COVID - 19 and youth: The effects of the pandemic on participation
COVID-19 and youth: the impact of the pandemic on youth participation

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted various aspects of the economic, social and political life, affecting disproportionally the civic activism both at global and local level. The measures introduced in order to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus have undoubtedly influenced youth activism and participation in their communities’ decision making processes, as well as their access to youth services.

This research analyzed the impact of the pandemic crisis on the level of youth civic engagement in Moldova, in particular on the dynamic of the activism of youth with a high level of participation. Based on an opinion poll conducted in July 2020, 3 clusters of youth were identified from the perspective of their civic engagement: (i) youth with a high level of participation, (ii) youth with a medium level of participation, (iii) youth with a low level of participation. Thus, the group of youth who already have a consistent and predictable behaviour regarding their engagement in the community life represents the reference cluster of this research. The share of youth with a high level of participation represents 10% of the overall population under analysis.

The restrictions imposed by the pandemic crisis resulted in a lower level of youth participation. Nearly 60% of the youth with a high level of participation continued to engage actively in the community life during April-June of this year: 54.5% participated in the working meetings of NGOs and Youth Centres, and 58.6% of youth participate in the decision-making meetings of the community, association or Youth Centre. During the pandemic crisis, this category of youth especially manifested themselves in community awareness raising actions by signing petitions (65.5%) and helping older people.

The pandemic determined a significantly lower participation of the most active category of youth, namely those of 15-17 years old. Prior to the declaration of the state of emergency due to COVID-19 pandemic, the youth aged 15-17 manifested a higher civic engagement in comparison with other youth categories (finding outlined by this research). Their activism is directly associated with their daily educational environment, as the educational institutions represent an enabling environment for the development of youth abilities that positively influence their likelihood to engage. As activities involving physical interactions in these institutions were suspended during the pandemic, this measure had a greater influence on the withdrawal of youth aged 15-17 from the participatory process.

On the other hand, the pandemic created preconditions for youth of 21-24 years old to have a higher representation among the activists during the crisis. Though, prior to establishment of the state of emergency in the country this group of youth had a lower motivation for participation, it appears that the pandemic crisis reversed this situation. Thus, during April-June 2020, youth aged 21-24 showed a higher civic activism. This situation was probably determined by the massive withdrawal of youth aged 15-17 from the participatory process due to the suspension of education institutions’ activity.

The use of on-line communication and socializing platforms represented a form of youth participation during the pandemic. The platforms were used to raise the awareness of and inform people about protection methods from the COVID-19 virus. Though the pandemic crisis impeded the social activism of youth, it boosted innovation among the youth by increasing the use of on-line and social platforms for civic purposes. Up to 65% of youth used on-line platforms to inform their community about the methods to reduce the spread of COVID-19 among people in their community.
At the same time, the research showed that during the pandemic, youth accessed much more rarely the services of youth entities. Thus, the pandemic crisis has not only revealed, but also outlined the low rate of accessing Youth NGOs, Councils and Centres. The opinion poll conducted in July 2020 disclosed a strong discouragement of youth to benefit from the activities organised by institutions and associations operating in the youth interest. Thus, in the last year, less than 10% of youth benefited at least once from a service of the youth entities from Moldova, which represents an extremely small share. This share was considerably reduced due to the restrictions imposed in April-June 2020. Almost 62% out of those 10% of youth mentioned that they benefited rarer or never from the services provided by the respective entities.

Given the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth participation, the policy response has to outline interventions meant to address its long-term effects. In order to retain more youth in the participatory process, we have to reboot all tools and mechanisms that helped educating youth to influence the decision-making process, to engage in the social life both at local and national level. We do not exclude the possibility that due to the lack of procedures for rebooting or rethinking all secondary activities that used to stimulate youth to be more active in social life, Moldova will witness a long-term chronic decrease in the level of participation and in the share of participating youth. Therefore, we have to pay more attention to the strengthening of all participation mechanisms, and continuous monitoring of youth engagement, and the subsequent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research was conducted by the Centre Partnership for Development, under the Joint Fund of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research for the development of Youth Centres and participation strengthening and civic engagement of youth in Moldova, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the United Nations Population Fund. The data underpinning the analysis were collected through an opinion poll conducted by the Centre of Sociological Investigations and Marketing Research „CBS-AXA“ during 06-24 July 2020. The sample included a number of 1,010 people aged 15 to 24.
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis, coupled with the measures taken nationally to combat its negative effects, have produced significant deviations in the social, political and economic live of the whole population, including youth.

Globally, the youth aged between 15 and 24 years are among the groups most affected by the pandemic crisis. Though youth have not been identified as a part of the risk group of getting infected with COVID-19, they are considered to be the ones most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic crisis. According to a recent OECD study\(^1\), youth are the group that was most affected by the rise in unemployment. This is explained by the fact that this age group has fewer savings. At the same time, youth mention that the pandemic has influenced the most their mental well-being, employment, engagement in education, thus it resulted in a limitation of their individual freedoms.

Youth participation is an important element to be monitored in terms of the effects produced by COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Assuming that the pandemic-related restrictions limited the youth’s freedom to manifest themselves in all fields of activity, this research aims to identify how the pandemic impacted youth engagement in civic and decision-making activities in Moldova. In particular, the research analyses the differences between the levels of youth participation before and during the pandemic crisis.

What is participation? Various international and national specialized studies on youth’s situation in various fields of activity offer different interpretations of youth participation. For clarity and understanding of the analytical approach, this research defines youth participation as the right and opportunity of persons aged 15 to 24 years to engage in civic and decision-making activities in order to promote their interests and needs, by influencing positively the local and national decisions, free of any forms of exclusion.

### Definition of participation in other sources

- **Participation** can be defined as a right and process by which children and youth become active contributors to their own lives and are connected to the lives of their communities. (*Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 12, 15, 31*)\(^2\)

- **The right**, the means, the space, **the opportunity** and the support given to youth in order to participate in the democratic life of any type of community. (*Council of Europe*)

- Involving of youth in innovative and responsible actions that meet both the authentic needs of youth, as well as the opportunities for planning and/or taking decision that affect the whole society. (*U.S. National Commission on Resources for Youth*)

- Participation implies active involvement of youth in the decision making process, in public consultations, in carrying out activities in the society that target them directly or indirectly. (*Law No 215 of 29.07.2016 on Youth, Republic of Moldova*)

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[http://cntm.md/sites/default/files/Ghid%20participarea%20tinerilor%20%5Bprint%5D.pdf](http://cntm.md/sites/default/files/Ghid%20participarea%20tinerilor%20%5Bprint%5D.pdf)
ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND

The legal framework on youth participation in economic, political and social life is shaped by a systemic regulatory approach. Youth participation and protection rights are regulated by the Law No 279-XIV on Youth of 1999. In 2003 the legal framework was supplemented by the Youth Strategy, which comes with a more specific approach to youth participation since 2008. Subsequently, the National Youth Strategy (2009) was developed, which establishes youth participation as a national priority and an intervention area for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The National Youth Development Strategy has become a platform fostering the further development of the legal framework by approving the Law on Volunteering (2010) and the Education Code (2014). The objectives and action plan for youth sector development are currently set forth in the Government Decision No 1006 of 2014. At the same time, the Law on Youth entered into force in 2016, which highlights the participation of youth as a main principle of activity in the youth area.

Having a legal framework in place is not enough to determine youth to engage in the decision making. Both national and international reports that assess the presence of youth in civic and decision-making activities find a low level of participation amongst youth. For example, the 2020 Youth Index in Moldova, the instrument that measures the gaps between the situation of youth and adults in various social and economic areas (participation in the decision making, economic vulnerability, economic activity, risk situations and health), scored 0.69 points (on a scale of 0 to 1; where 0 means no gap between the compared groups and 1 - the maximum gap) revealed a much lower level of youth participation in the local political and decision-making processes than in the case of the adults.

The participation of youth can be interpreted by analysing both the intrinsic and the extrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors refer mainly to youth’s motivation to participate in civic and decision-making activities, which is also influenced by their perception of participation, and the extrinsic factors — the access to participation (participation enabling environment, opportunities to engage). In the context of COVID-19 pandemic crisis and its impact on all social areas, the effects of the pandemic can be regarded as an external factor that also impacted the level of youth participation.

This research aims to identify how the youth engagement changed as result of the pandemic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly influenced the youth involvement both in Moldova, and worldwide. This analysis is intended to reveal the extent to which the crisis effects and response measures impacted the youth’s decision to engage and their opportunities to participate in the social life and in the decision making process.

Understanding how the pandemic influenced the youth participation will help identify specific and relevant public policy measures. Thus, special attention will be paid to measures that must

3 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=31482&lang=ro
4 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=23615&lang=ro
5 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=119872&lang=ro
6 Law on Youth http://lex.justice.md/md/366763/
8 https://moldova.unfpa.org/en/node/51648
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHcqRufwz7U
9 Note that the Youth Index was calculated on the basis of two indicators: (i) ratio of young people to adults in the total number of local councilors and (ii) ratio of young people to adults who voted (in the local elections). Thus, such a large gap (0.69 points) was determined by the low participation of young people in the elections in 2019, compared to adults.
be implemented in order to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic in the long run, which could result in a chronic diminution of youth participation in Moldova.

The research is based on the data of the opinion poll conducted among the population aged 15-24. Considering that a state of emergency was established in Moldova in March 2020 to mitigate the harmful impact of the pandemic crisis, and many activities were either stopped or disrupted, the opinion poll conducted among youth aged 15-24 helped us measure the changes in the level of youth participation. The trends in youth participation show the general and specific picture of the influence of the pandemic crisis on the access and motivation to participate among people aged 15-24 in Moldova.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research was developed on the basis of a quantitative analysis of the results of the opinion poll among youth aged 15-24. The data were collected during 06-21 July 2020 by the Centre of Sociological Researches and Marketing “CBS-AXA” on a sample of 1010 persons. The interviews were made on the basis of a questionnaire, available both in Romanian and Russian for participants to choose from.

**Data collection method:** telephone survey with computer application (CATI).

**Stratification criteria:** 13 geographical regions, which fit to the territorial administrative units before the return to districts, residence (urban-rural), size of urban localities (2 types), population in rural areas (3 types of rural communities).

**Sampling:** The volume of the urban strata and of the total by regions (former districts), as well as the volume of the rural strata were calculated in proportion to the general population, according to the data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova for 01 January 2020.

**Selection mode:** random selection of phone numbers.

**Representativeness:** the sample is representative for young population aged 15-24 of the Republic of Moldova, with a maximum error of ±3.1%.

### T1. Sample structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1010</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender of the respondent:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-17 years</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20 years</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24 years</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil / student</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete secondary education</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General secondary education</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional vocational education</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LIMITATIONS**

Lack of a baseline that would allow to compare within similar time frames the degree of youth participation before the pandemic and during it. Although various surveys are conducted at the national level among youth to highlight amongst all their level of participation, however, the data revealed do not allow to do a comparative analysis of the youth’s situation before the state of emergency was declared due to COVID-19 pandemic and during it. Moreover, it is thought to be taken into account at the same time, the distinct definition of the participation in the various surveys and this research. Thus, in order to identify how the pandemic affected the decision and the possibility of youth to participate, 3 clusters were defined for the purposes of this research, depending on their level of participation – the high-participation cluster, the medium participation and the low-participation one. The youth in the high-participation cluster represent the baseline for this research (see more details in the Analytical approach).

The phenomenon of participation is not characteristic for a large number of youth, therefore the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participation of youth is done mainly through the analysis of the cluster characterized by high civic engagement. As the share of the most active group is considerably lower than those with a medium and low participation, a multicriteria disaggregation of data to determine how the pandemic impacted different categories of youth based on the socio-demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, standard of living, etc.) was not possible to be analyzed for all the stages of the research.

Any variation in the level of youth participation between April and June 2020 was attributed to COVID-19 pandemic. We do not exclude the fact that there were other factors that influenced the level of civic engagement of youth during this period, but still, we consider that the pandemic was the dominant factor.

Taking into account the protection measures imposed during the pandemic crisis, the data underlying this research were collected by telephone. This led to a reduction in the number of topics covered in the interview questionnaire. Therefore, some additional aspects concerning the youth participation and the effects of the pandemic on it could not be identified.
Analytical framework

The impact of the pandemic crisis on the civic activity of youth will be analysed from the perspective of their participation in the community decision-making process and access to the services provided by various competent institutions. Youth participation was determined by measuring their presence in the decision-making process and involvement in community life – attending meetings where decisions were made for the community, organisation, youth centre; street demonstrations, rallies, signing petitions; attending working meetings of or volunteering for an NGO/youth centre and supporting the elderly. The quantification of services used was performed by analysing how youth viewed the support received from NGOs, Youth Centres and local or district Youth Councils, as well as the level of accessing the necessary participation, vocational and personal development services.

To determine the impact of the pandemic crisis there is a need to identify a baseline before the restrictions on self-isolation and social distancing were put in place. In the absence of baseline data on youth participation, which was a major limitation for the intended analytical process, we considered it necessary to determine the youth population structure in terms of their civic engagement. Starting from the idea that youth are not a homogeneous group of people, each of them having a unique situation, including in terms of participation, a Civic Engagement tool was designed for this research, which identified three distinct clusters of youth depending on the degree of engagement mentioned above.

Youth Civic Engagement Index was calculated on the basis of two factors: (i) the participation intent defined by the motivation of youth to get involved in civic life and their perception of their opinion being taken into account in the decision-making process and (ii) the effective participation of youth in the last 12 months (see the Table below). Starting from the premise that the intention also determines the de facto participation, we believe that both factors have an equal effect on the civic engagement of youth. Thus, each factor was assigned a weight of 50% of the total value.

T2. Method of calculating the Civic Engagement of Youth Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response options conversion</th>
<th>Weight of the variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARTICIPATION INTENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent do you think the opinion of youth is taken into account?</td>
<td>To a very large extent – 1  To a very small extent – 0</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In your opinion, are youth motivated to engage in the decision making?</td>
<td>YES – 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO – 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION</strong> (in the last 12 months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Have you helped older people in your community?</td>
<td>YES – 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO – 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Have you participated in projects, meetings where decisions have been made for the community, organisation, youth centre?</td>
<td>YES – 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO – 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have you participated in street demonstrations, rallies, signed petitions?</td>
<td>YES – 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO – 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Have you participated in working meetings of an NGO/youth centre or volunteered for them?</td>
<td>YES – 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO – 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The value of the Civic Engagement of Youth Index was determined on the basis of the data generated by the opinion poll. The response options for all six questions were converted to values of 0 and 1, as shown in the table above. The final values of the Civic Engagement of Youth Index was calculated as an arithmetic mean on a scale from 0 to 1, where: 0–0.33 represents the cluster of youth with low participation; 0.34–0.66 – youth with medium participation; 0.67–1 – youth with high participation.

Characterized by:
- High motivation to engage in the decision-making process;
- Predisposition to believe that young people’s opinion is largely taken into account;
- Active participation in activities associated with civic engagement (participation in meetings, where decisions are being made, street demonstrations, volunteering, etc.)

High Participation
(0.67 – 1)

Characterized by:
- Relatively low motivation to engage in the decision-making process;
- Predisposition to believe that the opinion of young people is taken into account to a certain extent;
- Inconsistent participation in activities associated with civic engagement.

Medium Participation
(0.34 – 0.66)

Characterized by:
- Lack of motivation to engage in the decision-making process;
- Predisposition to believe that the opinion of young people is taken into account to a small extent;
- Reluctance to get involved in activities associated with civic engagement.

Low Participation
(0 – 0.33)

F1. Defining the clusters of youth through the prism of Civic Engagement
Source: CPD approach based on the data generated by the opinion poll of July 2020

The reference group for analysing the impact of the pandemic crisis on the civic engagement of youth will be the group of Though the opinion poll included questions divided in terms of time period (questions that highlight their participation in the last 12 months and in the last 3 months), the simple comparative analysis cannot be applied, because the possibility of participation in any activity associated with civic engagement at least once during 12 months is higher than in a much shorter period of time, such as 3 months. Thus, division by clusters helped highlight the youth who are characterized by increased civic engagement (high-participation cluster).

Starting from the assumption that the engagement of youth with high participation is more predictable, due to the fact that they have a permanent and consistent engagement, being more motivated in this regard, the probability of them getting involved in activities during the last 3 months is much higher. In other words, unlike other groups in which participation varies even in the absence of the pandemic crisis, youth with high participation will show a stable activism during the pandemic crisis, as well. Therefore, the findings derived from the participation variations in this cluster during the pandemic can be interpreted as the effects of the pandemic on the general participation of youth in Moldova.
I. Youth participation: Overview

Participation is a key element both for the development of youth’s personalities and for the prosperity of the entire society. Thus, particular attention should be paid at national and local level to their involvement and motivation to be actively engaged in the life of their communities and in take action to strengthen their personal and professional skills. Specifically, we mean the development and implementation of efficient mechanisms that would enable this process and contribute to increasing the number of youth that benefit from their rights as part of the decision-making process and civic activities in their community/district.

Over the last year, less than 20% of the youth from Moldova took part in activities that influence the decision-making process. The opinion poll carried out among youth in July 2020 highlighted that only one-fifth of the youth in the country had been involved in some activities that would require their expression in the decision-making process. The aforementioned includes participation in meetings where decisions are made, including decisions for the community; working meetings of youth structures; as well as street demonstrations/meetings, etc. As Moldova is implementing a specific framework to address youth issues, including their participation in social life, at a time when their engagement is at such a low level, questions come up on how well and efficiently these mechanisms are developed and how efficiently they address the actual needs of the youth.

When we talk about the potential reasons that would explain such a low overall youth participation rate, it is necessary to pay attention to their perception about their opinion being taken into account. The motivation of a young person to display one behaviour or another, to get civically engaged is determined both by their internal urge to do so, but also by external factors. An important pre-condition that stimulates significantly the civic participation of youth, found during this research, is the level of their opinion being taken into account by the governmental decision-making authorities, as well as the extent of their representation. By means of regression analysis and statistical tools it was proven that youth participation in influencing the decision-making increases the more they are inclined to think that their opinion is taken into account (see the figure below). Thus, the more youth’s opinion is taken into account, the more they get civically engaged, by taking part in working meetings of NGOs, youth centres, as well as in the decision-making process. This phenomenon reveals that subjective opinions about perception and inclusion of youth in the decision-making are significant and should not be neglected when defining the public policies.

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10 See the information on the relevant national framework, which was reflected in the beginning of this research.
The research highlighted that more than half of the interviewed youth population believes that their opinion is neglected in the decision-making process. Figure 3 reflects the share of youth and their perception of this topic. Only 32% believe that the youth’s voice is heard.

**F3. Impact of taking youth’s opinion into consideration on their actual participation**  
*Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020*

Youth aged 15 to 17 were more engaged in civic activities. The thorough analysis in terms of social-demographic criteria (such as gender, age, area of residence, income level, etc.) highlighted deeper age-based inequalities. To be precise, data revealed that the older the youth get, the less civically engaged they are. Figure 4 shows the share of youth that took part in the decision-making activities or activities aimed at influencing the decision making. It is obvious that the most active youth are the ones in the age group 15 to 17 years. This happens because educational institutions are an enabling environment for the civic engagement of youth and for accessing extra-curricular activities. Youth are looking for opportunities to develop their soft skills in order to supplement the knowledge acquired on the basis of the school curriculum.

When it comes to youth aged between 21 and 24, an explanation of their lower engagement is that most youth in this age group are either employed or looking for a job. These youth contribute to the development of their communities by means of their economic activity and not so much by affiliating to a youth structure, such as youth centres or NGOs. These trends are also valid internationally, i.e. youth enrolled to study show a higher level of participation in youth clubs.

**F4. Share of youth that took part in the aforementioned activities during the last year, by age, %**  
*Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020*
At the same time, the research highlighted that the presence of persons with disabilities in the family does not have a negative influence on the youth’s desire and possibility to participate. The analysis of youth participation in terms of presence or lack of persons with disabilities in the household led to two major findings. On the one hand, it was noticed that youth that have persons with disabilities in their family are more involved in the decision-making (see the figure). On the other hand, gender inequalities in participation were found when correlating the presence/absence of persons with disabilities in the family with the respondent’s gender. To be precise, while there are no significant gender discrepancies in the case of families without persons with disabilities, when we look into families that have members with disabilities the gender inequalities vary from 6.3 p.p. to 19.8 p.p., all of them disadvantaging girls/women, regardless of the form of participation. This can be explained by the fact that in such cases the greater burden of care in the family falls on the young girls/women, which is also fueled by the societal gender stereotypes regarding the perceived roles of women and men in the care and household chores. Consequently, girls are more involved in such work, which leads to their greater exclusion from participation processes.

F5. Share of youth that took part in the aforementioned activities during the last year, by presence of persons with disabilities in the household, %

Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020
II. Youth participation during the pandemic

Measures undertaken to overcome the toxic effects of the pandemic crisis had a negative impact on youth’s participation level. Imposing social distancing, and closing down most entities, including educational institutions and the ones working for youth (NGOs, youth centres, youth councils, etc.), have certainly reduced youth’s possibility to engage in activities aimed at participation in social life and skills strengthening in order to influence the decision-making process. This is also confirmed by international reports on the impact of the pandemic on youth participation all over the world. In the national context, this research allowed us to identify the extent to which the crisis influenced the level of youth retention in activities related to participation and civic activism.

The impact of the pandemic on youth participation was measured through the analysis of involvement dynamics of the most active youth cluster. As mentioned before, an essential limitation of the analysis was the lack of a baseline that would allow comparing the degree of youth participation within similar time frames before the pandemic and during it. In order to overcome this limitation, it was decided to define 3 clusters of youth: with a high level of participation, with a medium level of participation, and with a low level of participation. Based on the assumption that youth with a high level of participation are the most motivated and consistent in relation to their engagement, the pandemic time could not hinder their activism spirit. Consequently, the situation specific for this cluster may be taken as a baseline for determining the impact of the pandemic crisis.

Only one in ten youth from Moldova has a high level of participation in the decision-making and social life of their community, which is caused by their high level of motivation and belief that their opinion is taken into account. As a result of the primary calculation, the share of each youth cluster among the interviewed population was determined according to the presented analytical model. The highest prevalence belongs to youth with a low level of participation – 50%, followed by the share of youth with a medium level of participation – 40%. According to the same calculation, only 10% of youth have a high level of participation. As the shares of youth clusters were identified on the basis of questions reflecting the level of motivation to engage, perception of their actual inclusion and participation, these shares reveal a picture that deserves the attention of public policies on the inclusion of youth in the decision-making processes.

The reasons behind the fact that only 10% of youth have a high level of participation include (i) low trust of youth in the authorities and in how inclined they are to listen to youth’s opinion and take measures that would meet the needs of the youth; (ii) services provided to youth in communities do not meet their needs; (iii) the complexity of activities aimed at youth’s professional and personal development, which requires
more time for engagement; (iv) prioritisation of other responsibilities besides participation (taking care of the family, employment, professional career), etc.

**The analysis by clusters confirms the likelihood of youth aged 15 to 17 to engage actively in the social life.** The socio-demographic assessment of youth from the high-participation cluster, as compared to the general population of questioned youth, allowed to identify the distinct profile of those who are more active civically. The figure below shows that age is the main element that makes the difference between these two populations. Thus, in the high-participation cluster, the share of youth aged 15-17 exceeds by far those aged 21-24, even if the situation in the case of the general population is reverse. The fact that they are still enrolled in education (school, college of vocational school, etc.) confirms once more that educational institutions represent an enabling environment for adolescents aged 15-17, who can manifest themselves and participate in different activities aimed at increasing their engagement.

Additionally, the youth from rural area stood out with their high prevalence in this cluster – accounting for about 60% of the high-participation category. Even though at the level of the general population, the difference between individuals from rural and urban areas is not significant (2.2 pp), in the high-participation cluster youth from rural area stand out. This situation can be interpreted as a bigger need of the rural youth to be associated to a group, the social distance being smaller in rural areas as compared to the urban ones.

![Diagram showing the profile of youth from the interviewed general population and of those from the cluster with high participation](image)

*F7. Comparable profile of youth from the interviewed general population and of those from the cluster with high participation, %
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020*

**The pandemic crisis determined a significant withdrawal of youth with high participation from civic activities.** Given that the cluster of youth with high participation is the baseline used to highlight the impact of the pandemic on youth participation, the poll data reveal that an average of 60% of the youth from this cluster participated in activities in the last 3 months. Thus, during the pandemic more than 1/3 of the youth with high participation withdrew from the activities that influence the decision-making process. Although most of them managed to remain civically engaged between April and June of this year, engaging mainly in awareness raising activities for different issues by signing petitions, if to extrapolate the drastic decrease in participation noticed among this category of youth to the clusters with a lower participation before the pandemic, we get quite a pessimistic picture revealing a substantial decrease in the participation of the entire youth population in Moldova during the pandemic.
The pandemic had a different impact on the participation of young men and women, with a more pronounced negative impact on the latter. Interpreting the poll data from a socio-demographic perspective during the period when social distancing measures were imposed and the activity of various entities was stopped, the overall results vary. Thus, a lower retention in civic activities during that period was found for young women compared to young men. Of the total number of young female population with a high civic participation before the restrictive measures were imposed, during the pandemic only 40% of them had the possibility to engage in civic activities (see Figure 9). This dynamic can be explained by the unequal gender-based effect on the division of household chores and childcare duties. Thus, women, including young women, spent more time for cooking, cleaning activities and helping younger family members with remote learning, which did not allow them to participate in civic activities to the same extent as men.

On the one hand, the pandemic determined youth aged 15-17 to withdraw from civic activities, and on the other hand, it favoured the participation of those aged 21-24. During the pandemic, only 1 in 3 youth of this age (from the high-participation cluster) managed to participate in civic activities. At the same time, it seems that the pandemic boosted the participation of youth aged 21-24. This reversal can be explained by the following: (i) the closing down of educational institutions had a drastic impact on the withdrawal of pupils/students from the participatory process, as these institutions represent the most enabling environment that provides opportunities for participation, (ii) the need to interact and be part of a group determined youth aged 21-24 to get involved in different activities, particularly online activities, during the quarantine period.

F8. Share of youth from the high-participation cluster by their participation in the last 3 months, %
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020

F9. Share of youth in the high-participation cluster who participated in the last 3 months, of the population of that cluster, %
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020
Apparently, individuals with high income were more reluctant to participate during this period. Only one third of the active individuals with high-income participated in working meeting of the NGOs, youth centres, or in volunteering activities.

Due to the measures imposed during the pandemic, youth spent up to six hours per day, sometimes more, on online platforms. The specific data of the general youth population who participated in the opinion poll revealed that they spent more time for social media activities and online lessons during the pandemic (see the Figure below). Given that youth were deprived of the physical interaction with their peers, using these means to socialise was an optimal solution during the period of social distancing. When educational institutions closed down, the educational process was conducted online and students needed more time to manage to process the education material according to the curriculum. The extremely demanding education via online platforms affected the desire of youth to participate in additional online seminars/workshops, as well as determined their poor engagement in other activities.

One form of participation during the pandemic was youth involvement in the dissemination of the information about protection measures, including via social media. Given the importance of the information of the public about COVID-19 and the measures to diminish the contamination risk, many youth came forward with the initiative to disseminate relevant information about the pandemic. Thus, on average, about half of the Moldovan youth helped to inform various individuals about protection measures, including by publishing information on social media (see Figure 11).

At the same time, during this period, youth engaged actively in providing support to older people in their communities. Of the total number of youth, 80% were open to support older people during the pandemic. Given that older people were identified as the most vulnerable group to the drastic impact of COVID-19 virus, providing them with information and support through different volunteering activities was identified as a form of participation that youth assumed. The data presented below show a strong distinction by territorial profile. Thus, in the rural area, the youth engaged to a greater extent, which is explained by the fact that in villages, the community and the spirit of helping those from the neighbourhood is more pronounced and the social distance is much smaller than in the urban areas.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Helped the elderly from the village</th>
<th>Informed others about the pandemic and the methods of protection</th>
<th>Involved in the distribution through social networks of information about COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young men</strong></td>
<td>81,8</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young women</strong></td>
<td>79,6</td>
<td>67,5</td>
<td>52,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15-17 years</strong></td>
<td>83,3</td>
<td>65,4</td>
<td>47,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18-20 years</strong></td>
<td>83,4</td>
<td>65,5</td>
<td>43,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21-24 years</strong></td>
<td>76,6</td>
<td>61,1</td>
<td>49,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low income</strong></td>
<td>69,4</td>
<td>56,6</td>
<td>54,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average income</strong></td>
<td>82,4</td>
<td>64,9</td>
<td>46,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High income</strong></td>
<td>84,6</td>
<td>68,4</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td>75,7</td>
<td>62,2</td>
<td>44,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td>85,1</td>
<td>64,9</td>
<td>49,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**F12. Share of youth who conducted the listed civic activities in the last 3 months, by socio-demographic criteria, %**

*Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA, July 2020*
III. Access to institutions

At this stage of the analysis we were concerned about understanding the extent to which the activity of institutions that represent youth’s interests and the services provided by them determines the level of youth participation and what was the impact of the pandemic on their decision to use the services offered.

The research showed that youth use to a low extent the services provided by entities that represent their rights. On average, 87% of youth did not benefit in the past year of any services provided by NGOs, youth councils or youth centres that operate in the territory. The figure below reveals a lower degree of youth engagement in the activities provided by youth centres – only 7.7% of youth said they benefited from their services in the last 12 months.

The low rate of use is influenced by such factors as access, complexity of the activities offered, degree to which the services provided meet youth’s needs, etc. This is confirmed by the disaggregated analysis of the data by the socio-demographic criteria of the respondents. The following figures present the shares of youth that last year did not benefit from a single service/activity/project provided by NGOs, youth councils or centres. Thus, it was found that youth aged 15-17 and those from rural areas benefited of very few activities organised by NGOs. Given that this category of individuals in most cases is enrolled in education, the low share of engagement would be an indicator of the high complexity of the services provided by these institutions (projects implemented during a long period of time that require an ongoing participation of youth). The low rate of engagement of rural youth could be an indicator of the lack of such institutions in rural communities or of the noncompliance of the services with the needs of the youth. At the same time, the data revealed that pupils (aged 15-17) are mostly oriented towards consulting/interaction activities provided by youth centres and councils that request a lighter attendance (upon need). Also, it was found that youth who have persons with disabilities in their families benefited to a higher extend from activities and services provided by youth centres and councils, which can be regarded as a form of association to a group, favouring thus their participation in the community life.

The research showed a higher inequality towards young women in terms of benefiting from the services provided by entities. Correlating gender with other socio-demographic criteria of the respondents emphasized that regardless of the demographic characteristic, gender gaps among those who did not benefit from these services mostly disadvantage the girls. The biggest gaps are related to the engagement in the activities provided by NGOs, including those specific for young girls from urban areas, where various such organisations are concentrated. They refer particularly to young women with higher education and those with low socio-economic level. This situation
could be explained by the higher likelihood of young women to allocate time for family duties rather than for participation and professional development activities.

F14. Share of youth that did NOT benefit from the services provided by the listed entities, %
Source: Opinion poll of CPD and UNFPA

Note: In this context, significant gender gaps were not found on age criterion and hence were not included in the figure below

F15. Gender gaps among those who did not use the services provided by youth entities
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA

The cluster-based analysis reveals that youth associated with a benefited from these opportunities to a higher extent, as they showed more interest in activities organised by local or district councils for youth. Data showed that though the youth associated with the high-participation cluster have the lowest share in total youth population, they are more likely to benefit from the services provided by youth entities. Thus, we can assume that a more consistent engagement in the activity of local or district youth councils, of youth centres and NGOs has a positive impact on the development of a higher level of civic engagement of youth.
F16. Representation of the use of institutions’ services by youth, from the perspective of clusters, %
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA

Impact of the pandemic crisis on the approach of youth entities

The pandemic crisis did not only outline, but also emphasized the low opportunities of youth to benefit from the services of the organisations that represent their interests. As described in the previous chapter, last year, on average, only 9.7% of the total youth population benefited from at least one service provided by NGOs, youth centres and councils. In the context of the measures imposed to fight the effects of COVID-19 pandemic, the poll revealed that this share decreased even more. Thus, 62% of them noted that during April–June 2020 benefited rarer or never from services and activities provided by these entities (see the figures). Therefore, a significant negative impact of the pandemic is found in this context. This is also confirmed by the fact that youth associated with a high participation were negatively impacted by the effects of the pandemic crisis, which visibly reduced the share of those who benefited from the services of those entities. Given that, compared to the general youth population, a decrease was noticed in the level of use in both cases, we conclude that once the protection measures were imposed, even if the entities managed to maintain or adapt to a certain extent the services they provide, they still did not manage to meet all the needs of the youth.

F17. Frequency of using the services provided by youth entities during the pandemic period
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA

It is obvious that the pandemic amplified the gender inequality among beneficiaries of services, young women being to a greater extent disadvantaged. The figure below reveals the share of youth who in the last 3 months benefited rarer or never from the services provided by...
COVID-19 AND YOUTH: THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The pandemic had a negative impact on the situation of youth from rural areas. Thus, about 70% of the youth who live in rural communities reported a lower engagement in the activities organised by entities. In the context of educational institutions lockdown, quarantine and social distancing measures, etc. youth from rural areas had fewer opportunities to benefit from the services provided. At the same time, we should take into account that the civic infrastructure in the rural area is less developed than in the urban area. Thus, closing down the already scarce entities had a visible negative effect on the youth from the community.

The results found over the past months show that the situation worsened (66.8% of girls mentioned these response options). This situation can be explained among all by the fact that young girls allocate more hours for online classes as compared to young boys (see the figure below).

In this respect, we note that youth who reported high revenues were less inclined to benefit from services. More than 75% of youth reported that they benefited rarer or never during the pandemic (see the figure below).
IV. Access to services

Only one in five youth showed the desire to benefit from empowerment services. The research revealed a greater need for activities that target the personal and professional development – thematic information sessions, economic empowerment services and a lower need for youth participation services (see the figure below).

At the same time, it was found that only half of those who needed development services received them. Besides the fact that less than 20% of the youth showed interest and felt the need to get involved in capacity building activities, both professional and personal, only 53% of them managed to actively benefit of such services. The figures below show that a higher number of youth managed to benefit of thematic seminars and volunteering activities – which mainly took part through the association of youth in different groups of common interest. As the specific situation concerning the youth from high-participation cluster reveals a significant gap between the need for and use of services (on average 2/3 of them actually used the services), this situation could be explained by two structural factors, namely the access to these services (particularly their location and accessibility) and the service options provided in order to meet the de facto needs of the applicants. The fact that even among the youth who show an increased civic activism there is a visible gap, the motivation of youth would have a lower share as an intrinsic influence factor.

It is worrying that youth who live in households with persons with disabilities benefited less from the services they needed. The figures presented below reflect the share of youth that needed certain personal or professional development services and of those who managed to benefit from them. The socio-demographic analysis revealed that youth said that they or someone from the family who have a disability were mostly neglected in this context. This can be mainly explained by the level of accessibility and adaptability of these services to the needs of persons with disabilities, as well as by the fact that they had to spend more time to take care of the family members with disabilities.

At the same time, the gaps that affect the most youth aged 15-17 were highlighted. Thus, even if youth felt the need to participate in such sessions, the de facto participation was not the same. Thus, the question regarding the extent to which the services provided to and available for youth meet their participation needs persists.
Impact of the pandemic crisis on the beneficiaries of empowerment services

Apparently, during the pandemic crisis, youth showed interest for civic and training activities. The opinion poll data show that during this period, certain youth needed to be involved more in training, volunteering activities, etc. Thus, out of all the interviewed youth, 6% reported to access more often economic empowerment and career guidance services, volunteering activities, economic empowerment and career guidance trainings (see the Figure). In the context of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic crisis, it is highly probable that youth felt the need to speak to their peers. Thus, the participation in these activities seems to be the solution they identified to meet the needs of interaction and socialization.

From the abundance of services and trainings developed on the online platforms during the pandemic, it seems that youth paid an increased attention to the contents of the service itself rather than to the providers of such services. This could explain why during the pandemic the share of those who reported asking more rarely for the support from entities is higher (the finding was included in the previous chapter), as compared to a reverse situation in the case of services accessed (they used them more often), even if the shares themselves do not represent big differences. During the quarantine, most of the organisations stopped their activity and further presented their services (workshops, trainings, courses, etc.) in the online version. It seems that youth, while accessing the multitude of services provided by different organisations, focused more on the content, without making a difference among those who organised the activity.
In the past 3 months these services were mainly accessed by the youth who were less involved in civic activities before the pandemic. The analysis of the situation from the perspective of the high-participation cluster revealed that in the past 3 months they actually accessed more rarely empowerment services (because they benefited of such services before the pandemic). The situation in the general youth population shows that youth who used to have a lower civic participation engaged to a higher extent in empowerment activities during April–June 2020. The figures below confirm this, but also highlight the profile of youth who during April–June requested and benefited more often of capacity building, economic empowerment, career guidance and participation services. Thus, young women aged 21–24 and youth with low income accessed more often the services during the pandemic.

F23. Gap between the use of services, %  
F24. Unreported share of those who benefited last year, %  
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA

F25. Frequency of accessing participation and empowerment services by socio-demographic criteria, %  
Source: Opinion poll commissioned by CPD and UNFPA
Key findings

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the youth’s activism, whose participation decreased, a phenomenon that can have a long-term effect. In the context of the protection measures established to diminish the negative effects of the pandemic, such as social distancing, close down of education institutions, during April-June 2020 the youth were noticed to withdraw from activities, losing their interest to engage in the participation process. As well, the closing down of the organizations that provide capacity building and youth representation services also had a negative impact. During the pandemic, only 6% of the youth continued to use the services of these institutions. The decrease in the interest for participation was analysed for a three-month period, but if extrapolated on a period of 12 months, it could reveal a deeper impact, with a dramatic decrease in the civic participation of youth.

The participation of youth aged 15-17 was affected the most by the pandemic. This analysis revealed an increased interest for civic engagement in communities among individuals aged 15-17, as their activism is more pronounced compared to the other categories of youth. Last year, on average 10% of the total number of youth from this age category used the services of entities providing youth empowerment and participation opportunities. Their more pronounced activism is due to the education institutions that offer an enabling environment for the civic engagement of youth and for accessing the extra-curricular activities, which allow them to develop both personally and professionally. Thus, the lower engagement of this category of youth in the participatory process during April-June 2020 can be directly associated with the dropping in the number of enabling mechanisms that used to be provided by the educational institutions.

At the same time, the gender inequality among youth with a smaller representation intensified exponentially during the pandemic. The research showed that girls benefit less from the services provided by youth empowerment entities. During the lockdown, even fewer girls were involved in civic activities and benefited from the services of NGOs, youth centres and councils. In contrast, boys, during the pandemic became the majority group both in terms of participation and access to youth services. This situation shows that when external factors, such as the pandemic crisis occur, the group of youth that tend to have a lower participation will be impacted two or three times harder by their effect.

The inequalities in capacity building and funding of youth structures in rural area as compared to urban area grow worse during the pandemic crises. This study found a gap between the actual participation of the youth from rural areas and the services available for them. The rural and urban youth tend to participate equally in the civic life of their community, but during the pandemic crisis, an increased participation of rural youth was found. This proves the exponential impact of the proximity and the less formal relationships of those from rural area during a crisis. At the same time, rural youth benefit less from empowerment and development services. This gap between the participation and use of services can suggest that in the rural area, although the motivation of youth to participate is high, the financial resources channeled for strengthening and broadening the support provided to local youth are not enough.

The mechanism for providing access to services for youth from households with persons with disabilities during crisis situations is not strong enough. This analysis proved that the presence or absence of persons with disabilities in the household has a significant impact on their participation. This factor impacts the access to and use of services during certain pandemic crises because these youth help to take care of family members that depend on support. Thus, the national response to the pandemic crisis took less into account the disproportionality of the population and the specific needs of the households with persons with disabilities.
Recommendations

Given the predominantly negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the decisions and opportunities of youth to actively engage in the decision-making process and civic activities, in order to overcome this situation, the authorities should address this issue in a comprehensive and systemic way.

I. The public policy response should take into account the interventions that would address the long-term effects of the pandemic on youth participation. As educational institutions reopen in September, it still remains to be seen whether enabling mechanisms for youth development and participation in place before the pandemic will be resumed as well. We do not exclude the possibility that due to the lack of procedures for rebooting or rethinking all secondary activities that used to stimulate youth activism in the social life, we will witness a long-term chronic decrease in the level of youth participation. Thus, the public policies should be adjusted to the trends identified in this study, expected to grow stronger in the long run.

II. Strengthen all the mechanisms that influence and inspire the active participation. In order to maintain the high levels of participation of active youth it is necessary to reform the public policies by developing new interventions, but we do not have to neglect the strengthening of already existing structures. Currently, ensuring a safe learning environment is a priority of national youth policies. Although an important platform aimed to retain more youth in the participatory process, special attention has to be paid to rebooting the ancillary services. Thus, the tools and mechanisms that help teach the youth on how to engage in the decision-making process and social life both at local and national level should be maintained and reinvented to ensure their sustainability.

III. Set an ongoing and efficient monitoring mechanism of youth participation and of further impact of COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic crisis, although identified and to a certain extent predictable, is extremely dynamic and needs a periodical monitoring mechanism. Applying tools for a consistent assessment of youth engagement, including in the decision-making process, would generate up-to-date data on the level of participation, that can be used to adjust the public policies in real time. This approach would facilitate the formulation and implementation of efficient interventions to solve the major problem that discourages the youth from engaging actively in the community life and in advocacy activities that target their interests and needs.

IV. Ensure a systemic approach to youth inclusion with a minor representation and participation. As emphasized by the research, youth that live in households with persons with disabilities generally tend to be more affected by the pandemic, as they have to perform household chores and offer support to family members. At the same time, the rural youth benefit the least from representation and support services. This dynamic requires a thorough analysis of the factors underpinning the barriers faced by the minority groups or groups affected by social stereotypes. Therefore, a systemic approach through the cooperation of different government structures, civil society and sustainable development partners is of utmost importance in formulating a fast and efficient response.

V. Use the participation opportunities of youth as a tool to fight the impact of the pandemic on the physical and psychological wellbeing of youth. Motivating youth to engage in civic activities can be a major challenge if the restrictions imposed by the pandemic crisis persist for a long period of time. This research presented the impact of the pandemic crisis only for a period of three months, but the negative effect on the participation can be a progressive one. In this context, the need to acknowledge the benefits of civic activism by youth and to promote it as a tool for long-term wellbeing will represent a pivotal aspect in the development of public policies and national development programs.