BY US, FOR US:

REWIRING EDUCATION FOR A NEW GENERATION

RESEARCH BRIEF

OCTOBER 2021

EDUCATION MUST BE REWIRED

Within the context of revolutionising technologies, changing climates, and a world-altering pandemic, young people must learn to navigate not only the world of today, but also that of an uncertain tomorrow.

The importance of a holistic, agile, and resilient approach to education was enshrined in the targets of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*[1] In order to reimagine education, it is essential to hear the voices of those who are most impacted: young people.

To *rewire education for a prosperous and sustainable future*, Dubai Cares has launched the **RewirEd** platform.[2] The RewirEd Summit will be held in December 2021 to catalyse meaningful and urgent shifts in education globally.

"When one is educated, that person becomes like a light bulb that shines and illuminates other people. Education enlightens your mind and it makes you see opportunities even in the worst-case scenarios." – young woman from Zambia

To ensure that young voices are at the forefront of the Summit, this youth-led research was launched to examine the following research questions:

1. Pathways to Learning and Livelihoods
How can education, in all its forms, best equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need across their communities, work, and personal lives?

2. Young People's Aspirations
How can we rewire education systems to ensure that they are reflective and supportive of young people's aspirations, values, and motivations?

3. Active Youth Citizenship
How can young people's capacity for active citizenship be strengthened and elevated in political and economic systems?

BY US, FOR US
This research uniquely captures the global perspective on education reform, the impact of the pandemic and youth inclusion directly by young people, from young people through an innovative youth-led methodology. Within this study, young people are clear: rewiring the system is needed to meet their needs and transform education to set young people up for future success.

1 United Nations. (2021). Goal 4. Available at: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4.
2 For more information: https://www.rewired2021.com.

Inclusive, youth–led research methodology.

This research complements existing research on education reform, the impact of the pandemic on education and livelihoods, and youth inclusion. However, this research uniquely captures the global perspective directly *by* young people, *from* young people through an innovative youth–led methodology.

The research was led by a team of 12 young researchers from 12 different countries (selected out of 1,081 applicants).[3] The team of young researchers investigated the lived experiences and perspectives of 3,294 young people across 70 countries.
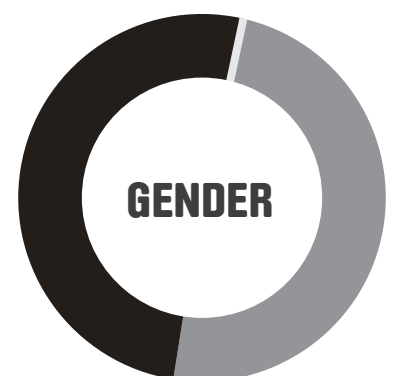
Table 1: Data collected by method, region, and gender.

Method	Region					Gender			Total
	Europe	Asia	Africa	N. & S. America	Not specified/ other	Male	Female	Non–binary/ Did not disclose	
Survey	159 (9%)	533 (31%)	886 (51%)	150 (8%)	15 (1%)	842 (48%)	882 (51%)	19 (1%)	1,743 (53%)
Focus group discussion, audio clips, youth talks	167 (11%)	535 (34%)	430 (28%)	419 (27%)	0 (0%)	845 (54%)	706 (46%)	0 (0%)	1,551 (47%)
TOTAL	**326 (10%)**	**1,068 (32%)**	**1,316 (40%)**	**569 (17%)**	**15 (1%)**	**1,687 (51%)**	**1,588 (48%)**	**19 (1%)**	**3,294**

METHOD
- Survey
- Focus group discussion, audio clips, youth talks

REGION
- Africa
- Asia
- N. & S. America
- Europe
- Other

GENDER
- Male
- Female
- Non–binary/did not disclose

---

[3] See page 26 for more information on the researchers.

THE SIX-STEP YOUTH-LED RESEARCH MODEL MAXIMISED YOUTH LEADERSHIP AT EVERY STAGE OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS.

The approach began with the recruitment of young researchers. Out of 1,081 applicants, a group of 12 young researchers (58% female, average age of 24 years old) from 12 different countries were selected based on their connections to civil society, experience with education and livelihoods, and interest in the research process.

1. SETTING THE FRAMEWORK

Restless Development and Dubai Cares collaboratively determined the research focus: according to young people globally, how should education be rewired for a prosperous and sustainable future? Next, a desk-based review of research on youth, education, skills, pathways into employment and the future of work, including relevant research on the impact of COVID-19, was conducted. Guided by the literature review, a research framework was designed. Young researchers then provided feedback to ensure that the study would reflect their priorities.

2. DESIGNING THE QUESTIONS

During a one-week training and workshop, young researchers were trained on critical research skills such as data collection methods, data analysis and research ethics. They collaboratively prioritised the key questions to be asked.

3. COLLECTING THE DATA

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected by the researchers.

- Survey. Data collection began with the survey. The survey was shared extensively by Restless Development, Dubai Cares, 40 partner organisations, and the youth researchers' networks. The young researchers supported their peers to fill in the survey over the phone offline as needed.

- Focus group discussions. Following the survey, the young researchers independently identified respondents in accordance with the sampling framework (young people aged 18–30 years in a mix of geographic regions). They identified the respondents primarily through convenience sampling of their existing networks and connections and snowball sampling; however, they also made efforts to reach those outside of their networks by connecting with administrators in different municipalities and other local groups.

- Audio/video clips. The opportunity to answer question prompts via sharing audio/video recordings was offered to participants as an alternative to the focus group discussions (through the same sampling approach). The aim was to reduce barriers to participation for young people who were not able to take part in focus group discussions due to technological or time restrictions.

- Youth talks. In order to reach more young people in the regions that were less well-represented in the survey results, three virtual (Zoom) youth talks were held for participants from Latin America, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe and South Asia.

4. ANALYSING THE FINDINGS

The data analysis occurred in two phases beginning with the survey data, followed by the qualitative data. The preliminary survey analysis and the research framework guided the creation of the qualitative data codebook. During a virtual week-long analysis workshop, the young researchers used a deductive coding process to analyse the qualitative data. The researchers also compiled the list of limitations based on their experiences with the data collection.

5. CONDUCTING VALIDATION EXERCISES

Three of the young researchers continued as report writers. They validated the coding done by their peers, generated a finalised list of themes, and each led writing sections of the report alongside Restless Development staff. As a result, the report presents a comprehensive and highly collaborative study led by young people and written in their voices.

6. CONVENING CONVERSATIONS FOR ACTION

Following the publication of this research, the biggest task begins: *inspiring action*. First and foremost, the research recommendations inform the RewirEd Summit in December 2021. Furthermore, through the RewirEd campaign and a series of conversations both online and offline about the content of the research, young people will facilitate calls to action to truly rewire education.

Study limitations.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this research project was conducted almost entirely online, from researcher recruitment and training, to primary data collection, to analysis and writing. It is likely that this skewed the sample towards urban, better educated, more strongly digitally connected, and better exposed/networked young people (both as researchers and study participants). Furthermore, the researchers identified respondents *primarily* through their networks, so the respondents are likely to be more similar to the researchers than young people on average. Voices of young people outside these networks are underrepresented. Finally, in some regions, contextual challenges or cultural norms impacted how much respondents were willing to share with researchers, which is likely to have skewed findings toward more socially acceptable and less controversial responses.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING AND LIVELIHOODS

Young people's learning continues to be a global concern among young people themselves. Young people who took part in this research claim that education and school systems are unable to meet the work challenges of both the present and the future, emphasising the growing need to firmly link together learning and livelihoods.

31%
of young people feel soft skills are the most important toward achieving their aspirations, followed by entrepreneurial skills (23%).

40%
of young people believe that their biggest barrier to securing meaningful employment is that educational opportunities are not well aligned to available work opportunities.

50%
feel only somewhat prepared by their education for available work opportunities.

There is a mismatch between education received and work opportunities available.

In the survey, the majority of respondents did not feel well-prepared for work opportunities: 17% said that education did not prepare them at all and 50% felt only somewhat prepared for available work opportunities. Of the survey respondents, men were more likely than women to feel very well prepared (36% men, 24% women). The lack of competency-based and transferable skills is an integral factor hindering students from acquiring employment after graduation. To the respondents, competencies and transferable skills should have been taught through practical experiences, but very few said they gained practical experiences through their education. Instead, their learning relied too much on textbooks, note memorisation, and passing of exams. Many wished that their education had been more focused on discovery and exploration instead.

This mismatch is even more pronounced in rural contexts. In rural areas, young people are in need of different skills, based on their aspirations and the opportunities available, to those that typical educational institutions are prepared to provide. Students in rural areas struggle to access the courses and skills they need in their locations. Few have consistently reliable internet connectivity (39% rural vs. 58% urban survey respondents), which also further limits their access to skill building and courses online.

"The world does not need millions of math geniuses to get better, it needs critical thinkers, innovators, and data analysers. It does not need flamboyant grammarians who speak crappy [i.e., impersonal], it needs effective communicators who make people feel human. The workplace rewards and promotes students not for how high they score grades in examinations, but how they use the classroom lessons to solve problems." – 22-year-old male respondent from Bolivia

Educators are not well enough prepared to address learning needs.

Young people explained that there are limited well-trained educators who understand workplace demands. In fact, 10% of survey respondents viewed it as the biggest barrier to their education. They highlighted that there is a **gap between what and how educators are teaching, and what young people know they need to learn** and how best to learn it. On the other hand, many respondents recognised that educators can also be limited by the system in which they operate. A 22-year-old male respondent from the United Kingdom stated that:

"They have the desire to impose a rigid syllabus that means teachers don't get to teach their personal areas of knowledge and interest. And thus, we can miss out on some of the best teaching, which is when a teacher shares their passion with us."

Furthermore, they recognise that educators' workloads are not proportional to the incentives they receive from this career.

The skills that young people need are not featured prominently enough in their educational journey to ensure a smooth school-to-work transition.

The school-to-work transition is shaped by skills availability, skills demand and skills activation. It is a non-linear process, which has profound impacts on young people into later life. A UNICEF study found that four out of 10 young people do not make the transition to stable work at all, even as adults, meaning that the ability to maintain a decent, dignified livelihood will remain elusive throughout the course of their life.[4] Young people highlighted that, once they have graduated, they struggle to find jobs because they **lack the communication and social skills** that can help them to network and to navigate better within society and the workplace.

While a diverse range of courses and educational opportunities are available to them, a significant number of young people wished **financial, entrepreneurial, professional, digital, and soft skills** had featured earlier in their educational journeys. Young people feel that they require a comprehensive education in order to be well prepared for diverse work opportunities. They want to have opportunities to pursue careers in fields such as humanities and art, and not be bound to exclusively technology-driven workplaces, which is the type of employment toward which they feel most higher education institutions are pushing them. Furthermore, 21% of the survey respondents stated that they did not know where to find work opportunities or they did not know the 'right' people to connect them to opportunities. Young people believe that while education is important, it is essential to have a good network with relevant people in order to get ahead in the working world.

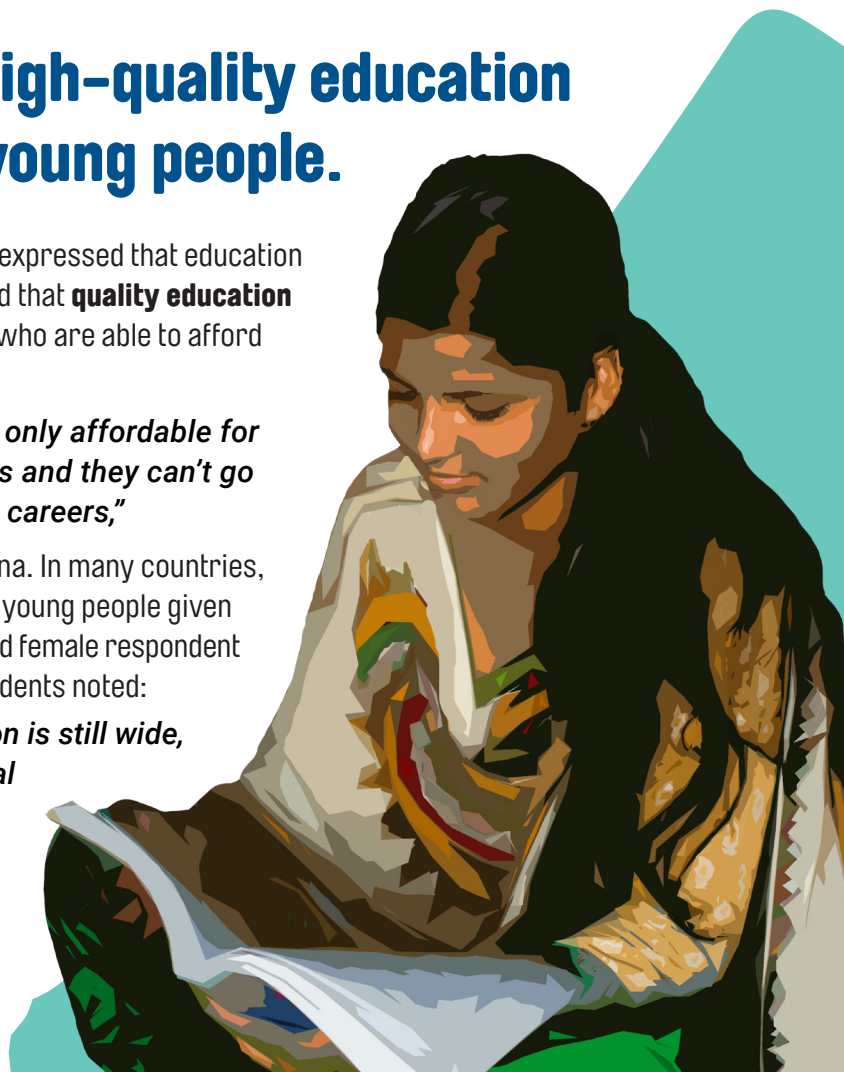# The cost of accessing high-quality education is a concern for many young people.

Twenty-four percent (24%) of survey respondents expressed that education has become too expensive. Young people understand that **quality education is most accessible to the highly privileged class** who are able to afford good schools.

"There's a big problem that good education is only affordable for rich people. Poor people study in poor schools and they can't go to good universities and hence it affects their careers,"

explained a 24-year-old male respondent from Ghana. In many countries, free public education is the only available option for young people given the cost constraints of private schools. A 26-year-old female respondent from Ecuador summarises what most other respondents noted:

"The gap between public and private education is still wide, perpetuating class differences, access to equal opportunities, and access to better job opportunities."

---

4 Alam, A. (2019). *Unpacking school-to-work transition: data and evidence synthesis*. Office of Global Insight and Policy Scoping Paper No. 02. New York: UNICEF.

BOX 1: CRISTINA'S STORY
THE REALITY BEHIND A UNIVERSITY DEGREE

Cristina (pseudonym) is 26 years old and lives in Ecuador. She studied law at a public university and felt that her curriculum was too outdated for the reality of the workplace. She explained:

"I felt that the curriculum needed, and still needs, changes to comprehensively prepare students for a more competitive job market, where memorising codes is no longer necessary. I believe it is important to ensure the development of digital skills, to ensure access to software specialised to our career, to include in the curriculum subjects related to business training, project management, and basic finance, and to prepare professionals to have a broader understanding of the different career opportunities. There is a gap between professionals graduating from public and private universities, not only in terms of academic preparation, but also in terms of infrastructure and lack of university management. This means that we continue to depend on the State to survive and, therefore, there are fewer job opportunities."

YOUNG PEOPLE'S SHORT AND LONG-TERM ASPIRATIONS

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), the motivations of young people are highly diverse, incorporating factors such as sense of purpose and impact on society.[5] In this study, half (51%) of the respondents said that as they look forward to the next five years, their biggest aspiration is to have work opportunities from which they can learn and grow (especially in Asia), or to start their own business (especially in MENA).

28%

of young people's greatest aspiration in the next five years is to have opportunities to learn and grow; 23% aspire to start their own business.

30%

of young people feel that they need additional skill–building or learning opportunities, whereas 22% need access to financial resources to achieve their aspirations.

34%

of young people need greater access to leadership and personal development opportunities for future employment opportunities.
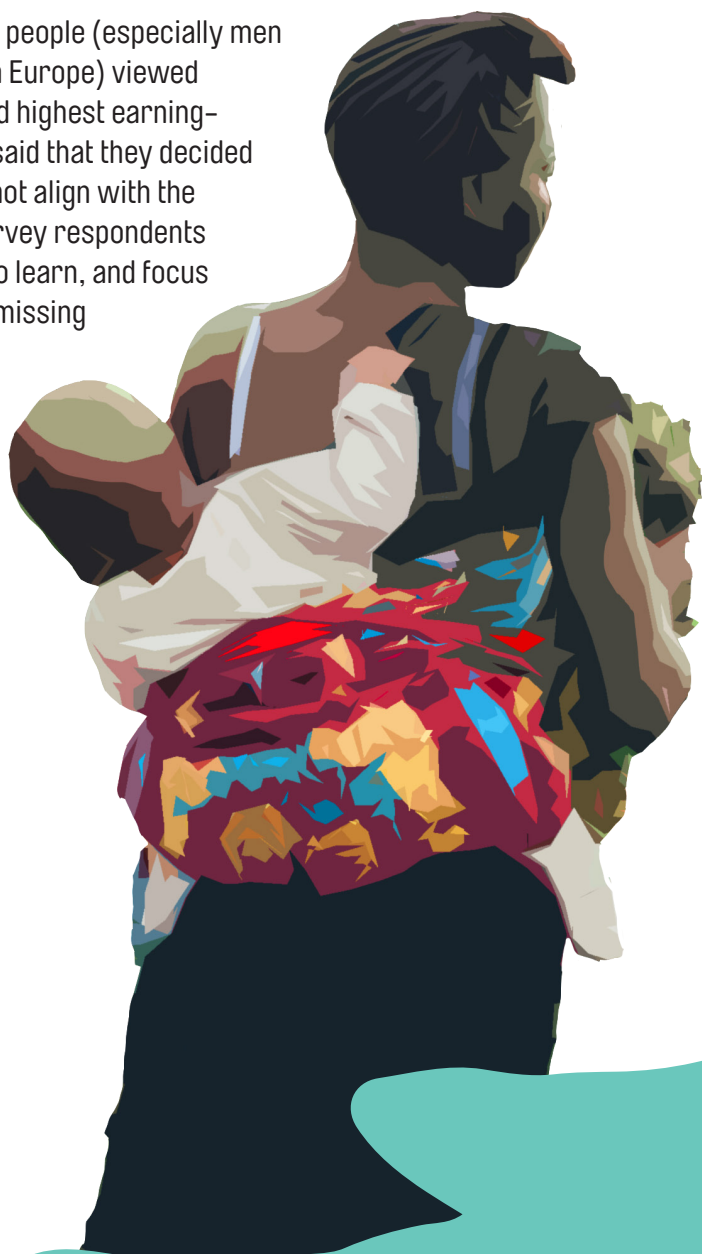
[5] Gardiner, D. and Goedhuys, M. (2020). *Youth aspirations and the future of work: a review of the literature and evidence.* ILO Working Paper 8. Geneva: ILO.

Being financially stable is a key driver in youth career aspirations.

Overall, young people are driven by the desire to have a stable income that will allow them to be comfortable, to afford the basic costs of living, and to be independent (especially for respondents in Africa). In order to achieve their goals, most young people said that a good education and a reputable degree were the gateways to better paying, stable jobs. Many respondents across the globe viewed **financial stability as the key to longer-term happiness.**

Young people across all countries shared stories of **aspirations that they chose not to pursue because they worried that they would not be lucrative.** These were primarily fields related to supporting social causes and in the arts and humanities. Instead of following their passions, they choose career paths influenced by their families and/or educators that were recommended as being more lucrative and stable. This is echoed in other studies, which have also found that young people prioritise income and stability over their own more creative aspirations, often due to the job market.[6]

The exception, however, is entrepreneurship. Many young people (especially men and respondents in MENA and Africa, though uncommon in Europe) viewed **entrepreneurship** as one of their greatest aspirations and highest earning-potential opportunities. Most of the young entrepreneurs said that they decided on this career path after realising that their interests did not align with the curriculum schools provide. Nearly a quarter (23%) of survey respondents said that entrepreneurial skills are what they most want to learn, and focus group participants elaborated that these skills are sorely missing from their curriculums. The Youth Think Tank (2021) findings were similar: young entrepreneurs are eager and have vision, but they lack the skills and business development experience needed to excel.[7] A few respondents shared that entrepreneurship is not something that their parents encouraged because it is not as stable as other types of profession; parents typically preferred that their children went to university instead.

---

[6] Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world.* Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/.

Restless Development. (2019). *What does success look like? Supporting young people to reach their living aspirations.* Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/07/living-innovation-research/.

[7] Restless Development. (2021). *Spotlight on youth entrepreneurship: supporting small-scale entrepreneurs to expand their businesses and create employment opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa.* Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/05/supporting-small-scale-entrepreneurs/.

Work-life balance is important for young people.

According to respondents across all regions, they want to work in companies or organisations that value work-life balance. They want to attain a personal work-life balance in order to **achieve happiness, mental stability, and to have enough time to spend with their families.** This is essential in Europe especially, with survey respondents being two to three times more likely than respondents from other regions to say that enjoyable and fulfilling work is the most important thing to them. They felt strongly that their work time had to match the time they could spend with their families. In Africa, respondents prioritised getting a fulfilling job that aligned with their values and supported them to live happily with their families.

BOX 2: MAKING THE SWITCH
FAMILY PRESSURE TO EARN OUTWEIGHS PASSIONS

Family may be the strongest influence that shapes the choices young people make regarding their aspirations. Respondents explained that they are compelled due to the respect they have for their families, the social norms that they adhere to, and the financial support their parents provide. Unfortunately, many young people felt that their aspirations were better recognised by their friends, teachers, and acquaintances than those in their household.

Rita (pseudonym) grew up in the capital of Rajasthan State, Jaipur, India. Her father works with the government and she considers him one of her role models. From a very young age, Rita took her father's advice to heart. So when her father suggested that she should reconsider her aspiration to become an activist and focus on higher income-generating opportunities, she decided to act upon it. Rita recalls:

"I used to participate in social campaigns like flash mobs. My parents clearly stated that working in campaigns will not pay my bills. They had expected that I would start earning or making a living for myself. This type of statement is quite common, especially in my ethnic community, where earning is given much priority. I realised that only giving back to the community is not enough, so I began searching for opportunities where I could also start earning myself."

Currently, Rita is working at an organisation that she and her family believe is stable, and she aspires to be a researcher and policy maker in the future.

Aspirations are shaped by the opportunities (perceived to be) available.

Aspirations of young people are socially determined, with perceptions of available opportunities and expectations influenced by lived experiences and the actions of others around them.[8] The extent to which young people pursue their dreams depends on:

- **Economic status:** The respondents explained that good opportunities exist for those who can afford them. Many young people are already faced with pressure to support their households and others are dependent on their families for support. Respondents in Latin America and Africa were most likely to stress the need for additional financial resources in order to fulfil their aspirations. Financial factors not only shape the opportunities available to them, they also often even dictate the opportunities that young people see for themselves. Respondents emphasised that young people need more exposure to different opportunities in order to dream bigger and bolder.

- **Educational opportunities:** Many felt that those already possessing the highest status were best positioned for and by educational opportunities; some young people felt that online education could have the potential to narrow that gap. In some countries, especially in Latin America and Africa, some young people are increasingly seeing *"migration as a way, or maybe the only one, to achieve their goals and aspirations"* (Bolivian female respondent). In other countries, respondents shared that there are limited educational opportunities related to specific fields (e.g. humanities and social sciences in India, arts and literature in Zambia and Ghana). Therefore, some young people must choose paths outside of their aspirations due to the availability of courses.

- **Personal networks:** Having access to opportunity does not stop at education: it continues into the world of work. Young people shared many stories about how they did not feel that they had the networks needed to be able to enter or grow in certain professions. Survey respondents in MENA and Africa, more than in other regions, stressed the necessity of more networking opportunities.

- **Gender:** Globally, young people felt that men are typically expected to have lucrative and stable careers to provide for their families whereas women's careers are often driven by the expectation that they must be more mindful of household responsibilities. Similarly, in most contexts, there are certain degrees and related careers that are considered more masculine (e.g. business, engineering) and others more feminine (e.g. teaching, nursing). Finally, the confidence that survey respondents had that they could achieve their aspirations correlated with the gender of the respondent ($p < .001$). Male respondents demonstrated a higher confidence about achieving their aspirations than women.

- **Personal risks:** A few young people, especially women, said that chasing opportunities can come at a cost. Some female survey respondents (across different countries and regions) shared that safety is actually the most important thing to them when they think about their future education and work opportunities. A couple of young women in the focus groups shared traumatic personal experiences or experiences of their peers, including 'sex-for-grade' propositions by professors. A 22-year-old female student in Ghana shared: *"Many of us find ourselves facing psychological trauma due to sex-for-grade proposals from our lecturers."* Additionally, a few focus group respondents mentioned the risk of feeling susceptible to an environment of corruption. This was especially relevant when young people were speaking about politics and governance processes.

[8] Gardiner, D. and Goedhuys, M. (2020). *Youth aspirations and the future of work: a review of the literature and evidence.* ILO Working Paper 8. Geneva: ILO Ray, D. (2006). 'Aspirations, poverty and economic change.' *Understanding poverty.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN CITIZENSHIP AND DECISION MAKING

Young people want a seat at the table to address the gaps and challenges they experience in their education and livelihoods. Thus, rewiring education is a task that calls for a radical reimagining of how young people can be placed at the centre of decision making and embrace their role as active citizens. It requires moving beyond tokenistic inclusion of 'the youth voice' and toward genuine representation in leadership roles and decision making spaces.

53%
of young people feel only somewhat represented in governance.

66%
of young people feel they do not have the opportunity to organise themselves to speak out or feel that they are not listened to by adults.

31%
of young people are most motivated to take action when faced with issues with which they have personal connections.

46%
of young people see lack of opportunities or lack of resources as the main barriers to raising their voices.

Historic exclusion, tokenism, and fear of reprisal leave young people discouraged with their governments.

Although young people continue to push for their voices to be heard, their **representation in decision making remains relatively limited**. A slight majority (53%) of survey respondents felt only somewhat represented in civic spaces. However, the perception of representation differs by demographics. Across all countries, young people felt that the exclusion of women and girls in decision making processes is high. Also, if young people were from minority communities in their region, they felt that playing an active part in decision making was even harder. In MENA and Africa, the respondents from rural areas were often more involved in local governance and politics than the young people in cities. However, as also found by IFAD (2019), the voices of young people in rural areas often go unheard in higher-level policy dialogues, meaning their unique needs are not supported.[9]

Young people said that they find joy and a sense of purpose when they are given the opportunity to contribute and actively participate in decision making regarding policies that will impact them when enacted. They consistently shared that they felt youth inclusion must go beyond participation – they want to be involved from the onset of policy or programme design through dissemination and implementation. Unfortunately, they felt that their **participation in decision-making processes and governance is often tokenistic**. While they may be invited to participate in conferences or consultations, they believe that their presence is typically a number-counting activity. In other words, while they may be consulted, they are not able to influence decisions or take action (or perceive that they cannot have an influence).

Respondents in this study elaborated that the **people in leadership positions do not uphold their interests** or, worse, they actively stop young people from speaking out. One young woman in Zambia explained that every time young people try to speak out against bad governance during a protest, the police arrive to "shut them up". This is demoralising for young people who want to participate in governance and politics. In some contexts – especially in MENA, Africa, Latin America, and South Asia – young people expressed **fear of backlash or consequences** from speaking out against their governments. In India, for example, focus group participants explained that politics is considered highly dangerous as there are many cases of political violence, so engaging in civic activism or holding political positions is strongly discouraged by parents.

---

[9] Trivelli, C. and Morel, J. (2019). *Rural youth inclusion, empowerment and participation.* Rome: IFAD.

Barriers such as financial constraints, government instability, and exclusionary practices inhibit active citizenship.

Young people come up against many barriers that limit their active citizenship such as a **lack of opportunities to get organised, financial constraints, corruption, government instability, and even limitations in laws and policies**. For instance, countries set a minimum age for representation in governance systems. Just 1.9% of parliamentarians worldwide are under the age of 30.[10] Some young people suggested that there should be youth quotas to increase opportunities for young people to be represented (similar to women's quotas). However, young people explained that candidates typically must spend huge amounts of money to promote their candidacy and fill out a significant amount of paperwork, which is discouraging for most young people – and often impossible. They overwhelmingly perceive that it is necessary to 'play dirty', know someone, or have a lot of money in order to get involved in the political space. These perceptions are strongest in contexts facing government instability. Without a stable government system, young people see limited opportunities to get involved in formal (or often even informal) decision–making spaces.

Young female survey respondents were more likely than males to feel that adults either will not listen to them or do not follow through on their suggestions with action (37% women vs. 25% men). Furthermore, when young people were asked to think about their future civic participation, female respondents more often believed that time pressures or competing priorities would be their major barrier (compared to insufficient resources for men). Typically, women are overburdened with responsibilities at home and, as more and more women are also working outside of the home, the time they have to participate in citizenship activities is typically more limited than the time men have.

"I believe that each new generation has its own features, perspectives, problems, and solutions as well. So when it comes to solving our problems no one can understand the core problem except us; therefore, I see that leadership and decision-making stereotypes are the biggest barrier preventing young people from participating in leadership and decision making."
– 25–year–old female respondent from Lebanon

---

[10] Inter–Parliamentary Union. (2016). *Youth participation in national parliaments*. Geneva: IPU. Available at: https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/youth–participation–in–national–parliaments–2016.

Young people struggle to connect with many forms of active citizenship.

When the young respondents spoke about youth leaders and activists, they typically viewed these individuals as *others*, and did not consider themselves in these categories. In many cases, young people did not feel that they had sufficient information to be able to participate actively in their communities or countries. Some respondents felt that many young people did not even fully understand the laws of their country or their personal rights.

Young people are balancing their lives with studies, work, volunteering, and family and friends. They expressed that they need to invest their time and energy into roles and responsibilities that have meaning for them and bring them closer to their goals. Due to their discouragement with government and **perception that their voices ultimately will not matter**, many choose not to be active citizens and instead focus their time on things in which they find value.

The respondents in this study felt that the **education system perpetuates a system where free speech and thought are not taught or supported**. This results in young people not knowing how to effectively express their views or being intentionally held back. While many young people say they and their peers have ideas to support development, they do not share these ideas out of inexperience and a lack of confidence.

Respondents were more interested in engaging in **decision-making spaces in their local communities** than at a national or international level, but still only on a limited scale. Many expressed a feeling of responsibility to their community and wanting to create a better tomorrow. One-third of survey respondents said that volunteering in their community was their preferred way of engaging and being active citizens.

The other space where young people felt influential was in the **media**. Media outlets provide young people with a platform to share their opinions, ideas, and experiences through talk shows, articles, blogs, and more. Seventeen percent (17%) of survey respondents said **social media** was their primary mechanism for exercising their voices, and focus group respondents elaborated that it was a key means for them to engage in advocacy and spread information. A 2020 study by Restless Development found that 85% of young people felt that social media activism is effective in creating positive change and 45% believed that it has created more opportunities for young people to have their voices heard.[11]

"If we are taking India as an example, look at the political discussions that happened before COVID in Kerala. All these discussions happened in universities in central Kerala, where there are the highest number of young people. Eventually, intensive lobbying was done using arts, strikes, rallies, and so on. Only after this, the issue was in the limelight. What I mean to say is: usually dialogues on any political issues are only taken after youth raise their voice. However, when the dialogues meet their conclusion, young people are not acknowledged. So even if youth have a voice and show clear vision, they are not credited for their efforts."
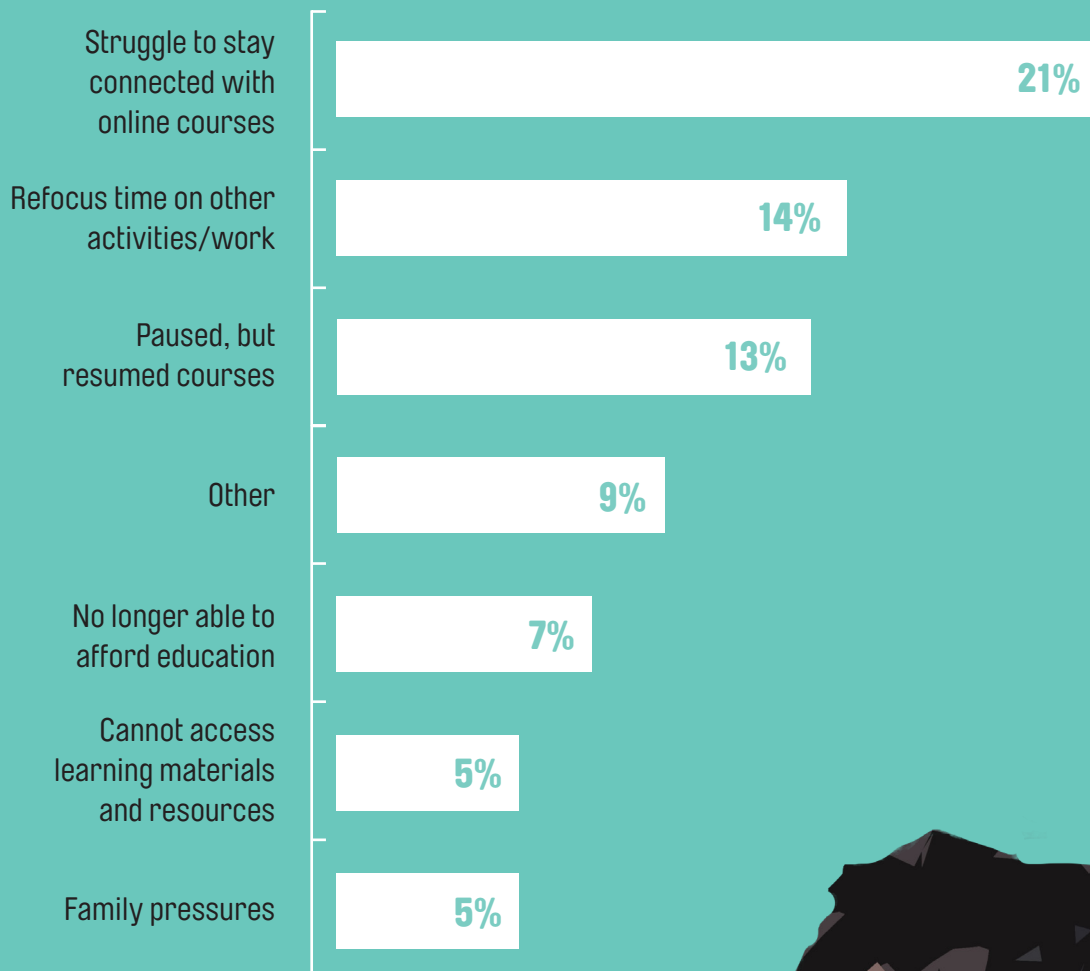– 25-year-old male respondent in India

---

[11] Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world.* Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUTH ASPIRATIONS, EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS, AND LIVELIHOOD PRIORITIES

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of young people's lives and futures, but its impacts are not homogeneous across all young people. While one-quarter of the survey respondents said their education had not been affected much, the remainder (74%) felt more affected (see Figure 1). The effects of COVID-19 were most felt by survey respondents in Africa and Asia (78%) and least felt by those in Europe and MENA (62%). These findings echo the ILO's foundational 2020 study, which found that 73% of young people globally experienced a disruption to their education.[12]

12 International Labour Organization. (2020). *Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

Figure 1: Of the 74% of survey respondents (n=1,743) who felt that COVID-19 had affected their education, this is how they described the most significant impact:

Category	Percentage
Struggle to stay connected with online courses	21%
Refocus time on other activities/work	14%
Paused, but resumed courses	13%
Other	9%
No longer able to afford education	7%
Cannot access learning materials and resources	5%
Family pressures	5%

Inequities in accessing education and employment were emphasised by the pandemic.

The **digital divide was a key factor in whether students' education was disrupted:** 91% of survey respondents without internet access at home and 88% with unreliable connectivity experienced disruption, as opposed to 66% of respondents with reliable internet access. The situation is especially acute for girls and young women who are disproportionately excluded from education. Some have gone into early marriages rather than continue their education post–pandemic; UNICEF estimates potentially 10 million girls worldwide could be affected.[13] The disruptions young people are facing in their education are of uncertain duration, making planning even more difficult.

In addition to educational impacts, COVID–19 has had tremendous impacts on young peoples' livelihoods. Even prior to the onset of the pandemic, the ILO found that young people aged 15–24 were already three times more likely to be unemployed compared to adults.[14] Since COVID–19, many lost jobs and some had to take pay cuts, whereas others had to work in fields that may not have been their aspirational path, simply in order to keep some financial stability. **Access to opportunity varied significantly along existing lines of marginalisation and disadvantage**, including income, locality, gender, and disability status.

Many young respondents shared that their **mental health has suffered** due to isolation, loss of opportunities to study (including abroad) or work, and extracurricular activities being stopped. In particular, the shift to online education has caused many young people to lose their sense of community. This has had a profound impact on their aspirations and the way they are (and are not) engaging in their communities. As a female participant from Nigeria shared:

"COVID-19 has affected my present and future aspirations, and I am not sure of what the future holds for me."

For some, radical shifts due to COVID–19 opened up new opportunities.

On the other hand, some young people feel that the pandemic has made it easier to access courses online. They found that the costs are often lower for online courses and enable more access, especially since they do not need to move in order to study. Also, **virtual classes can make it easier to plan**; students are able to participate according to their own availability and work to a schedule that suits them.

COVID–19 forced young people to look inward and explore other skills, particularly related to technological innovations. Many took the opportunity to explore different career aspirations, especially those with digital connectivity who could use the internet to gain different educational insights. Also, quite a few respondents said that the pandemic has inspired them to become entrepreneurs or focus their aspirations toward addressing community needs.

---

[13] United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). *COVID–19: a threat to progress against child marriage.* New York: UNICEF. Available from: https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid–19–a–threat–to–progress–against–child–marriage/.

[14] International Labour Organization. (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture.* Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

A young female intern in a law firm in India shared: *"Due to COVID, the courts were completely shut. The opportunities that I (an intern) used to get were eliminated. This changed my aspirations completely. This was when I started noticing the start-up environment in my country and that is why I shifted to become an aspiring entrepreneur instead."*

Interestingly, many young people experienced **changes in their personal knowledge about their society** as a result of COVID-19. Numerous respondents said it made them more aware of social issues and reflect on what matters in society; they became more eager to help those in distress. While movement restrictions limited the opportunities for young people to mobilise and participate in decision-making spaces, online platforms surged in some places and opened up new opportunities for young people to engage with wider networks. This finding is a recent shift in young people's perceptions: early into the pandemic in 2020, young people said that their leaders and politicians were not using virtual platforms to connect with constituents and, therefore, such platforms were not effective at reaching them directly.[15]

CONCLUSIONS

Young people's realities are overlapping and interdependent. Young people are feeling a strong urgency and pressure to make the best educational and livelihood choices that align with their personal and community aspirations and goals. However, they are struggling with an outdated educational system that does not provide them with the necessary opportunities to develop their skills, expand their knowledge, and cope with technological advancement. **They are looking for a radical change**: they believe that a values and skills-based curriculum is far better than the traditional theory-based curriculum. But they do not feel listened to by powerholders. This overwhelming dissatisfaction has diminished or extinguished the aspirations of many young people. Despite these challenges, young people remain hopeful and optimistic that education can – and will – continue to be a light to guide their path. The urgency of rewiring education is profound in order to ignite the aspirations of our future's strongest asset – young people.

---

[15] Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world.* Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For government actors.

Pass youth-supportive work policies, especially for young people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider the following short- and long-term policies that support youth livelihoods: 1) establish and monitor a minimum wage; 2) set labour policies specifically targeting the informal sector that ensure young workers are being adequately paid and kept safe; 3) institute short-term relief programmes that support young people financially to restart their education and/or transition back into their chosen profession. These policies would propel young people toward more stability and prosperity.

Open up decision-making seats for young people and formally institute a youth quota in policymaking bodies to ensure that young people have a systematic voice in decision making. These efforts will reduce the tokenism that young people currently experience and will place important decisions about the future in the hands of those whose lives will be most affected. Also, formally initiating a government-mandated process through which commissions or councils must draft or amend policies that require inclusion of young people from the relevant professional backgrounds in the policymaking process could be a structural solution.

Create safe spaces for young people to be active citizens and rights holders. Implement diversified technologies that will enable greater inclusion of young people in dialogue and decision-making spaces. Maintain the digital spaces implemented during the pandemic through which young people engaged directly with policymakers and administrators. Also, create new, innovative ways to reach those without existing internet connectivity and/or guarantee the internet as a right to mitigate the digital divide. Finally, young people are typically the leaders and most active citizens in social movements and protests, but many still feel unsafe to exercise their rights. Do not disband protests or respond with police and violence.

For educational institutions.

Revise curriculums to focus on practical implications of academic theories. Higher learning institutions/trade schools should incorporate educational trips, collaborations with the public and private sectors, and workshops to promote practical learning. Students should be able to be assessed based on hands-on educational projects as opposed to only exams. Designing project-based curriculums where students can be examined based on their performance in delivering the project would not only more accurately assess their skills and abilities, but it would better prepare students for the workplace and ease their school-to-work transitions.

Train young people with 21st century skills such as critical thinking, entrepreneurial thinking, financial literacy, communication, people management, emotional intelligence, and other social skills. Young people are loudly requesting to develop curriculums that focus less on theory and instead lead with values-based education, and that build the skills they need to be professionals and engaged citizens. Institutions must diversify learning opportunities for various disciplines, especially those such as literature, arts, civic knowledge, and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, to harness digital evolution, education must support young people to strengthen their digital skills and empower them with greater access to digital resources.

Support the transition from school to work by developing more robust and youth-friendly channels of communication, information sharing, and networking. Many young people are failing to achieve their work and employment aspirations simply because they do not know where to access opportunities or from whom they can access them. Across countries and demographics, young people shared that the media (including social media) was one of the main sources where they got information. Leverage diverse media channels to reach young people directly with youth-friendly information. Closing this information gap could accelerate a transformational impact on reversing rising unemployment rates and increase access to work opportunities — thus widening the pool for many young people who are competing for very limited job openings.

Provide sufficient counselling resources, especially to address impacts of the pandemic on students' mental health. Incorporate mental health sessions into their school activities, including focusing on students who are burned out in order to help them get back on track with their studies. Also, anti-bullying and peer groups for mental health support, including those led by a psychologist, should be standard in educational institutions. Students are also in need of career counselling and are asking for peer-to-peer mentoring during their classes to promote the art of professionalism.

For employers.

Develop policies and structures that accommodate the growth and development of young employees. This includes training supportive and understanding managers, having respect for mental health needs and providing support as needed, giving opportunities for voicing opinions safely without the fear of reprisal, providing opportunities for upskilling, giving new and challenging tasks to do, and making sure young employees feel a sense of purpose. Workplaces should institute mandatory mentoring for young employees with more experienced employees who are experts in the skills that young employees want to learn. This includes internships; internships must provide young people with the chance to engage in meaningful tasks, where they can truly learn and grow.

Review job descriptions and postings to make sure they are reflective of the skills needed rather than the years of experience required. Most job positions require some number of years of experience, but this is something that new graduates cannot have. Counting volunteer experience as work experience would also be a way to support young people in their transition from school to work. Also, importantly, be mindful of the impacts of COVID-19 on young people's work experience. Many had to re-prioritise their career paths by leaving education early, losing work, taking jobs outside their aspirations in order to make money, etc.

Collaborate with learning institutions on projects so the students can have practical, real-world experiences and opportunities for examination (beyond written exams). These partnerships could extend into offering job opportunities to recent graduates, which could in turn benefit communities by preventing 'brain drain'; talent can be kept locally rather than students leaving for big cities or other countries in search of opportunity. Such collaborations would be critical in young people being able to expand their networks and ease the school-to-work transition.
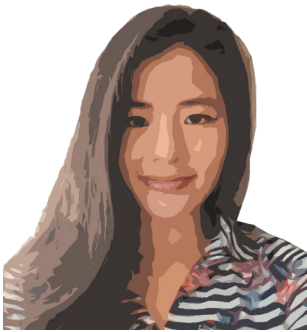
For donors and civil society actors.

Design programmes led by youth inclusion and cooperation. Start by restructuring funding and support to be more responsive to the *needs of* and *leadership by* young people. Additionally, ensure that young people can take the lead, especially in influential spaces with decision makers. Treat young people as citizens in their own right and afford them the civic capacities to co-lead approaches to the challenges they face. This could entail sending young people as representatives to government meetings, engaging young people in programme design, implementing ideas for funding, and more. The volume of young people's voices on different matters is important to gain traction and attention for the issues that concern them. Create more platforms – with young people at the centre – so they can connect and hold constructive discussions with key decision makers.

Focus on shifting gendered social norms. Girls experience gendered social norms that limit their aspirations and dictate their educational and livelihood choices and opportunities. Investing in social norm change interventions that target families, community members, and leaders to shift the norm will open up more doors for young women to dream bigger and have equal opportunities to young men in educational institutions and in the workplace. Interventions could include awareness-raising sessions with parents regarding the success their daughters could have in roles traditionally reserved for men, and gender sensitisation classes in schools for young boys and girls to understand the barriers women face so they may contribute positively to removing those barriers in the future. Women's inclusion programmes, such as mentorship programmes with female role models, should be made available.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Youth Researchers:

ALEYDA DANIEL FERNANDEZ

(Researcher, 23, Bolivia)
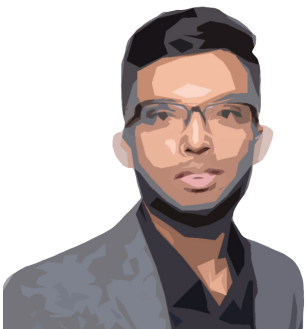
AMETEPEY FRANCIS

(Student, 26, Ghana)

AYOUB KHANFAR

(Activist, 25, Algeria)

CAROLINA FABARA NANCY

(Lawyer, 29, Ecuador)

MAHENDRA PHAGWAH

(Disability Rights Activist, 23, Guyana)

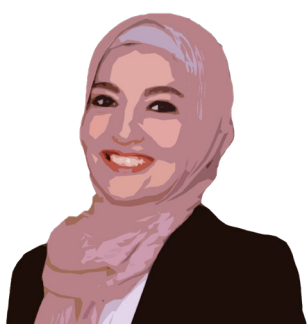**MOHAMMED SHEIKH**

(Student, 20, Yemen)

MUSATILA PURITY

(Education Advocate, 24, Zambia)

NICOLÒ EMMANUELLE PASSARO

(Writer, 29, Italy)

SHIMMAA KHALED

(Social Entrepreneur, 28, Egypt)

SRIJANI DATTA

(Climate Activist, 18, India)

SUSHMINA BAIDYA

(Social Development Worker, 25, Nepal)

TOYYEEBAH AJIBOLA MUSTAPHA

(Mathematician, 25, South Korea)

This research brief is based on the study 'By Us, For Us: Youth Rewiring Their Future for Education, Livelihoods, & Citizenship'. Please visit **restlessdevelopment.org/rewired-by-us-for-us** to access the full publication.

REFERENCES

Alam, A. (2019). *Unpacking school-to-work transition: data and evidence synthesis.*
Office of Global Insight and Policy Scoping Paper No. 02. New York: UNICEF.

Gardiner, D. and Goedhuys, M. (2020). *Youth aspirations and the future of work: a review of the literature and evidence.*
ILO Working Paper 8. Geneva: ILO.

International Labour Organization. (2020). Y*outh and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being.*
Geneva: ILO. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

International Labour Organization. (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture.*
Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2016). *Youth participation in national parliaments.* Geneva: IPU. Available at:
https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2016.

Ray, D. (2006). 'Aspirations, poverty and economic change.' *Understanding poverty.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Restless Development. (2020). *It's our future: building better education and work for young people in a post-pandemic world.*
Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/02/its-our-future-report/.

Restless Development. (2019). *What does success look like? Supporting young people to reach their living aspirations.*
Available at: https://restlessdevelopment.org/2020/07/living-innovation-research/.

Trivelli, C. and Morel, J. (2019). *Rural youth inclusion, empowerment and participation.* Rome: IFAD.

United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). *COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage.* New York: UNICEF.
Available at: https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/.

United Nations. (2021). Goal 4. Available at: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4.

ABOUT RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT

Every year Restless Development trains, mentors, nurtures, and connects thousands of young people in more than 70 countries to solve problems and lead change in their communities. Some are social entrepreneurs, setting up businesses to provide for their families and create jobs, others campaign on issues like gender inequality, and the youth unemployment crisis. We have worked with young people since 1985 and our work is led by thousands of young people every year.

ABOUT REWIRED

Led by Dubai Cares, in partnership with Expo 2020 Dubai and in close coordination with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC), and delivered in partnership with global stakeholders, RewirEd aims to be a catalyst in redefining education to ensure a future that is prosperous, sustainable, innovative, and accessible to all. Taking place in December 2021, the RewirEd Summit presents an opportunity for the global education community to come together, in person, to scale and jumpstart some of the positive change we want to see in education.

ABOUT DUBAI CARES

Since its inception in 2007, Dubai Cares, part of Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, has been working towards providing children and young people in developing countries with access to quality education through the design and funding of programmes that aim to be impactful, sustainable, and scalable. To date, the UAE-based global philanthropic organisation has successfully launched education programmes reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries.