

With Proven Potential for Innovation, Youth are Our Greatest Investment Opportunity

There is no crystal ball to tell the fortune, but it's crystal clear that by involving youth in decision making, the region will have a better future

by Adem Gashi, Team Leader of the RCC Western Balkans Youth Lab Project

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In March I was preparing to leave Prishtina and go to Sarajevo to start my new job as the Team Leader of a recently launched Project lead by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and funded by the European Union (EU), the Western Balkans Youth Lab. As I was packing it did not occur to me that the pandemic would change my plans completely. But it did, drastically. Everything changed in a matter of hours - from the simple advices to wash your hands and not touch your face to closing down everything but the essentials. Airports and borders too. So I started my new job online, adjusting the wheels of life, like everyone else, to a new, unknown terrain.

Everyone around the world did their best to adjust to the new normal. But what amazed me the most was the speed, initiative and innovation that young people showed in a matter of days since the pandemic broke out and brought us the lockdown.

The Youth Adjusted

Life is neither static nor unchanging. Smart enough young people adapted quickly to distance learning, found new ways to connect to each other in new circumstances, and instead of retreating or giving in to fear they stepped in to become part of solution, with solidarity initiatives, production of software applications, as health workers, and in many other forms.

We all saw them gathering and using 3D printers at their universities to produce visors and face masks. Some even went so far as to make a simple respirator, so badly needed in these times.

- ✓ In Serbia a group of 200 volunteers gathered via Facebook and started 3D production and donation of surgical visors for the medical staff;
- ✓ A sophomore in Bosnia and Hercegovina, through his startup company, started 3D printing surgical visors and donating them to the medical staff;
- ✓ Same goes for North Macedonia and Montenegro where youth are proving to use technology in equipping medical staff with equipment that is scarce;
- ✓ Mechanical Engineering Faculty in Tirana with 3D Imp-Act Project embarked on production of protective helmets for hospitals;
- ✓ Kosovo^{*} Formon Company, a 3D printers manufacturer, went out of their way and produced a simple respirator, while a bicycle tourism group in Gracanica decided to put their bikes to better use and created an online platform where people can order household items, and their volunteers go by bike and deliver items to people, helping those in need.

The youth responded to the new situation, adjusting quickly and practically. And it humbled us all.

And the young people we are talking about here showed readiness to help their societies in need, even though only 2% of them are satisfied with the situation in their economies. Staggering 71% of them think about going to work abroad and another 10% are still considering that option. Why? Simply because 51% of young people worry about employment, 37% about economic situation, and 28% about corruption.

^{*} This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

These are fresh data, collected through RCC's regular annual survey of the citizens of the region – Balkan Barometer 2020. And in spite of all of their concerns they started to utilize their ideas, knowledge and skills, to produce protective medical equipment, organize solidarity actions to help others, etc.

The fact that the region is extremely modest in its public investments into research and innovation at just around 1% of GDP on average did not stop young people, who comprise 21% of the general population in the Western Balkans, to dive into these unknown waters of providing innovative solutions for the societies to flatten the corona virus spread curve and help save lives. But it also had the effect on the general motivation, which was important in these moments. Living online has finally been approved by the 'adults' and innovative online approaches became desirable.

It's Time the Society Boosts the Youth

However, there is a wide consensus that all economies in the region will shrink and companies will cut jobs, greatly affecting young people, as many have not yet developed specific skills and do not have savings. At the same time, the survival of businesses will largely depend on their innovative mind-sets and ability to embrace change quickly. The youth has showed us all the potential for innovation when the times get rough, proving once more they are the greatest investment opportunity.

While taking the measures to curb the curve of the pandemic, provide relief packages and other measures to soften the impact of the pandemic on economy, employment, education, social life and other dimensions, the governments will hopefully recognize the strength and power of youth and will start tailoring new measures to prevent the youth from draining abroad in pursuit of better future. Together with young people governments can bridge the gap and use this opportunity to make them a permanent stakeholder in resolving issues of public interest, including youth needs.

Seeing how youth adapts, and their potential when given space, ought to shed light on the importance of their engagement in decision making. Amidst all the new changes they have found ways to adapt. A resilient and invaluable part of the community. But help works both ways, and as such we must find ways during and after this pandemic to make sure that youth will not be seen only as the future but also as the present. Ways to make sure that they are part of decisions that affect them, and not just because it is written in a strategy or required by a law, but rather because they have specific needs and their involvement makes the difference.

And here we come to the point of my work: the RCC got involved – practically and strategically. Practically, by giving young people more room in our own team and louder voice to express what they need and how they see things developing. Strategically, by implementing the Western Balkans Youth Lab Project, which works to provide opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making across the region and improve the overall socio-economic environment and mobility of youth in the Western Balkans.

There is no crystal ball to tell the fortune, but it's crystal clear that if there is appropriate response to youth issues and greater involvement of youth in decision making, the region will have a better future.