

RESILIENT REALITIES

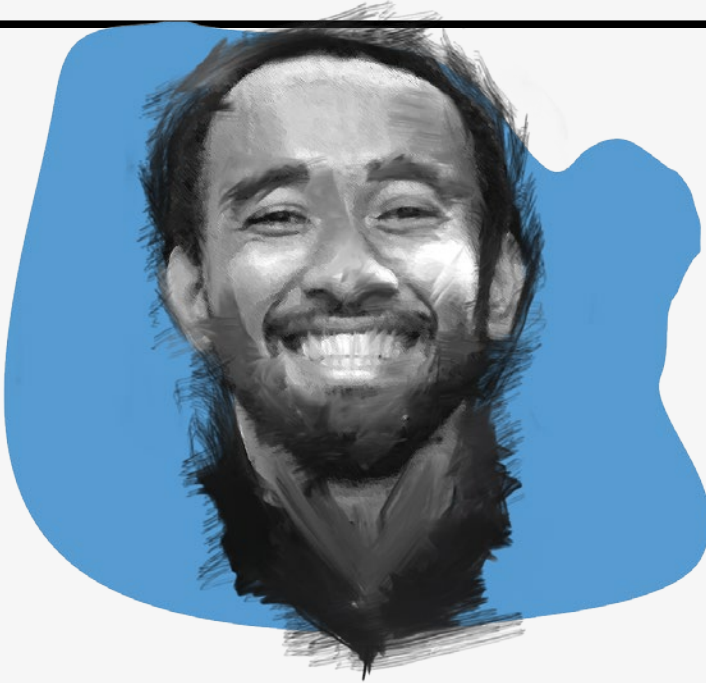
How youth civil society is experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Oceania Spotlight: The 'Access Revolution'

Participatory research
coordinated in partnership between
**Restless Development, Recrear,
& the Development Alternative**

Oceania Co-Researchers



KIM ALLEN

Growing up on an island called Tubetube, on the remote southeast coast of Papua New Guinea, I have witnessed first-hand development challenges. Inspired by my childhood experiences, I am passionate about development work, community affairs, environment and social justice. I have a background in communication studies.



LIA INGUANTI-PLEDGER

I am a Public Health graduate in Melbourne, Australia. I am passionate about local civic engagement, strengthening youth participation in public policy and improving urban liveability. I believe in the power of community and grassroots campaigning, and in the capacity of young people to tackle institutional, structural and social barriers to health.

Introduction



During the COVID-19 crisis, many of us experienced a period of social isolation. For this research, we wondered how youth civil society, unable to engage in face-to-face activities, managed to support other young people during the lockdown. We asked:

How are youth organisations engaging young people to understand the effects of the COVID-19 crisis in their lives?

To answer this question, we heard from 17 young people in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa and Australia through a qualitative survey. We interviewed 8 youth leaders in PNG and Australia. We also carried out desk based research on other youth organisations and community groups through articles, events and social media monitoring.

Below, we share two pieces. The first pulls out our key learnings about how to engage young people during lockdown. The second focuses on inclusion and shares practical tips and best practices to making Zoom calls accessible to youth with disabilities.

What We Learned About Our Research Question:

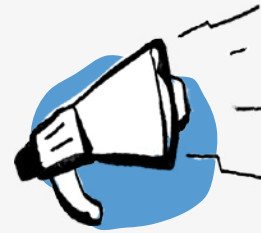
What are youth organisations and groups doing to engage young people and understand how the COVID-19 crisis is affecting their lives?



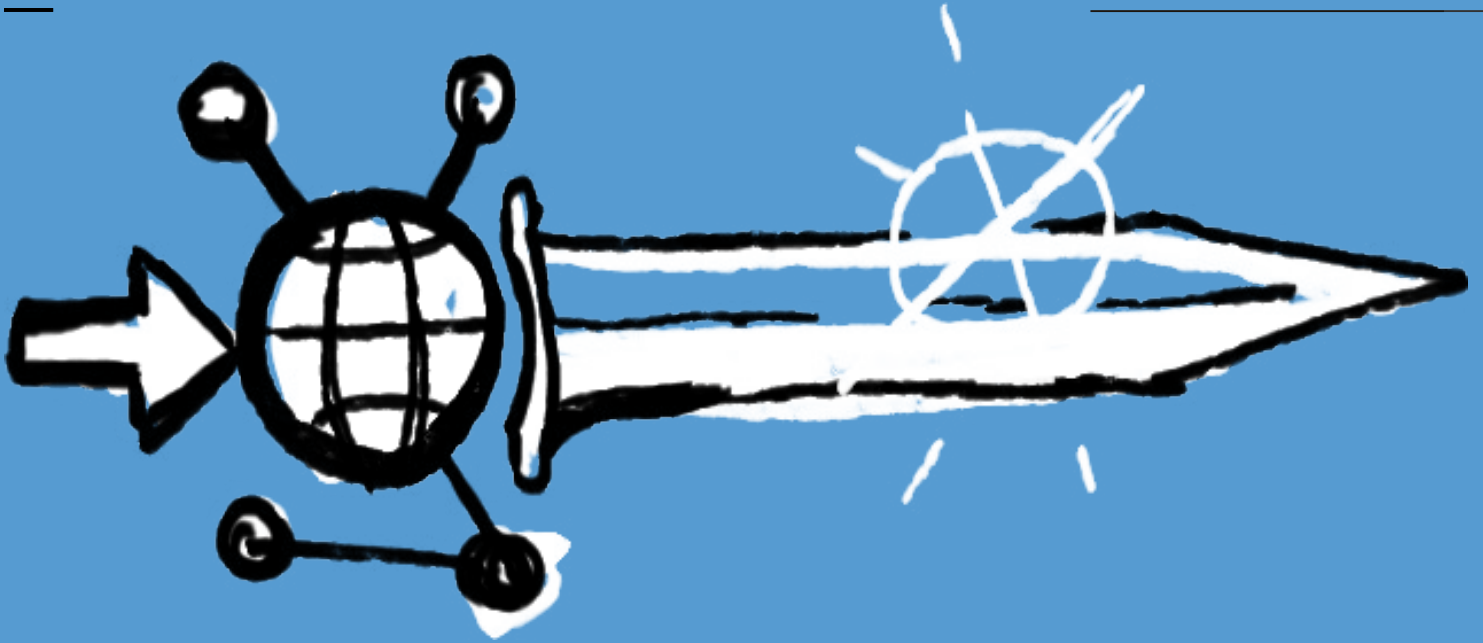
COVID-19 has presented us with an opportunity to be experimental with how we engage with one another. Youth civil society asserts that recovery does not mean 'returning to normalcy'. COVID-19 has provided us with a platform to redesign how we engage with one another towards a more inclusive and accessible society. Radical experimentation is required, as demonstrated by youth groups and organisations who have taken to this period with flexibility and innovation. The civil society sector can benefit a lot from replicating and taking up these new trends, and in this process young people need to be supported into positions of power in the post-pandemic recovery.



Youth civil society organisations need better resourcing and support to scale up the programs they have been testing over the last few months. As a response to the crisis, organisations had to act quickly. They responded by creating new programs and testing them through trial and error. We now need more funding to further test and scale up these programs and approaches, and maximise opportunities to cross-pollinate success and learning.



Youth organisations need funding for advocacy support to disseminate content through appropriate communication channels. Appropriate and credible content distributed through the right communication channels is key to COVID-19 awareness. Not all audiences are on social media or reside in the vicinity where information is accessible. The situation also challenges young people to constructively utilise technology and effectively engage online platforms as a tool to communicate reliable information.



The Double-Edged Sword of Online Engagement

By Lia Inguanti-Pledger and Kim Allen

In the past few months, we have been chatting with youth leaders, monitoring the youth social media response to COVID-19 in Australia and Papua New Guinea, and interviewing organisations about how they have been engaging their communities. We found that youth civil society is experimenting with digital tools to build community and learning through trial and error.

Through conversations with leaders of community organisations, we have noticed how quickly and promptly they have been responding and adapting to the social distancing measures. Amidst lockdowns, social media and digital platforms became primary spaces for their work. On the one hand, social media has been used broadly for information sharing, advocacy, and raising awareness for

support services. Meanwhile, organisations and groups were learning that young people in this time need to feel part of a community.

Substituting in-person programmes with digital ones is a challenge that groups have been tackling boldly. Elsa Tuet-Rosenberg is the Director of Training of Democracy in Colour, a racial and economic justice grassroots organisation run by people of colour. She shares that “the biggest learning for us was pivoting our community engagement to an online capacity”. She feels the ease of online access might bring forward an “access revolution” meaning that flexible and remote working arrangements might be more widely accepted post-COVID-19 (an issue that, as she stresses, disability advocates have long been campaigning for).

In fact, online engagement has helped some groups reach out to new people. Miller Soding, the Event Programming and Relationships Coordinator at Australia's largest LGBTQIA+ youth driven organisation, Minus18, shares:

"One thing that we found is that by providing digital events, we attracted a group of young people that perhaps had heard about us before but were too nervous or shy to attend our located/in-person events".

So, at Minus18 they have been "playing around and experimenting" with creating a sense of community online:

"We've been running dance workshops, drawing workshops, writing workshops, song-writing workshops – we were able to expand the kinds of events that we deliver and, in turn, reach a broader community".

This has been an important lesson that opens up opportunities for the future. Miller shares:

"We now have the skills and knowledge to deliver these digital events which we will continue to do, because it is increasing our reach so much."

Yet, some young organisers reflect that not all young people are fond of digital gathering. Lauren Millard coordinates a support group for LGBTQIA+ youth called Skittles:

"The nature of Skittles is totally social – we run fun activities and eat pizza – so it was really difficult to continue to foster this same energy whilst not in person."

She shares that Zoom events were not working for the young people she supports. Instead, their outreach efforts had to be more tailored:

"Our work was all behind the scenes one-on-one communication and support (...). People assume young people love the internet but the young people I work with weren't comfortable sitting and looking at their face on a screen. Cyber bullying is a real concern for them, so they prefer to engage with platforms where they can maintain total anonymity. I think we really learnt that there is no blanket approach to working with all young people."

This is a reminder that adapting programs to respond to the lockdown does not only mean organizing Zoom calls. Cat Nadel is the Co-Founder of Young Campaigns, a movement which exists to build the power of young people to fight for a fairer future. She reflected that:

"Young people are fired up! We need to be able to channel this energy into the specific campaigning they want to do, but also [realize] that young people are fatigued by all the Zoom calls so we need to balance that out."

In PNG, Kim interviewed Maliwai Sasingian, Executive Director for The Voice Inc., an organisation focused on building youth personal and collective leadership. She reflected how:

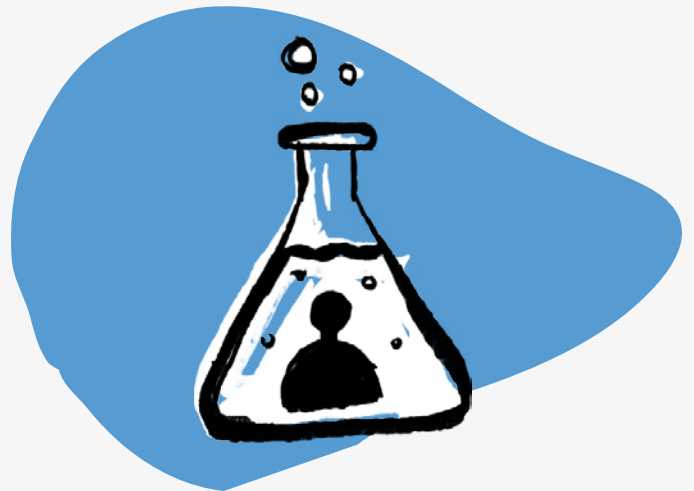
"the pandemic invited us to really look within, as an organisation and individually. It invited us to be creative and innovative in delivering our programs".

Considering the less reliable Internet access in PNG, the organisation had to find different solutions:

“We developed our leadership program (the Dream) into house kits, and have it delivered to our members. This means members who signed up for The Dream program can now do the training in their homes. The lessons in the house kits are covered both in the workbook and audio tracks saved in a flash drive that goes out to everyone who signed up to do the program. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, our members still had access to the program, and we had online interactive sessions.”

Youth organisations have a high capacity to adapt. Because of the close bond with their communities, they can engage in more intimate conversations with young people to sense how this period of disruption is shaping our day-to-day reality and respond appropriately. In Elsa’s words:

“That’s the beauty of grassroots community-based organisations, you don’t have to reach out and contact the community about the issues they are facing... We are those people, we are those communities, we are experiencing these issues and we are our biggest stakeholders”.



Can COVID-19 Help us Become More Inclusive?

By Lia Inguanti-Pledger



Despite the fact that the first Australian case of COVID-19 was recorded at the end of January, COVID-related posts did not emerge in digital youth spaces until around mid-March. Content at this stage was mostly speculative, referencing 'times of uncertainty' and 'uncharted territory'. By the end of the month we began to understand that the impacts of COVID-19 would affect people differently.

A new wave of digital campaigning called for a particular governmental approach that acknowledged the unequal burden for certain Australian communities who are at higher

risk than others, for example; the elderly, the immunosuppressed, people with disabilities, Indigenous communities and newly arrived migrants.

Youth civil society saw this as an opportunity to advocate for a more inclusive society. Youth-led organisations engaged in conversations about what COVID-19 means for diverse groups of young people, such as multicultural young people, international students, LGBTQIA+ young people and young people with disabilities, discussing notions of 'access' and 'accessibility'. Broadly, access

refers to the availability of a program, service or tool, where accessibility speaks to its usability, suitability and inclusivity considerations. Therefore, as a practice, accessibility is a tangible commitment to equal access, which is particularly important in order to be inclusive towards people with disabilities. Some questions we were asking ourselves were:

- **How would lockdowns influence access to health services?**
- **What did the increase in digital ways of engagement mean for those without access to digital technology or the internet?**
- **What kind of support is needed amongst communities without COVID-related information?**

I believe that, in asking questions and engaging in discussions about access during lockdowns, we were able to build on our understanding of accessibility beyond the context of COVID-19.

To learn about the experience of access and accessibility for young people with disabilities during COVID-19, I reached out to The Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) to see if they would be interested in taking part in an interview. Their response encouraged me to learn how to create more inclusive and accessible spaces on Zoom, from the hand of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and the Disability Advocacy Resource Unit. Some of the most interesting tips I learned through their ['Accessible Zoom Meetings'](#) Webinar are:

1. **Focus on inclusion rather than access! Inclusion is about allowing everybody to have the same experience.**
2. **Accessibility needs vary greatly and there is no one 'blanket rule' for making a space accessible - it is important to ask participants or attendees what their specific accessibility requirements are prior to the meeting so that the appropriate arrangements can be made by the host.**
3. **More practically, a reminder that not everyone can see who is in the meeting, who is speaking or what their body language is. But it is important to make sure everyone knows who is in the room, and one way to do this is saying your name before you speak.**

COVID-19 has put the spotlight on the numerous issues around online inclusivity and accessibility with our current ways of working. In Australia, organisations have been wrestling with this issue during the pivot to digital platforms. Understanding the importance of inclusivity and accessibility online are only the first steps towards a refined approach to youth engagement; one that meaningfully considers and embraces diversity. I also hope that what we're learning will be a catalyst for us to consider inclusivity and accessibility more broadly, not only in the way we work, but in the ways we interact with one another out in the world post-COVID.

Co-researchers and authors:

Kim Allen and Lia Inguanti-Pledger.

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Editor and research coordinator:

Gioel Gioacchino, Recrear

Co-editor and research accompaniment:

Fiammetta Wegner, Recrear

Copyediting:

Restless Development

Graphic design:

Cesar Duarte, Recrear

Project coordinator:

Freya Seath, Restless Development

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REALITIES**