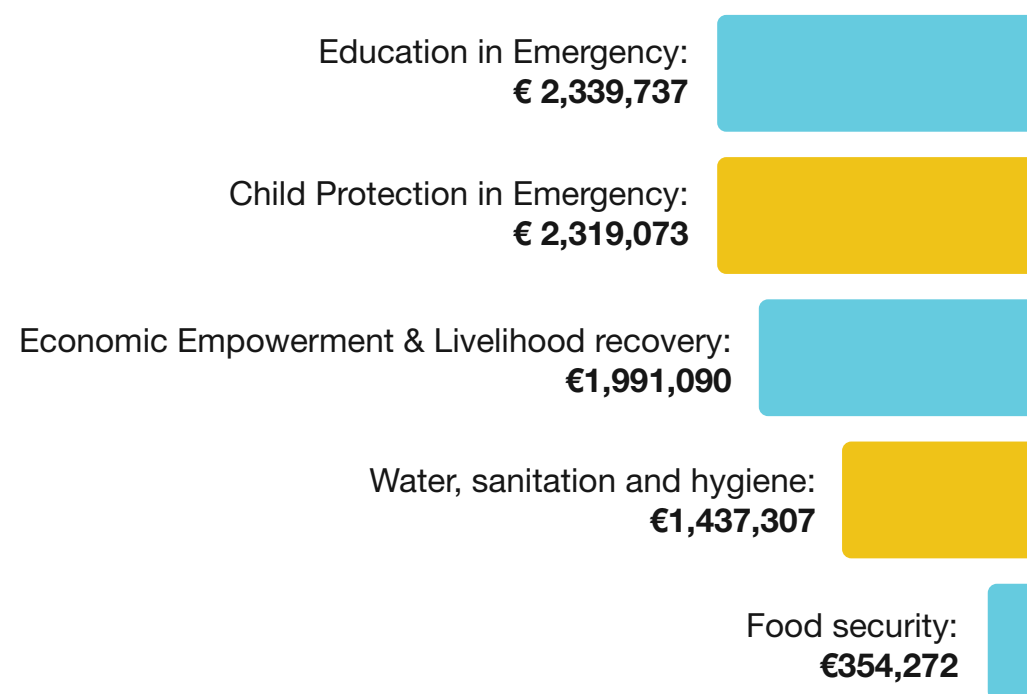
“Self-initiated marriage increased during the pandemic.”

Anjana, Nepal to Khadiza, Bangladesh

PICK UP THE PACE!

These impacts are already highlighted in the Hear It From the Girls’ report published by Plan International in 2020. Youth across Asia Pacific are still struggling with COVID-19 impacts. Their physical and mental health, economic prospects and education are still severely harmed while CEFM and gender-based violence continue to subdue their development. It is disturbing that progress has not been made in these issues and the youth, especially girls, are in dire need of support. Among others, working for a safe and inclusive online environment where youth are protected from gender-based violence online is essential as this will continue to pose real consequences to their health and lives.

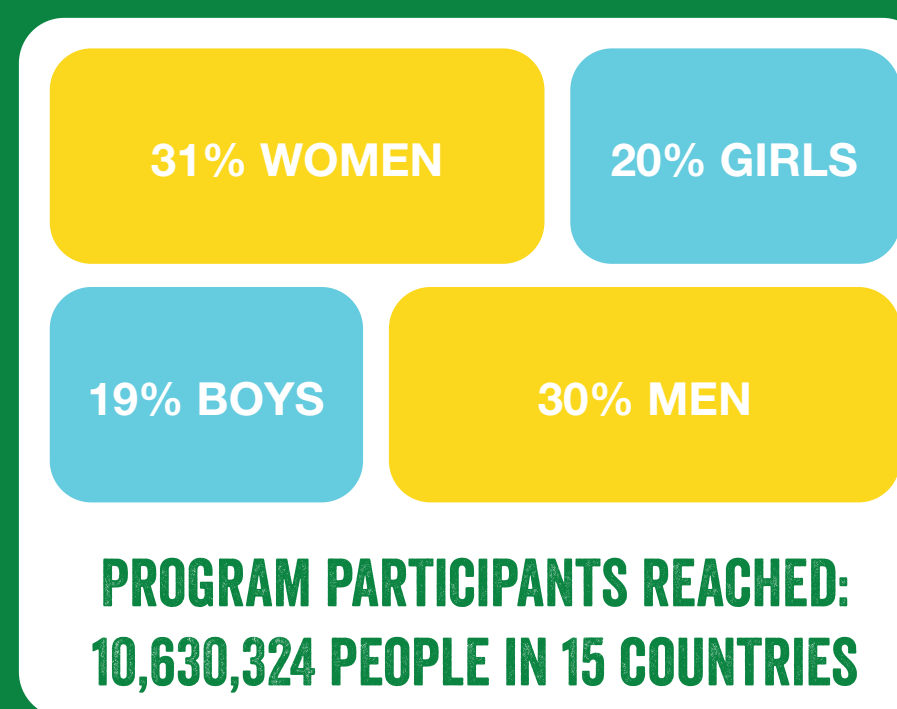
Plan International, including the Asia Pacific Regional Hub, has reacted to the onset of the pandemic with various initiatives to protect girls from violence; Get girls back to school; Strengthen girls' economic security and social protection; Protect girls' Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR); and Support girls' agency and voice. In the financial year of 2021, Plan International's total expenditure of COVID-19 response in 15 countries in Asia Pacific was €15,417,292. Among 10,630,324 people participated in our programmes in the region, 20% were girls and 31% were women, slightly higher than the proportion of boys and men.



**TOTAL EXPENDITURE OF COVID-19 RESPONSE
FROM JULY 2020 TO JUNE 2021: €15,417,292**

In its efforts to bring about gender aware and gender transformative COVID-19 responses, Plan International's systems of support not only mitigate multidimensional disruptions and restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic but also aim at building back better.

In realizing this goal, Plan International engages vulnerable people to ensure our response meets their needs, guaranteeing young people continue to have voice and representation in the pandemic response through youth-led initiatives. Plan International Asia Pacific regional hub is also working to create and leverage online platforms for risk communications and campaign advocacy among adolescents and young people, especially girls and young women. Youths across the region have joined us and taken the lead in activism to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and support their peers in recovery and development.





**...WE REFUSE
TO STOP!**

Even though we cannot laugh freely and see each other smile, at least the sense of togetherness still holds us together, and I think that is the value of any disaster, that we are going through it together and finishing it together.

- Azil

“Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, it’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

Are you ready for the dance with us?

“

“At a personal level, I found beauty in my mom’s garden. When we were locked at home and could not buy vegetables, we learned how to grow them. That’s the first time ever I learned how to plant, nurture some sprouts and even cook for myself. This refreshing experience reminds me of the importance of some basic survival skills that I often ignore and the beauty of nature. If I can still grow myself in COVID-19, there is no reason why tomorrow cannot be better than today.

I embrace the imperfection of my online classroom. There will be background noise and distractions and sometimes, the priority in my class might not be studying but my students’ mental health. Instead of focusing on the outcome, I choose to appreciate every little progression of my students and me. As long as we’re making progression, we’re heading for a better tomorrow...”

Phuong Anh, Vietnam to Sreylin, Cambodia

The impact of COVID-19 is devastating. People wanted 2020 to pass quickly but 2021 is another year living with the pandemic. Young people decided not to wait for a better future, we want a better today. And we act for it!

To be able to help others, we start with ourselves first. We protect not only our physical health from the COVID-19 virus with masks and sanitizers, but also our mental health with meaningful talks and sharing. Education is also our strongest weapon, and the virus was wrong to think that lockdown can defeat us. “No difficulties, no discoveries”, we find different ways to access our powerful weapon and fight the pandemic. Brave and confident, we help our communities, especially vulnerable groups. No one should ever be left behind in this global pandemic.



Photo credit Newma

An organizer on behalf of Bangladesh Marma Students Council (BMSC) handing over food items to an indigenous woman during a food crisis in the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

- *Newma*

TO CHANGE THE WORLD, WE MUST FIRST BEGIN WITH OURSELVES

Initiative to take care of mental health and well-being during COVID-19

YOUTH ADVOCATE RAISING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS DURING THE PANDEMIC IN PHILIPPINES

Shem, 18 years old, says that many people her age are struggling to cope with the unprecedented situation of COVID-19 pandemic. Turning to social media to deal with the boredom and isolation of the lockdown, Shem decided to use the platform to raise awareness about mental health issues and help to reduce the stigma that people often experience.

To support other young people online, Shem provides webinars on mental health with advice on taking care of their emotional wellbeing and where to find online therapy, available care services and other ways to access treatment and support for their mental health.

“I will soon undergo training on peer facilitation in providing psychosocial support as part of the project’s initiative to care for and manage mental health issues of the students brought about by the impact of COVID-19 pandemic,” Shem shared.



YOUTH ACTIVISTS ACROSS VIETNAM CONNECT THROUGH “PLANEST”

The COVID-19 pandemic with lockdown cancelled nearly all the field trips and offline activities that youth activists in Vietnam had planned. Young people from different youth models such as Champions of Change, Peer Educators, Girls Clubs and Youth Advisory Committees felt disconnected and discouraged, not knowing what their peers were doing nor how to help them.

Necessity is the mother of invention. “PlaNest” (a closed group on Facebook created by members of the National Youth Advisory committee) acted as an online platform for all young activists working with Plan to stay connected and motivate each other. They come up with various initiatives such as “Plan in our eyes” contest to reflect their experience working with Plan; “You tell, Plan listen” to collect feedback and sharing’s and “Face mask video challenge” to produce communications material from community-generated content. By designing and working together on mini projects, young people feel their time is spent meaningfully and their minds less trapped by negative thoughts.



Photo credit Plan International

“

“From the beginning, I struggled with working from home. It’s pretty hard for me to implement all my execution plans. I was stressed when staying home for the whole month and kept reaching out to talk to people. I got the message from my friends that “This could be a good time for you to reflect and get well-prepared for your next chapter”. I realised there’s a way for us to approach our working life these days. I have more time to learn about myself and seriously look at all the pending items. I’m working on the project as a Youth Advisory Committee Member of Plan International Vietnam, and I already found the way to work on it during the COVID-19. I learnt how to do the focus group discussion during one of the research I worked with Plan International as well, when I still don’t know how to kick off the project because it’s all offline activities. And you know what, I found a way to transfer all the offline activities to online by the focus group.

Another blessing that I have during this time is to see you in this project as well. I understand that not only am I trying to spread positive energy to people, but a lot of people like you out there. Listening to your story about sharing a good vibe via Tik Tok with the topic related to feminism and gender equality inspired me. Seems like we are doing the same things in different ways, and I hope that you enjoy the process.”

Tien, Vietnam to Maya, Indonesia

“CHILDREN HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY” COMIC STRIPS IN INDIA - EXPRESS YOURSELF THROUGH ART!

The isolation related to the COVID-19 pandemic caused both physical and mental health concerns for children. Being creative with the solution of art therapy, Plan India conducted a workshop with children from its communities for improving their resilience and coping capabilities which can allow them to communicate their experiences through artwork. It provided them with a creative platform to express their thoughts, impressions and issues that affected them.

As a result, they put their perspective on pandemic related issues like vaccination, prevention, awareness, mental health etc. and created excellent comic strips which reflect their unspoken thoughts and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Photo credit Plan International



Photo credit Plan International



TO FIGHT THE PANDEMIC,

EDUCATION - OUR POWERFUL WEAPON CAN'T BE TAKEN!

Initiative to ensure education access when social distancing was applied

THE LEARNING KIOSK INITIATIVE AMID THE PANDEMIC IN PHILIPPINES

In the Philippines, the RAISE Above project works with young people, teachers, parents and village officials within the community to establish safe learning spaces for students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The learning kiosk also serves as a repository of academic modules - so that teachers, parents, and students can conveniently and safely drop off and pick up assignments as needed. Through community donations, the learning kiosk can provide children with school supplies, art materials, educational toys, and books.

“Our learning kiosk motivates people to pursue their creativity and complete their education,” explains Ten-Ten who is chairperson of the local youth council in Western Samar. “Parents have also expressed their interest and support for this initiative. They want their children to have the education opportunities they never had when they were young.”

The volunteers include teachers, college students, and youth leaders - all of whom are properly vetted, making sure they thoroughly understand child safeguarding, child rights, and gender equality.

“

“Regarding online learning, now I can adapt to online platforms that we use in E-learning but same as other students, I also still struggle a lot with catching up on the lessons and concentrating during online sessions. Fortunately, my friends helped me a lot by making club study, so that we could still spend time together, we can discuss and help to explain to each other about the lessons which we have studied and find a new strategy that could help to shape our learning habits. It might sound really simple, but it really helps me a lot, with my emotional control, mental health, physical health and motivates me to fight against this pandemic as well. More than that, my National Youth Advocacy team also conduct some online TV talk shows to discuss about how important the education is, trying to persuade the children to go back to school and inspire their parents to encourage the kids to go back to school, talking about the pros and cons of online learning, the opportunities for girls to join the social works and fight against this pandemic together as well. I hope that our action will make a better change in our community, and you as well, can find a good way to deal with the COVID-19.”

Sreylin, Cambodia to Phuong Anh, Vietnam



Photo credit Plan International

WALKIE-TALKIES SUPPORT STUDENT'S DISTANCE LEARNING IN INDONESIA

In response to the challenges that children and their parents, especially in remote rural areas, are facing learning from home during the pandemic, Plan Indonesia collaborated with school authorities, the local government and community disaster preparedness teams to support students' distance learning using hand-held, portable, two-way radio transceivers.

Plan Indonesia delivered a consignment of the walkie-talkie radio sets to schools attended by children from three villages in the island of Lembata in Eastern Nusa Tenggara Province, all three have poor communication signals and no internet access.

The radios help teachers maintain contact with their students while the school is closed.

“My friends and I can continue our learning using the walkie-talkies. It helps, as my schoolmates and I can hear the voices of our teachers which motivates us to continue our studies,” says Eti, 13 years old, who is part of Plan International’s sponsorship programme.

For Eti, being able to reconnect with her friends and teachers has been a blessing. “It feels like we have returned to school, even if it’s only for a short time,” she says. “I hope this virus will be gone soon and things go back to normal, so I can go back to school and study with my friends.”



WE ARE ALWAYS STRONGER TOGETHER

Initiative to adapt current programmes and projects in the context of pandemic

YOUTH GROUPS FROM SAFE SCHOOL PROJECT RAISE FUNDS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND IN BANGLADESH

The project team of Safe School project in Bangladesh formed 12 youth groups made up of more than 280 students from schools in the district. The young people took part in training to increase their understanding and awareness of disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and gender equality.

When COVID-19 swept through the country, the youth groups decided to campaign on the necessary prevention methods needed to stop the spread of the virus. They received training and face masks from Plan International and conducted demonstrations in their communities on how to wear the masks properly and the importance of maintaining social and physical distance.

Keen to do more to support the community, they started fundraising to buy more masks and soap, approaching their parents, members of the public and community leaders. One youth group also started growing vegetables to sell. They rented a piece of land and planted seasonal vegetables such as radish and cabbage. They sold their harvest at a local market and went door-to-door to sell to vulnerable families at a reduced price. Some produce was even given away for free to very poor community members.

“We sell vegetables to families with children at a low price so that they can meet the nutritional needs of their children,” explains 17-year-old group member Anwara.

With the profits from the sale of the vegetables, the youth group decided to set up a contingency fund to cover the future needs of their community during emergencies and difficult situations.



“YOUTH REPORTERS” AND “GIRLS OUT LOUD” - YOUR VOICES ARE ALWAYS HEARD IN NEPAL

‘Girls Out Loud’ is a closed Facebook group of girls and young women aged between 13 and 24. The space is moderated by trained professionals and provides girls with a safe online platform. With 16 active groups in countries around the world, members inspire and support each other to challenge the views of their families, friends, teachers, and even religious leaders. As their confidence increases, the girls have begun to advocate against things that affect them, such as online abuse and harassment which, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, has become a key area of concern as most girls use digital technology to keep up with their schoolwork and stay in touch with their friends and family.

To ensure that no disadvantaged children and youths feel voiceless, the Youth Reporter project is designed to equip young people from grass root level with basic mobile journalism skills, so they can creatively share their views through storytelling in response to the pandemic. Young people are trained to communicate their experience through blogs, interviews, audio stories and photo journals. Respecting extended lockdown and social distancing measures, the program was virtually conducted. Participants in rural areas don’t have internet connection and proper networks to effectively complete the training virtually, so the sessions are divided into groups where they can be trained over the phone. Facing various challenges, youth participants still successfully produced various authentic products and published their articles in online news portals on various issues.



**The internet is sexist. We need
concrete steps from the technology
sector, governments and social media
platforms to make the internet a safe
place for girls and women.**

HELP INDIA HEAL - WHAT DOESN'T KILL US MAKES US STRONGER!

The second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in India has unleashed an unprecedented public health crisis caused due to the large-scale spread of COVID-19 infection in all parts of the country. In this context, Plan India with youth activists launched #HelpIndiaHeal initiative which seeks to directly support nearly 200,000 COVID-19 -affected families. The campaign helped improve food security, education and financial inclusion for children and their families; communicate on appropriate behaviour for the community during the pandemic, as well as promote vaccine uptake.

To reach the communication objective of #HelpIndiaHeal campaign, young girl changemakers from Plan India programmes actively produced community-generated content. From missing school to practising hand hygiene, social distancing to dealing with issues like access to sanitary products, youth activists share their own authentic experience and unique perspectives on the pandemic. Various self-shot videos have been produced, promoting COVID-19 vaccination, addressing vaccine hesitancy, giving eye-witness accounts on the situation and urging the community to follow appropriate behaviour. This content supports the fundraising campaign effectively.

“

“We, child club graduates with Sahayatri Youth group raised funds. With the support of like-minded individual donors, we collected enough money to buy sanitary pads. We distributed sanitary pads to travellers that were traveling from the Indian border, Jamuniya. We also distributed sanitary pads for women staying in the quarantine. Similarly, we had received JEC materials on handwashing from a social media youth group. We distributed it to the young people and organized a video competition to sensitize the community. We organized a sensitization program on sexual and gender-based violence in COVID-19 to aware community members to timely report such incidents. Self-initiated marriage increased during the pandemic. To prevent such incidents, we worked with the local government and police. I am also a Youth Ambassador of Plan International Nepal. The Youth Ambassadors organized various interactive and engaging activities to aware the community about CEFM and human trafficking increasing despite the pandemic.

We had also prepared an action plan to work together to fight against COVID-19. We are planning to distribute masks and sanitizers to the children in the Bheri Zonal Hospital. We will be organizing various orientations for

youth and children on preventing human trafficking. We will take necessary COVID-19 safety measures while organizing the gatherings. We have planned to organize a debate program on “Role and Responsibility of youths on preventing human trafficking” by September 2021.

I am interested to know about Bangladesh as well, how you are coping with this pandemic and how it has affected your campaign/work, did COVID-19 affected your campaign? I will be waiting for your reply. Stay Home, Stay Safe.”

Anjana, Nepal
to Khadiza, Bangladesh

Photo credit Plan International




HEROES OF SOCIETY IN INDONESIA - THERE'S A HERO INSIDE EVERYONE

Naila, a 19-year-old activist in Indonesia, coordinated a student charity campaign as part of a youth movement. By involving the students in this movement at times of crisis, she wants to prove that everyone has an equal and important part to take action and give a contribution. Together with her youth community organization, Kita Bersama, they encouraged over 800 students to be Heroes of Society by taking part in the campaign.

The leading purposes are to raise awareness of what has been happening in her country and do fundraising. They also want to provide learning opportunities relevant to others, they held several webinars for the students that participate in the campaign. The webinar series "Personal Development" aims to give motivation and knowledge to the students.

All the activities and movements were done online. In a span of one month, they succeeded to gather 200 million rupiahs (~USD 14,000). Moreover, they cooperated with Human Initiative, one of the NGOs in Indonesia, that helped distribute the funds for people who were badly affected by the pandemic.





The sound of these baby birds
wakes me up every morning. My
day starts with enjoying the music
they bring from my window.

- Anjana

**WE STRIVE FOR
A BETTER
TOMORROW**

BETTER TOGETHER

The dream of being on a trip, meeting surroundings without an uncomfortable mask is mostly common around the world. When virtual learning substitutes face-to-face lectures, girls, who are negatively affected by online false information, find it more desirable to gather their friends and share their feelings, discomfort or difficulties they are undergoing.

“

“Even now, the situation still seems to be worse, but I agree that we have learned many things during this pandemic, and I am sure that when the pandemic is over, we will become stronger as well. We would use the experience that we have today to make a better future, and we could go back to class, hang out with friends and when that day comes, I hope that we will see each other.”

Sreylin, Cambodia to Phuong Anh, Vietnam

Plan International is continually working with governments throughout the region and its partners to detail girls and young women’s needs and priorities. We need to minimise the impact of any follow-on effects of COVID-19 on girls and young women. Throughout the letter exchange, not only have exceptional youth activists been drawn out, but they also sincerely express their expectation for a better normal.

Remarkably, during the pandemic, some girls take an opportunity to improve themselves by discovering and learning new things such as cooking, baking with numerous recipes, academic and practical skills and so on. They hope and act at the same time to actualize their dreams.

“

“Dancing in the rain” is definitely not easy, but it’s our life. Even if the storm of COVID-19 eventually goes away, tons of other rains are waiting for humans. Instead of waiting for an ideal day that never comes, I choose to enjoy my life a little better every day. A better tomorrow for me is just a simple day when everyone can embrace the imperfections and difficulties of our lives and thrive for the best.”

Phuong Anh, Vietnam to Sreylin, Cambodia

BETTER SUPPORT, BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

It is undeniable that we are recovering from the abysmal period caused by COVID-19, in which the economy, industry, agriculture, and tourism were all stagnant. Most importantly, education has been dramatically changed. Although e-Learning is a good method, it does pose some risks to students in its early stages including Adaptability, Struggle, Technical Issues, Computer Literacy, Time Management, Self-motivation, and Cyberbullying. discomfort or difficulties they are undergoing.

“

“Education during the pandemic is hard (not gonna lie). I remember you shared about it as well in the breakout room. There are so many things we need to do at the same time and face that “double standard” at home. But I know strong girls like us can face and fight it. However, I will always be your support system here from Indonesia. Just never give up and believe in your dreams. Let’s travel when the world is getting better!”

Maya, Indonesia to Morokot, Cambodia

COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in domestic violence cases, particularly during the first week of each country's COVID-19 lockdown. Among children, however, despite experts' predictions of an increase in child maltreatment and abuse cases, the rate of police and social service reports has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our girls sincerely hope for a healthier future with lesser violence and crimes.



“

“Living day by day seems so hard at that time, even at some point we don't know what to eat the next day because our parents run out of cash. A difficult time like that makes you realize that for all of this time you will never be grateful for the little things that you had before. This pandemic also teaches me and you to be aware of your surroundings, a lot of your friends cannot continue their education because they cannot pay the tuition fees, several of your friends also quietly suffer from domestic violence, the problem that you don't realize exists before it happens.”

My message to you at your age right now is to use the power that you have to spread awareness and help others. During these two years, I already saw a lot of people suffer because of this pandemic, they lost everything they had, and you also lost several things you had. I want you to make sure that things like this will never happen again in the future. You probably have more money and power than I do. A lot of people have helped you before in this difficult time and now is your turn.”

Azil, Indonesia to himself in the future

BETTER EMPOWERMENT, BETTER LEADERS

Plan International has always placed a strong emphasis on equal rights, girls' leadership, and youth empowerment, as well as encouraging girls to participate in leading activism, pioneering, and making positive changes to their communities. If they have an ambition of becoming a change-maker or entering politics, it would definitely be possible to put into practice.

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“Collectively, we have to come forward to answer all the questions and solve the problems. The policymakers need the most role for this. They should keep in mind these sustainable developments along with growth. In the future, I would also like to be one of the policymakers to play a direct role in global sustainable development. To me, development means more than just concrete infrastructure. Development means a sustainable environment where every organism and nature can survive in health and every human being can live with equal rights and dignity. I have talked a lot about dreams which need more diligence to make them come true.”

Newma, Bangladesh to herself in the future

Newma, a girl from Bangladesh, has been spontaneously inspired by other's contributions while observing how another girl was able to retain strength and motivated herself to get rid of all the challenges and barriers in life. It drives her wish to work as a partner in helping and reaching people.

“

“All of your performance always makes me realize the power of a girl and through which girls can improve themselves, contribute to their family and society. The most important thing to learn was how to lead every critical situation in an organized way. However, your direct role in the health and education of our indigenous girls is commendable. Besides, directly and indirectly, you are doing a lot of work to establish equal rights for girls politically. After all, I have seen in you how a girl can overcome all the obstacles in society and become strong enough to contribute to the welfare of society. I have also been able to do a lot of work for the indigenous with you in this COVID-19 pandemic. And I know you have more far-reaching plans to work for women's empowerment and community development, including the political rights of indigenous peoples in the future. So, I want to work together as a partner in your dream.”

Newma, Bangladesh to a change-maker

Besides, Muna from Nepal pins her hopes on immediately taking action to save the future of the children. Since the pandemic's first lockdown, all schools and universities in this Municipality have been closed. Many private and public schools and colleges have started offering online classes. Community-based schools and colleges, on the other hand, are not suited to do so.

“

“You are well aware of this situation. Time demands to continue virtual education. I would like to request you to kindly coordinate with schools and colleges and equip them with the required facilities so that no child would be left behind. We need to come together and seriously think about the future of the children. I hope you will immediately take the necessary actions.”

Muna, Nepal to Mayor

**LIFE THROUGH THE WINDOW OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING LOCKDOWN:
LETTERS AND DREAMS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC ENDURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**



Photo credit Azil



Photo credit Phuong Anh



Photo credit Anjana

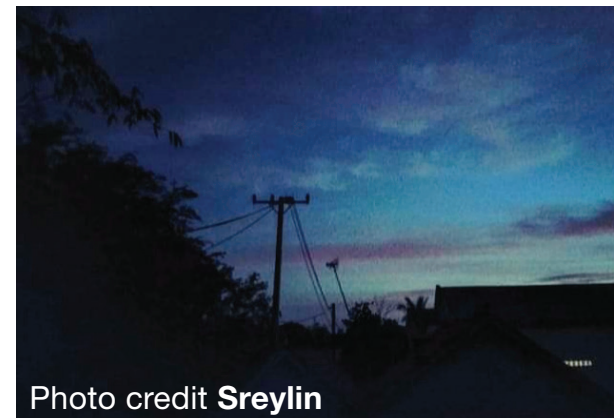


Photo credit Sreylin



Photo credit Tien

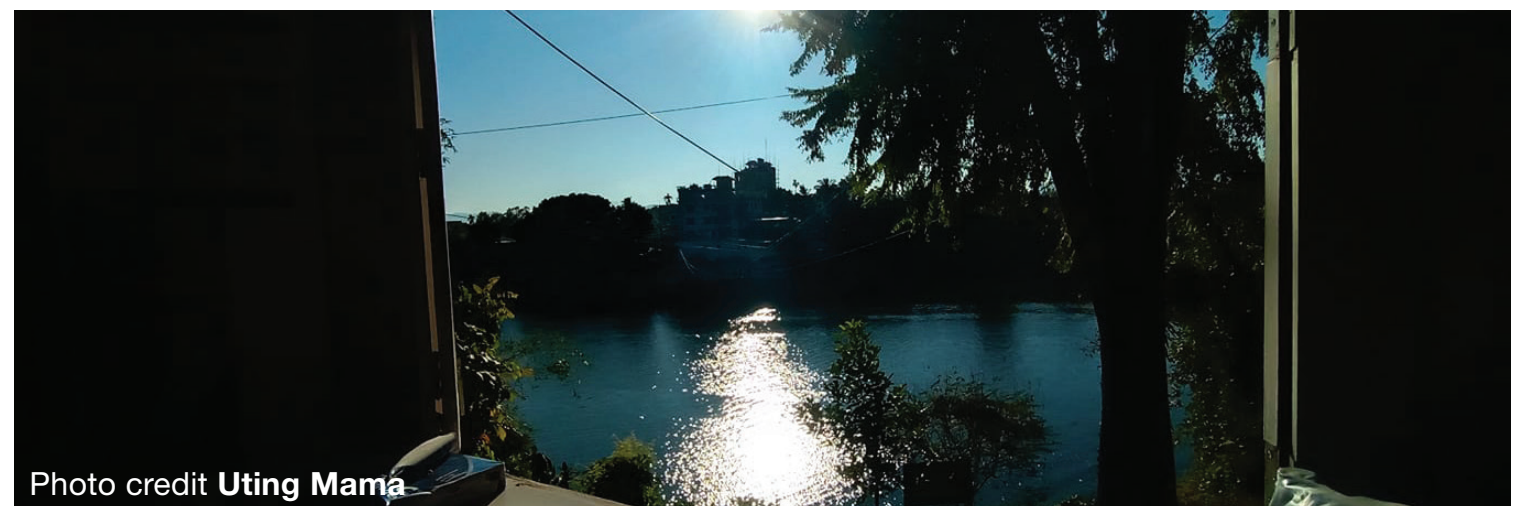


Photo credit Uting Mama



...WITH PLAN ON OUR SIDE

We as youth together
will make COVID-19
get lost from our
communities as soon
as we together join
hands in painting our
school. - Sreylin

Photo credit Sreylin

Amidst the spread of COVID-19 in the Asia Pacific region since 2020, Plan International has been responding and collaborating with the respective governments, humanitarian actors, private sectors and children and youths. The Asia-Pacific region has a large geographic scope and diverse socio-cultural, geo-political and economic contexts. Despite being home to 60 percent of the world's youth population, children and young people, especially girls, in many parts of this region, are often undervalued and underestimated.

The experience from Plan International when responding to COVID-19 pandemic, children and youths have been actively involved as risk communicators about COVID-19 and play an essential role in Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE), for example support in addressing hoax information, supporting their peers and community as hygiene promoters, leading a youth and community survey on the impact of COVID-19 to girls, collecting feedback and promoting accountability through a youth reporter initiative. From July 2020 to June 2021, in the Asia-Pacific region, Plan International has reached at least 10,630,324 people and 39% out of that number were girls and boys.

Reading all the letters in this report, the challenges that children and youths particularly girls face during the COVID-19 pandemic are valid, education discontinuation, increased risk of violence and exploitation online and offline, reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services, socio-economic impacts including the mental health and well-being issue. In addition, COVID-19 pandemic doesn't stop the occurrence of climate-related disasters where children and young people are exposed to the impact. Therefore, on behalf of Plan International, we will commit to continue working with you, Children and Youth.

We are committed to continue advocating for the policy makers and duty bearer for the following actions to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on children and youths and protect their rights, safety and well-being:



Continue **engaging children and youths** on the frontline of Disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate action and COVID-19 prevention and recovery effort and include them in decision making processes. Commit to engage children and youths and acknowledge their role as risk communicators.



Take robust measures to **safeguard all children and youths**, and particularly to protect girls and women from gender-based violence in disasters including COVID-19 pandemic. All service providers responsible for delivering child protection and sexual and gender-based violence services must adapt these to ensure accessibility during the outbreak, including through remote provision.



Ensure that relevant data to enable successful partnerships between children and youths and other parties are disaggregated by gender, age and disabilities, and include other **gender equality indicators**.



Ensure that targeted measures are taken to **protect and support young women's economic empowerment**, including social protection and paying attention to the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work during this time.



Authorities must recognize that COVID-19 affects girls and boys, women and men differently and ensure that **policies and interventions** to prepare for and respond to the outbreak are equitable, gender transformative and protective of human rights.



Consider the gender digital divide and address gender disparities in access to digital learning. This includes working to provide free or low-cost mobile internet access. Where digital solutions to distance learning and the internet are accessible, ensure that girls are trained with the necessary digital skills, including ways to stay safe online during education and their social activities.



Prioritize **learning continuity** in the period of school closures and ensure that adolescent girls' needs and lived realities are considered. This includes accessible and inclusive distance learning that will reach the most marginalized and limit inequalities in the education system.



Prioritize **longer-term investment in essential health services**: Simple measures such as ensuring adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) supply.



Safe reopening of schools to make sure that the risk of COVID-19 exposure and transmission is minimized in school settings.

And finally, we must all commit to ensuring no children or youths are left behind. Ensure children and youth, especially girls and boys with disabilities, living in poverty and other vulnerable groups are included and prioritized in programmes that seek to address and mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have been unprecedented in recent times, but those in the future will not be, and the world, including Asia Pacific, needs to be prepared to respond effectively, keeping the health and wellbeing of children, adolescents and youth are paramount.

We will continue Walk the Talk and recognize the meaningful roles of Children and Youth as Risk Identifier, Risk Communicator and an active Agent of Change that contributes to strengthening communities resilient to disasters.

- From Vanda Lengkong - Regional Head of Disaster Risk Management, Plan Asia Pacific -

COME, JOIN US!

People usually think of activism as something that brings large-scale change. With this project, we hope to share the notion that every single small step counts, that every little thing you do to make this world a better place is worth sharing and learning from. Grow a small tree, write a blog post, film a TikTok video with a positive message, extend your hands to a friend in need, all those efforts are appreciated since they are the bricks that step by step help us build a better today.

Some people may say that 2020 and 2021 are the years we all want to forget, but we think they are the years, though painful, we need to remember. Together going through difficulties, we cherish the “normal” and find within ourselves the unique idea, the hidden power and the enduring strength that are only used when facing challenges. Young activists participating in this initiative had come together and inspired each other through their own personal stories. We listened about an empty classroom in Vietnam, the very last day a family-owned restaurant opened in Indonesia, we saw the baby birds starting a new day in Nepal, a school in Cambodia with new clothes painted by young people, then we smiled with the family that received a small fund raised by activists in Bangladesh.

We are going through a global pandemic, which means that you are not alone. We are fighting together and young activists in Asia Pacific are trying their best to make sure that no one is left behind. Come and join us! Share your stories and lend us your lens. Because we are always better together. And because a better tomorrow won't start without a better today.

Jakarta, 31 Agustus 2021

Halo Azil

Bagaimana kabarmu di usia 30-an? Jika Kamu belum berusia 30 tahun maka jangan membaca surat ini dan simpan sampai Kamu berusia 30 tahun. Kamu mungkin sekarang bersantai di rumah baru yang Kamu beli di dekat danau Singkarak sambil menyeruput teh melati panas seperti yang selalu Kamu bayangkan, atau mungkin kamu terjebak di depan komputer melakukan banyak pekerjaan dari perusahaan tempat Kamu bekerja, karena impian Kamu untuk menjadi pengusaha sukses belum tercapai.

Tapi apapun kondisimu saat ini, aku ingin mengingatkanmu untuk tetap bersyukur dan bersabarlah, hidup saya di sini pada tahun 2021 semakin baik, kami berusaha untuk menghadapi pandemi. Tapi ingat nggak enam bulan pertama covid 19 di Indonesia? Kamu stres, semuanya berubah dan Kamu belum siap untuk itu. Ingat gak hari ketika orang tua kita harus menutup restoran yang mereka bangun selama 15 tahun, sangat menyakitkan untuk menyadari bahwa kita kalah dalam pertempuran melawan pandemi ini.

Menjalani hari demi hari terasa begitu berat saat itu, bahkan pada titik tertentu kita tidak tahu harus makan apa di hari berikutnya, karena orang tua kita kehabisan uang. Saat yang sulit seperti itu membuatmu sadar bahwa selama ini kamu tidak pernah mensyukuri hal-hal kecil yang kamu miliki sebelumnya. Pandemi ini juga mengajari saya dan kamu untuk lebih peka terhadap sekitarmu, banyak teman kamu yang tidak dapat melanjutkan pendidikan karena mereka tidak dapat membayar biaya sekolah, beberapa teman kamu juga diam-diam menderita dari berbagai macam kekerasan yang terjadi di dalam rumah mereka. Masalah yang tidak kamu sadari sebelumnya terjadi.

Pesan saya kepada kamu di usia kamu sekarang adalah untuk menggunakan kekuatan yang kamu miliki untuk membangun kesadaran akan hal yang sebelumnya kamu alami dan juga membantu orang lain. Selama dua tahun ini, saya sudah melihat banyak orang menderita karena pandemi ini, mereka kehilangan semua yang mereka miliki, dan kamu juga kehilangan beberapa hal yang kamu miliki. Saya ingin kamu memastikan bahwa hal-hal seperti ini tidak akan pernah terjadi lagi di masa depan. Kamu mungkin memiliki lebih banyak uang dan kekuasaan daripada banyak orang yang telah membantu kamu sebelumnya dan sekarang giliran kamu untuk membantu mereka.

Hormat saya
21 tahun Azil

Azil, Indoensia to himself in the future

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Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, we drive change in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For more than 80 years, we have been building powerful partnerships for children and are active in more than 75 countries.

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