

***Caritas Internationalis Contribution***

*Contribution to ‘Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Human Rights of
 Young People’ – Human Rights Council Resolution 48/12*

**CARITAS AND YOUTH (INTRODUCTION)**

Caritas Internationalis (CI) is pleased to contribute data to the’ Study on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Human Rights of Young People’. Caritas Internationalis is a global Confederation of 162 member organizations that, inspired by our Christian faith and the values of the Gospel, respond to humanitarian emergencies and promote integral ecology and integral human development. Caritas Internationalis has its headquarters in Rome and two delegations, in New York and in Geneva.

Caritas Member Organizations, as respected, trusted and established members of their local communities, have been on the frontlines of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the staff and volunteers who carry out the grassroots work of Caritas worldwide are youth, and so Caritas is well-positioned to contribute to this study since our Member Organizations provide a direct link to the young people who have both responded to and been affected by the pandemic.

Caritas, in particular in the past few years, has invested significant resources in supporting and empowering the youth who work and volunteer for Caritas at all levels – from the grassroots community level, to national and regional conferences, and now on a global level through coordinated support from our General Secretariat. The inputs in this report have been gathered by consulting with our regional and national contacts, and providing them the opportunity to respond to the questions indicated in the Call for Inputs. Caritas Internationalis has synthesized their responses into this report, which is organized by each question of the Call for Inputs, and ends with six recommendations from our Member Organizations for governments to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the full enjoyment of human rights of young people.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What are the main challenges that young people face in the country/region where you operate in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it?**

Our Member Organizations have identified an interruption in education as a significant challenge that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused for young people. Online learning has presented both a challenge for students, teachers and their families, and a disadvantage between rural/urban youth and youth across economic realities (because of unequal access to the internet). Caritas Jordan pointed out that this shift in education has had a disproportionate effect on girls, with more girls having to leave school than boys. In the absence of in-person learning, young people are also experiencing a significant lack of normal social engagement, which our members report as having a negative psychosocial impact on youth (manifesting in frustration and mental health issues such as depression). Caritas Kazakhstan identified that the development of youth with special needs has been especially negatively impacted by the absence of in-person social activities and programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a negative effect on youth who are entering or already in the work force. Our Member Organizations reported a decrease in job opportunities in their countries which has made it particularly difficult for youth to enter the workforce. Caritas Jordan reported that, because of a lack of job opportunities, many young people are now relying on freelance work to earn an income which is often unregulated (and can therefore be dangerous and unjust). Caritas Bangladesh reported that the interruption in education has delayed many young people’s entrance into the workforce, creating mental health issues for youth and socioeconomic issues for society. Caritas Syria reported that curfews negatively affected economic activity in the country, and that the resulting high inflation rates have made it too costly for entrepreneurial youth to start their own businesses.

Our Member Organizations reported that many young people (and/or their parents) who were already in the workforce lost their jobs or faced a decrease in wages, which negatively impacts the wellbeing of and opportunities for families. Some youth were able to shift to online work, however the vast majority could not and so they had to either change their specialization or lose their job completely.

The pandemic has also presented many varying social challenges for young people. Caritas Kazakhstan reported that youth in rural settings experienced isolation more harshly than their urban counterparts. Caritas Thailand reported that, since the start of the pandemic, youth have faced several restrictions. Caritas Iraq noted that Covid-19 restrictions have caused a shift in social realities that has escalated dangerous behavior among youth (use of alcohol, drugs, violence, extremism, etc.), and that the risk of marginalization is worse for women than men. Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand pointed out that the lockdowns in the country prevented youth from fully experiencing certain life experiences and key milestones (such as graduations, weddings, travelling, etc.). They also reported a difficulty in striking a work/life balance when working remotely, as it has been difficult to reconcile Pasifika culture with work-from-home realities. They report that it has been especially difficult for young people (in particular young indigenous females) to keep up with their work commitments while living in intergenerational homes and tending to their responsibilities there. They expressed that this put them at a disadvantage compared to their other colleagues around the world who do not experience the same work/life balance realities. All of these dynamics have caused mental health issues among some youth.

1. **What measures are taken in the country/region where you operate to support young people and ensure the full implementation of their rights during and after the pandemic?**

The efforts to support young people and ensure the full implementation of their rights varied across the Member Organizations surveyed:

* Caritas Bangladesh created job opportunities, many volunteer positions, and a youth group that focuses on raising social awareness. In doing so, they have given youth who are frustrated and isolated the chance to participate in initiatives that protect vulnerable communities. They reported that youth who participated in these initiatives expressed a decrease in stress. Caritas Bangladesh has also been providing youth with capital for business start-ups in rural and urban areas.
* Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand recognized an increased demand for mental health support among its staff, and arranged a partnership with an organization that provides wellbeing resources and support. Staff could book up to three sessions with health practitioners free of charge and on work time (and could request more, if needed). This resource was available to all staff, regardless of age.
* Caritas Syria emphasized the need for the organization to retain its staff and volunteers, and moved its training courses and capacity-building programs online when they could not run them in person.
* Caritas Iraq offered free health services at their clinics, and ran programs for youth that included psychosocial services, livelihood programs (people attended courses about how to run a business and could apply for grants to start their own business), peacebuilding courses, and rehabilitation via skills training (e.g. sewing, hairdressing, carpentry, etc.).
* Caritas Jordan reported that the government passed defense orders that prevented some people from getting laid off, and that the Ministry of Education offered support to students, families and teachers as learning moved online, and even televised lessons for public school students of all grades.
* Caritas Jerusalem reported that emergency income support was made available for youth to help to improve their living conditions.
1. **What role have the young people had in COVID-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts in the country/region where you operate?**

Again, the role of young people in the response to the pandemic varies among the Member Organizations surveyed. One common item, however, was the instrumental role that young people played in widely promoting public health and vaccination campaigns, especially through social media (Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, Caritas Syria, Caritas Iraq, Caritas Jordan, and Caritas Jerusalem). Caritas Bangladesh reported that young people also raised awareness through street drama and by recording audio messages for those who needed to stay at home. Caritas Iraq‘s youth volunteers also engaged in awareness-raising on the streets, talking to people and distributing information booklets about Covid-19 and vaccines. Other individual responses are as follows:

* Caritas Bangladesh also reported that youth were heavily involved in their Emergency Response Program by conducting needs assessments, data collection, Covid-19 support schemes and many other social activities.
* Caritas Syria reported that many young people participated in their Campaigns to help those affected by Covid-19 by executing ambulance procedures and providing necessary medical materials for patients (such as oxygen bottles).
* In Jordan, young Caritas volunteers distributed personal hygiene kits to 1500 students in an initiative called ‘Safe Return to Schools’, and distributed humanitarian assistance (e.g. medicine, internet charging bundles for students to access their online education) to vulnerable families and refugees even during the curfew restrictions, during which they had special permission from the government to continue their work. Young volunteers also collected data for the government in order to support Covid-related decision-making and to improve access to testing.
1. **What measures are taken in the country/region where you operate to value/encourage the role of youth in COVID-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts?**
* Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand reported that organizations and community groups could apply for grants and funds to support the promotion of and work around vaccination campaigns.
* Caritas Syria reported that financial and resource-based support from Government Ministries (such as those of Health, Social Affairs, and Interior and Local Administration), Humanitarian Organizations, Civil Organizations, and UN bodies helped them to increase and continue their activities under the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The surveyed Caritas Member Organizations submit the following recommendations for governments to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the full enjoyment of human rights of young people:

1. Establish a young people’s forum and engage it on the topic of the Covid-19 response; young people deserve to be listened to and respected by political elites. Governments should engage youth in nation-building and socioeconomic development activities on a massive scale, rather than just making use of its own work force.
2. Ensure adequate support to young people suffering from mental health issues, ensure that this support is accessible and inclusive to *all*, and raise awareness about the negative impacts that the pandemic is having on emotional and mental wellbeing.
3. Establish long-term financial commitments and integrated policy action for youth experiencing financial insecurity and housing instability.
4. Promote training for youth in entrepreneurship, and provide monetary support to youth for business startups.
5. Enhance local public transportation effectiveness and inclusion, so that everyone (e.g. youth, women, people with disabilities, etc.) can access labour markets and services.
6. Increase access to internet and smart devices for poor and vulnerable families, especially for educational purposes.
7. Enhance social protection measures at a national level to better protect the most vulnerable youth (bearing in mind the challenges highlighted regarding loss of employment).

**Member Organizations who submitted reports to this Call for Inputs**:

Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Thailand, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, Caritas Kazakhstan, Caritas Syria, Caritas Iraq, Caritas Jordan, Caritas Jerusalem.