



ASSESSING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN GEORGIA

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Prepared by ACT Impact for
UNFPA

Tbilisi

November, 2020



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INTRODUCTION

The assessment report has been prepared within the framework of the large-scale study *“Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in Georgia”* planned within an initiative by the Government of Georgia. The research was prepared by ACT Impact with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Country Office in Georgia.

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BACKGROUND

Young people are a crucial resource for the country’s development, since they can push for changes and actively participate in transformation. Supporting the youth in this process, equipping them with relevant knowledge or skills, and encouraging them is necessary to achieve results. Thus, studying the impact of what is going on in the country as well as globally regarding youth is important. This way, the direction of intense work, the stakeholders that should take responsibility for particular issues, and plans for ensuring the active engagement of youth in public processes can be defined. Naturally, in this context, it is of particular importance to study the impact of COVID-19 on young citizens and to identify measures to be taken by the government to support youth in the crisis.

There is no doubt COVID-19 is the most serious crisis of the past decade and will inevitably leave its mark on the economy both globally and on the local level. The same can be said on human rights protection, which is at risk. In addition, the crisis disproportionately and severely impacts the everyday life of those who belonged to vulnerable groups even before the pandemic started. Health-related risks, food safety issues and poverty are the challenges thousands of families all over the world have to face on a daily basis. Together with these challenges, now the universe has to fight against a new crisis, under which the final goal of actions carried out by states and governments is to protect lives, ensure the right to health, and save the economy. It can be concluded that these are the main goals of the measures taken by countries to cope with the pandemic, while the measures taken are altered by countries in compliance with a change in the COVID situation.

When the COVID-19 crisis started, the government of Georgia took active steps to protect various groups of the society. A large portion of the government’s anti-crisis plan was dedicated to the protection of citizens and their financial support. Similar to other countries, it is difficult to cover every group equally in Georgia. In addition, it is clear that the crisis would not affect every group equally. Taking this into account, it is important to analyze how Georgia responded to challenges faced by various groups because of the pandemic, how the state ensured access to information, education and different services, and how it managed to respond to the needs of various groups.

The goal of the presented study was to assess the socio-economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on youth. To this end, it was deemed important to assess not only the impact of the pandemic on youth, but the response of the government to the needs of young people. The effectiveness of the response and important steps to be taken in the future were defined in the research objectives. The given assessment in this context touches multiple important topics.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Similar to other countries, the Coronavirus pandemic significantly affected young residents of Georgia. The state had a concrete response to the challenges that emerged in this new reality. What are the challenges that were particularly important for young residents of Georgia, how did the state respond to them, and what are the main steps that need to be taken in the near future in order to respond to the said challenges? These are the major questions answered in the report.

In compliance with the project goal and objectives, a study design has been developed that envisages the utilization of desk research and qualitative study methods. The qualitative study integrated *in-depth interviewing* and *focus discussion* techniques. Within the scope of the study, in total, 23 interviews and 8 focus group discussions were conducted. Study participants included representatives of various agencies, local self-governing bodies, international and non-governmental organizations, and young people with different specifications (age, gender, region, type of settlement, ethnic group, working experience, education, and so on).

As the study demonstrated, the affect of COVID-19 on young people was among the most serious in the field of **education**. The following major issues emerging in the field of education for young people were identified: challenges related to online learning that affected the effectiveness of this format were related to (1) the readiness of students, (2) the readiness of academic personnel, and (3) technical issues. A large portion of *students* did not appear to be ready to consider an online format for learning as a comprehensive study process, which resulted them perceiving the study process as less serious. In addition to this, the technical skills of a certain part of *academic personnel* did not turn out to be relevant for online teaching. These issues are combined with problematic *technical issues* related to online classes. Namely, (1) limited access to internet and (2) low access to material and the technical appliances required to attend online classes.

Regardless of the challenges related to online classes, the study also identified that this format has its pros. Namely, *saving time and financial resources, and the possibility to more easily combine studying with other activities* were named as advantages of online learning, due to which young respondents of the study deem it important to switch to a hybrid model of education.

As the study revealed, the state's response to challenges emerging in the field of education was important in different aspects. Namely, in terms of *switching to the online learning model, organizing the payment of tuition fees, and managing the departure/arrival process from/to abroad*. Even though problems in all of these processes were stressed, as assessed by study participants the state's response to these challenges was effective. In the context of education, key informants of the study¹ particularly mentioned and positively assessed the enrollment of *entrants living in occupied territories* in higher education institutions without entrance exams. If before the pandemic, future students living in occupied territories could enroll in various institutes of Georgia only for a bachelor's program, this year they were allowed to enroll at the master's level as well.

As the study revealed, the Coronavirus pandemic particularly affected young people in the context of **employment**. Impacts in this direction differ by youth groups. In particular, the impact was different for young people who (1) *continue working*, (2) *lost a job during the pandemic*, and (3) *did not work before the pandemic*.

Some young people switched to a remote working regime during the pandemic, while others continued working offline. As the study revealed, the main challenges related to *offline work* were related to the commute to and from the workplace, which was caused by restrictions set in force on the movement of intercity transport.

Regarding *online work*, the study revealed that working hours were extended for young people when working online, and they had to work much more than in a traditional format. Another problem related to working online that is still topical implies the emotional and physical (not having enough space at home to fulfill every roles) difficulty of fulfilling various roles (mother, child, employee) simultaneously within the same space. It is worth mentioning that the transformation of the home into an office appeared to be particularly difficult for young parents, and primarily for women. Combining online work and being a mother when kindergartens do not work, schools are in an online format and a nanny service is not affordable for everyone makes many young mothers consider quitting their jobs. This increases the probability that the unemployment rate for women will increase.

¹ The person purposefully selected for in-depth interview who represents the most informed group of individuals on the study topic.

According to the study results, the pandemic has had a major impact on the economic activity of youth, as the majority of youth were employed in fields that were severely affected by the pandemic (tourism, restaurant and hotel business, etc.). Apart from the fact that some young people lost their job, according to the assessment of study participants, some young people also lost the opportunity to receive an education as they could no longer pay their tuition fee. As for those young people who *did not work before the pandemic*, the reality has become even more difficult because of the ambiguity of employment perspectives in the near future.

Regarding rights, it is worth mentioning that young respondents as well as key informants stressed that various human rights were not violated, but that they were limited. According to their main point, the limitation of rights was necessary because of the situation. Respectively, when speaking about the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on rights, it is reasonable to pay attention to the limitation of rights. As the study demonstrated, the right to *free movement and quality education* were the most limited for young people. As for a violation of rights, in this context study participants stressed the *violation of labor rights* only. As assessed by key informants, lots of employers dishonestly took advantage of the force majeure situation and actually violated the labor rights of many employees.

As the study demonstrated, another serious challenge imposed on young residents was regarding limited **social connections** as well as *limited physical activity* during the pandemic. Young respondents of the study believe that minimized social connections resulted from the regulations negatively impacted their psycho-emotional state. Moreover, they believe that the negative effects of restrictions will be more noticeable in the future and pose various threats relating to the mental health of young people. In addition, an additional factor affecting mental health was limited physical activity. The special importance of physical activity was stressed within the study by key informants, where they positively assess the development of *protocols for professional sports, fitness, gymnastics, and swimming pools*.

Regarding the health issues, young participants of the study did not stress a particular impact of the pandemic on health or challenges in terms of the accessibility of healthcare services.

For young people, sources of **information** on the regulations or other decisions with regard to the pandemic are quite diverse. Apart from traditional and new media (television, internet pages, social media), important sources of information include SMS notifications, family members and workplaces. *Facebook* from social networks and www.stopcov.ge from internet portals were named as sources of information. It is noteworthy that as assessed by key informants participating in the study, social networks would most likely be the main source of information for young people. However, as young respondents reported, one of the ultimate sources of information on regulations and decisions with regard to the pandemic was television, as this source was believed to be highly trustworthy. As assessed by young people, lots of fake news was disseminated all over the internet, largely in social networks, raising questions about the credibility of information. This is in contrast to television, where information undergoes a certain filter before being aired, and the probability of sharing fake news via television is lower.

Even though as assessed by young respondents and key informants, information on regulations or decisions was widely accessible through various sources, challenges still appeared. When speaking about challenges, young participants of the study stressed the *awareness level of citizens representing ethnic minorities* related to difficulties understanding the Georgian language.

As demonstrated by the study results, in order **to respond to the needs of young people**, it will be important to take steps in multiple directions. Particularly, starting work on a *hybrid education model* is one of the needs identified during the Coronavirus pandemic. Respondents stressed the importance of this model for employed citizens and young mothers. *The improvement of technical skills of academic personnel* was identified as one of the most important steps to take. Together with re-assessing the format of education, the study identified that it is important to *re-assess employment opportunities*. In particular, in terms of employment, respondents stressed the increased role of digitalization and the high probability of increased demand for specific skills relating to digitalization.

The development of a specific strategy by the state to support the employment of young residents was deemed important as the said strategy would generate employment opportunities for youth. In this context, respondents believe it is important that the strategy of the Employment Agency point out provisions focused on youth specifically. In order to support youth, the formation of a special fund is suggested, which would provide funding exclusively to the initiatives of young residents. This way, the younger generation will not have to compete with older generations who already have experience working and retrieving financial resources. Respectively, the probability of funding youth initiatives will increase.

Understanding the importance of labor formalization during the pandemic was emphasized by study participants, and it was noted that the state needs to start taking specific steps in this direction together with stakeholders.

As the study demonstrated, offering various services in an online format to individuals with special needs had quite a positive effect during the pandemic. Respectively, it is suggested to start working on the *modification of certain services* (e.g. therapy courses for disabled children). It is quite realistic that the utilization of said services in a range of cases will be effective even in the post-crisis period. The availability of such services may increase access for those who cannot otherwise receive this service because of geographic location.

The fulfilment of existing regulations by citizens was identified as one of the more serious challenges. Thus, it was deemed important for the state to take specific measures that would ensure the *strict monitoring of the fulfillment of regulations*. As the study revealed, this is particularly important in regions.

Speaking of awareness and the spread of information, study participants deem it important to take specific steps *in order to increase the accessibility of information in ethnic minorities' native languages*. The study also identified that it is important for the state to take specific steps *to involve youth in various activities*. One important aspect of youth engagement is volunteer work, implying the increased involvement of young people in various volunteer activities. Another aspect is to involve young citizens in the decision-making process, especially in cases when the decisions refer specifically to youth.

According to study results, even though the Coronavirus pandemic posed various challenges to the country, it also exposed **new opportunities**. The following new opportunities were identified: increased demand on *digital sales and delivery services*; increasing the number of young people interested in *agriculture*; *digitalization of generations*; *increasing accessibility to various learning courses*; *discovering new talents and starting a new activity or transforming an old one*.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As clarified by the results obtained through the desk research and qualitative component of the study, similar to other groups of the society, the Coronavirus pandemic affected young people in different ways. Among those, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education and employment was particular in Georgia. In addition, the impact on socialization is of special importance. While responses to challenges emerging in the field of education can be considered more or less effective and existing problems can be tackled relatively easily (e.g. fully ensuring access to internet and computers, training for academic personnel to acquire/improve necessary skills, specific steps regarding tuition fees, etc.), challenges in terms of socialization and employment are quite complex. Even though allowance packages envisaged in the state's anti-crisis plan are important for unemployed citizens and for those who lost their jobs, these mechanisms were not as focused on eliminating the problem (employment generation), which is natural at the initial stage of crisis. At that time, development of the abovementioned mechanisms aimed to promptly respond to the problem, while the following steps need to imply the development of a targeted strategy to minimize the problem. To this end, it is recommended to develop a youth employment strategy together with field experts that will aim to tackle unemployment in youth.

Problems of unemployment and related financial challenges, together with social distancing and isolation were related with a high risk of anxiety and stress in young people. As predicted by the WHO, the world will have to cohabitate with the Coronavirus pandemic in the near future. In addition, experts foresee a global economic crisis and Georgia will be no exception. Considering that a lack of jobs and problems related to employment have been among the most serious challenges in Georgia for years and years, it's not difficult to presume that serious changes are set to happen in the labor market in the near future. Many companies won't be able to easily cope with an economic crisis, and crucially important sectors (e.g. tourism) for the Georgian economy will have to pass quite a long road to remain in business. Under these conditions, it will not be easy to keep a job or find a new one, especially for young people who typically do not have much (if any) working experience.

These problems can be added to cancelled relaxation or traditional leisurely routines (for instance, limited or no access to entertainment such as a cinema, theater, club, different types of gatherings, travel, etc.) and a limitation on opportunities for comprehensive development. All of those factors may significantly increase anxiety and stress levels in youth. Accordingly, taking care of mental health is crucially important. Even though this challenge is more or less important for every sub-group of youth, young employed mothers

can be considered a special risk group. These mothers had to multitask even before the pandemic, but they appeared in a whole new reality during the COVID crisis. Now they not only have to combine the roles of a mother and housewife with the role of employee, but they have to combine the role of an online worker with other roles while kindergartens and schools are mostly closed or in an online teaching regime. These factors when added together make it very hard to fulfill all of the abovementioned roles.

In addition to this, it is important to keep in mind that various groups that were vulnerable before the pandemic may face particular challenges now. It needs to be taken into consideration that the majority of field work for the given study (focus discussions and interviews) took place at the end of September and beginning of October. At that time, the epidemiological situation was still relatively light in the country – new cases and death rates were kept low. Based on how things are going on in the world including in Georgia, it is obvious that the pandemic is getting worse. Taking this into account, we can conclude that apart from challenges in terms of education, employment and social isolation, various groups of the society (for instance, disabled individuals, young people living and/or working in the street, pregnant and single parents, drug-addicted youngsters, etc.) will face even more serious problems. Respectively, it will be necessary to keep an eye on the emerging needs of various groups, including young people, and to form the maximally relevant response to each challenge considering the available financial or human resources.

Based on the study results, the following recommendations developed:

- When discussing challenges in the field of education, the readiness of academic personnel for online classes was identified as one of the most important problems within the study. This mostly implies that part of academic personnel did not seem to have the relevant skills and knowledge to teach remotely. Respectively, **in order to increase the effectiveness of online learning and to ensure the right of obtaining a quality education, it is recommended to train academic personnel.** The main actors in the training process should be higher education institutions, while state engagement can be limited to providing respective recommendations, supporting and monitoring the process.
- One of the problems hindering effective remote learning is limited internet access as well as a low number of material-technical appliances for some students. Even though this problem was solved for a number of students, in order to fully tackle the issue and ensure the effectiveness of online learning, it is recommended **to identify a group of students with no access to internet or computer appliances and come up with mechanisms to provide them with the respective services.**
- The obvious advantage of offline learning identified by the study participants was its social nature. In addition, respondents also stressed the special importance of practical courses for certain disciplines, which makes the full switch to online studies unrealistic and undesirable. However, the advantages of online learning are clear. As stressed during the study, those advantages include saving time and financial resources, and easily combining the learning process with other activities. The importance of this format for employed youngsters as well as young mothers was noted. A combination of online and offline formats of learning may positively impact the effectiveness of the learning process in general, so it is recommended that **the state and higher education institutes begin working on a hybrid education model.**
- As the study revealed, regardless of the accessibility of information on some of the recommendations or decisions regarding the Coronavirus pandemic, citizens often fail to understand them. Respectively, when providing recommendations, **it is recommended to utilize simple language that a wide audience understands.** Apart from official decrees, ordinances, or decisions announced by officials during briefings, it is recommended to create contents (e.g. in the form of info graphics) that will simply and clearly explain the recommendations. In addition, considering the fact that television is an important source of information for every age group including young people, it is recommended to actively disseminate visually and contextually easily perceivable content through this channel. In addition, the information should also be available in various languages (ethnic minorities, sign language).

- The webpage www.stopcov.ge was identified as one of the main sources of information on the Coronavirus pandemic. As noted by respondents, the webpage is not user-friendly and it is difficult for users to retrieve desirable information. **It is recommended to have a link of regulations as a separate block on www.stopcov.ge**, which should be easily noticeable and searchable for users. Every regulation related to the Coronavirus pandemic needs to be grouped in blocks, in which the newest regulations will be provided in bold so users will easily understand which regulations are currently in force in the country.
- As the study identified, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic situation, representatives of ethnic minorities who do not speak Georgian have problems accessing daily updated information. Even though the webpage of the Public Broadcaster is available in Armenian and Azeri languages and news programs are transmitted four times a day (12:00, 15:00, 18:00 and 20:00) in both languages, considering the fact that accessing a webpage may be problematic for many citizens, while television is the most important source of information, **it is recommended to create TV content for ethnic minorities in their native languages (Armenian and Azeri), and to integrate this content into the program schedule of local TV channels** (such as those in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti).
- According to the study results, the practice of providing citizens with special needs with different therapy courses online appeared to be effective in some cases. On one hand, continuity of the process was ensured and the recipients of services felt that they were still being provided with care. On the other hand, the involvement of parents/guardians in the process increased, and they acquired knowledge and skills they can use more intensively beyond the therapy session. Online therapy courses are not equally effective for every diagnosis and turn out to be completely ineffective in certain cases. However, for many diagnoses, online therapy session outcomes were positive. Respectively, **it is recommended to start working with specialists and service providers to develop a strategy of providing certain services online to individuals with special needs. The systematic monitoring and evaluation of online services is also important.** This will increase the accessibility of services for those who cannot physically visit centers and obtain services for various reasons, such as geographic location.
- Since limiting social interaction and isolation is related to stress, and study participants expect that social distancing will still be on the agenda for the upcoming months, stress levels related to isolation will increase among young residents. Accordingly, **it is recommended to prioritize mental health and related issues.** The state should also involve specialists and start thinking about taking steps to ensure this. In this context, it will be interesting to modify and use the example of Lithuania. In order to enhance the mental health of students in Lithuania, universities made free therapy sessions available. A recommendation on introducing such services can be issued to universities in Georgia, as it would imply the support of mental health for students involved in the educational process. In addition, it is recommended to launch a program that will enable citizens who are dealing with a significant amount of stress during the pandemic to receive a free consultation with a therapist. It is important to enable citizens to receive an online as well as a telephone consultation. Experienced therapists as well as students specializing in psychology can be involved in the mentioned program. This program could also act as a temporary employment platform for young people.
- As revealed by the study, the pandemic made it crystal clear that attitudes towards mental health programs needs to be altered at the political level. **It is recommended to continue connecting healthcare programs with social programs more intensively and work with field experts to develop specific approaches for citizens with mental health problems so that instead of transferring them to clinics, they can be provided with services on-site** (at home, at different centers). In this context, it will be important to identify specialists and ensure their proper training (e.g. personal assistants with a therapy profile). Then they will be able to provide citizens with relevant services on-site and not at specific treatment centers.

- The necessity and opportunity of creating innovative products and services may emerge in the new reality. Ideas of young people are often innovative, and their approaches – interesting. Thus, **it is recommended to mobilize young citizens and involve them in the process of tackling problems or creating services and products.** It is also recommended to mobilize young people and involve them in various voluntary activities. This way, young people will not only be involved in activities, but they will feel as though they are an important group in the society, that their opinion matters, and that they can actively participate in processes. This will boost the self-confidence of young people and the belief that they can actually make changes.

Groups of volunteers can be formed for various purposes:

- Properly trained young volunteers may be willing to more actively engage with epidemiological studies (e.g. identifying contacts, making calls to those in self-isolation, etc.), which would give some fresh air to the specialists currently involved in the process, and increase the probability of retrieving information more quickly.
 - In addition, groups of volunteers can be created in collaboration with local self-governments, and these groups could work to retrieve information on the needs of various vulnerable groups or to provide them with different products. Even though certain activities are currently carried out in this direction, it is important to give them a regular nature; to designate a specific group of volunteers that will collect relevant information on the needs of citizens and respond to them in a timely manner.
 - Involving volunteers will be important not only to support vulnerable groups, but also to support the elderly and single parents. This is especially important for rural and highland settlements, where the accessibility of transportation, shops and pharmacies is limited. This will be even more important because of the regulations set in force for the upcoming months.
 - Groups of volunteers can also be an important mechanism to support single parents, as it can be a particular challenge for them to move around and leave the house to buy essential products every day, especially if they are also working.
- Challenges related to employment were identified as among the most serious problems young people face. Since the state will have to cope with these challenges in the near future, **the creation of a state program with the appropriate financial support is recommended.** The main focus of the program will be young people, and only youth initiatives will be encouraged. Only young people should be allowed to participate so that they will not have to compete with older generations. This way, more young people will have a chance to turn their initiatives into real projects.
 - According to the study, problems with informally employed citizens that were exposed during the pandemic clarified the importance of labor formalization for employers as well as for employees. Respectively, **it is recommended to intensively start working on raising awareness about the importance of labor formalization and switching the employer-employee relationship to a new format.**
 - Tightening regulations and state control of the implementation of regulations was identified as one of the primary needs within the study. Respectively, it is recommended to **carry out an active campaign to raise awareness and tighten state control on the fulfillment of regulations in the capital city as well as (and especially) in regions.**



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