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ENGAGING YOUTH IN COVID-19:

*Learning from the Youth COVID-19 Response Initiative
in Trinidad & Tobago*

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Youth participation in policymaking is a critical issue in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. There is the general notion that young people often resist or shy away from policymaking and are not interested in making necessary recommendations on issues that affect society. However, many segments of the youth population are actively involved in advocacy and policy change. The on-set of the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago and the proactive youth movement response to this is one such example to be highlighted. Many young people are willing to participate in policymaking, but have never been allowed to contribute, there is a critical need for youths to be trained on how to engage in the policymaking process and countries need to adopt a youth mainstreaming approach to youth engagement. Youth mainstreaming requires that youth be included during the entire policymaking process from start to finish to prevent tokenism and have genuine participation. The Trinidad Youth Council and the Tobago Youth Council in collaboration with Two Cents Movement and the Commonwealth Students' Association (Trinidad and Tobago) established the [Youth COVID-19 Response Initiative \(YCRI\)](#). The YCRI engage youth-led NGOs and relevant stakeholders on policy and public spending priorities for social and economic recovery. YCRI published a [report](#) that provided a youth response

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to COVID-19 and offered critical national development recommendations. This process started as a direct response to the lack of youth representation and diversity on the Trinidad and Tobago government's team to develop the Roadmap for National Recovery established in April 2020. Youth should take a leading role in the post-COVID-19 decision-making to protect their rights, articulate their priorities and enhance the scope and aims of social and economic development in meeting all citizens' needs. However, we have also recognised that the Caribbean trend has been to give lip service to this. Post-COVID-19 efforts by respective governments have centralised power to the state, often at the expense of youth participation. For this reason, the Youth COVID-19 Response Initiative (YCRI) gathered young people's input from various sectors such as education, health, culture, tourism, civil society, and volunteerism and submitted this report to the government's post-COVID recovery task force. Youth mainstreaming is the primary framework that underpins the report. It involves ensuring youth participation across all sectors of development planning, establishing targeted actions to address the needs and interests of youth and monitoring and evaluating the processes and outcomes of programmes. The Youth COVID-19 Response Initiative Report

lists twenty-eight (28) recommendations to inform more inclusive decision-making. A few of the key recommendations that stemmed from this report include increased Wi-Fi accessibility with particular focus on rural areas and marginalised communities, digitisation of all government services and implementation of six (6) to twelve (12) month training programme for teachers, students and community leaders on digital communications, teaching, learning and content creation. Internet access has become fundamental for modern life and indispensable tool in public education. COVID-19 revealed the unequal access to this essential resource in the region. Universal access to the internet should be made available to all. Likewise, COVID-19 has exposed inefficiencies of manual record keeping and service delivery across public sectors. Many public services are unable to be delivered without physical interaction. Hence, digitisation of public services will improve the ease of doing business in the region and protect public safety. Furthermore, many teachers and students lack the skills to make

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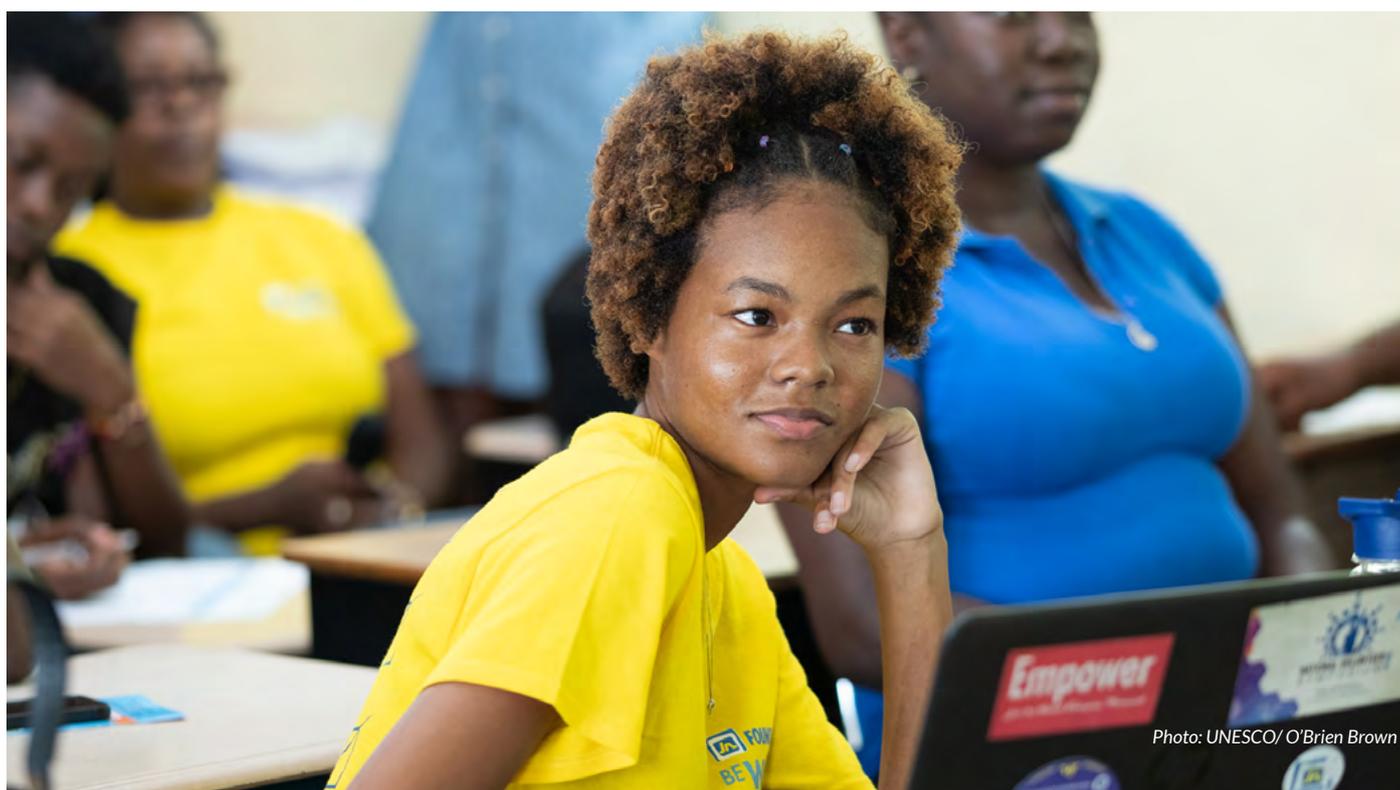


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use of online learning opportunities effectively. Online access is essential, but know-how is equally essential; both students and teacher must be provided with adequate training to make the most efficient and effective use of online platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has a far-reaching social and economic impact on youth's quality of life in the Caribbean. The Caribbean region has had less COVID-19 cases in comparison to some of our global counterparts. However, the pandemic's secondary effects continue to be felt in education, public safety, governance and mental health as it deepened pre-existing social and economic inequalities. COVID-19 exposed the challenges and vulnerability of low income and marginalised communities. Within the Caribbean, we have learned several lessons from this pandemic. Still, one that must be critically highlighted is the strength of the civil society and the continuous need for community engagement. Moreover, one of the best takeaways from the YCRI report is a collaboration of youth networks and the creation of spaces by young people to brainstorm initiatives, find solutions, share learning experiences and best practices with others around the region. Governments will not be able to tackle all issues related to COVID-19 on its own. Therefore, youth engagement and participation is paramount for national development.



Latoyaa Roberts has over fifteen years of experience working with civil society movements with a focus on youth, women and social entrepreneurship. She is the past President of the Tobago Youth Council (2017-2020), Director of Trinidad and Tobago Youth Ambassadors and has membership in many NGOs locally, regionally, and internationally. She also works as an independent development consultant for international organizations. She has a B.A in Communications Studies with Linguistics and International Relations and a MSc in Global Studies from the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus and is currently pursuing a Masters in Political Analysis and Public Policy at Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia with a focus on human and democratic rights.



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