



# Rescuing Their **INHERITANCE**

Youth can drive society's response to the COVID-19 crisis, even as they keenly feel its effects

All generations have a defining moment. A moment of truth when they critique the present and, striving for a better future, take destiny into their own hands. For today's youth—millennials and Generation Z—this is their moment. We know that many young people, already grappling with the legacy of the global financial crisis, have been hit especially hard by the pandemic. Educations disrupted. Livelihoods

upended. Anxiety and depression rife. Yet the world's young people have not stood idly by. Legions of diverse youths have mobilized as volunteers, social entrepreneurs, and thinkers to envision a fairer and more inclusive world.

Four young leaders from the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers Network discuss how their generation is confronting—and helping their communities overcome—the COVID-19 crisis.



**David Walcott,  
Kingston, Jamaica**

Twelve years after the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19 has delivered yet another dose of global trauma affecting younger and older generations alike. Despite the Caribbean’s tropical climate, small land masses,

and easily regulated borders, our health and economic systems remain vulnerable, and we now face socioeconomic repercussions that imperil the future of our youth.

The pandemic has triggered a sense of uncertainty and financial instability, particularly among millennials preparing for the conventional transition through education and employment to financial independence.

Young people in the Caribbean face increasing challenges to gaining entry to the wealth ladder—compounded now by the pandemic. Labor markets have contracted, and both locally schooled and repatriated Caribbean millennials are struggling to find jobs, despite degrees from eminent universities.

Students face disruption to their education as they struggle with remote learning. This has affected particularly those from low-income communities, despite the best efforts of educational institutions.

Compounding these challenges, our collective well-being has deteriorated notably. More and more people are struggling with depression and anxiety as we face isolation and mask fatigue, excessively consume social media, and deal with the unexpected loss of family members. Our financial distress has been compounded by existential angst as we contemplate an uncertain and unclear future.

Despite these challenges, Caribbean young people have shown their resilience through volunteerism and participation in public and private pandemic-response efforts. Regional decision-makers must use this crisis to build on the strength of our youth and realign our Caribbean identity with innovation and progress. This vision

calls for investment in opportunities for youth participation in our new world, complemented by policy-driven initiatives to boost access to online learning and remote employment.

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Policies that acknowledge and respond to burgeoning mental health needs will be essential to support Caribbean youth in a world where global crises defined our formative years. Policy-driven support can transform today’s struggle into tomorrow’s strength as we prepare to build a new Caribbean.

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**DAVID WALCOTT** is a medical doctor and the founder and managing partner of NOVAMED, a company driving the adoption of innovative health care solutions in emerging markets.



**Tiffany Yu,  
San Francisco,  
United States**

Despite being one of the world’s wealthiest countries, the United States has been leading the globe in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, in addition to grappling with racial tensions, hurricanes

and record wildfires, and political polarization.

The compounding effects have led to an economic, social, and mental health crisis that is taking its toll on young people, especially those who hold intersecting oppressed identities.

*The pandemic is highlighting the digital divide.* As school and work have moved online, many young people have been left to navigate potentially

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complex homelives without reliable internet and workable laptops.

*COVID-19 is exacerbating growing social inequities.* Research by McKinsey & Company found that the crisis disproportionately harms Black Americans, from mortality to bankruptcy. Disruptions to education, learning, and employment threaten young people with an overall setback.

*And the pandemic has created a mental health crisis among our youth.* Shelter-in-place orders are further straining unstable home environments. Young people are left to deal with trauma and grief on their own. Social distancing measures and social isolation increase feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and stress.

Yet during the pandemic we have also learned to be agile, adaptable, and resilient—especially young people, who are unapologetic about their desire for social change.

We often say that young people are the future. That means ensuring they have the voice and agency to cocreate that future. And we also need to acknowledge the intersecting identities that may cause compounded oppression—race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or some combination thereof. In this spirit, I have three concrete proposals for today’s decision-makers:

- Engage diverse young people in cocreating solutions by including at least one young person on every mayoral commission or council.
- Empower young people through access to education and employment by equipping them with hardware and connectivity and investing in small businesses and social entrepreneurs.
- Invest in young people’s mental health and overall well-being by teaching empathetic listening skills in schools and ensure that

everyone who wants mental health support is able to receive it.

Let young people be part of the solution to today’s crisis.

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**TIFFANY YU** is a San Francisco–based social entrepreneur on a mission to increase intersectional disability representation. She is the founder and CEO of Diversability and serves on the San Francisco Mayor’s Disability Council



**Ashleigh Streeter-Jones, Canberra, Australia**

Following months of hazardous bushfires, my community in Canberra had barely two months before the next challenge: COVID-19. Unlike the bushfires, the pandemic produced fear and uncertainty worldwide.

This distress affects especially vulnerable people—the young and the old, the poor and the homeless, people with preexisting health conditions, and those with uncertain immigration status. The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated global inequality; we have a long way to go in creating a more equal world.

Young people in the geographically broad Pacific region face many of the same pandemic-related challenges. COVID-19 has worsened job and financial insecurity. Governments are working hard to restore jobs, but young people will still be underemployed in industries hit by the global recession.

Many young people, especially from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have suffered disruption

to their education because they lack the devices and stable internet necessary for home learning. Community organizations and for-profit groups have held online workshops to help people upgrade their marketable skills, but many young people lack access to them. Mental health has also proved a significant challenge. Disrupted routines, uncertainty, isolation, and the loneliness of lockdowns have fueled anxiety and depression.

However, change creates opportunity. Young people across the world are invigorated by discussions about green recovery and are optimistic about the drop in global emissions. Similarly, many young people have embraced entrepreneurship, investing in themselves and their communities. Seizing this opportunity, I launched an initiative, Raise Our Voice, that works to upskill female and nonbinary youth from diverse backgrounds to be leaders in public decision-making. This brought about an engaged online community ready to be at the forefront of positive change.

During COVID-19, the World Economic Forum's Global Shaper Hubs have been organizing check-ins, food drives, and letter writing for those in need. I feel privileged to be part of a group quick to pivot and think creatively about how to support the community. COVID-19 will continue to be a challenge, but I'm proud to be one of the young people working to create a better world.

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**ASHLEIGH STREETER-JONES** is an intersectional gender activist who has spent much of her career working with young people and getting them a seat at the table.



**Hamad AlMahmeed, Manama, Bahrain**

The world's youth may have been spared the coronavirus's most pernicious health effects, but the associated economic shock has crippled fledgling careers and

interrupted the education of scores of young men and women across the globe. The Kingdom of Bahrain anticipated these knock-on effects early on and is working tirelessly and proactively to shield young Bahrainis from the pandemic's most perilous consequences.

The government has adopted a levelheaded and empirically driven approach in a deliberate effort to protect the health of its citizens and residents as well as safeguard the country's economic integrity. Striking an appropriate balance requires agile infrastructure, with the requisite flexibility to adjust and respond to a rapidly evolving reality. Bahrain's youth are instrumental in this regard.

The National Taskforce for Combating Coronavirus was established before Bahrain registered its first confirmed case of the virus, with the objective of a whole-of-government response. In leading the task force nerve center, I work with young men and women from all backgrounds and professional fields, who stand out for their enthusiasm and creativity.

Many of our prized solutions have been pioneered by young team members. Drive-through testing stations were set up in unused parking lots, and public buses were converted to mobile testing units. Bahraini youth also work in significant leadership roles across most of the task force's workstreams, including the contact tracing and testing plan teams.

The innovation brought to bear by these members has been critical to the realization of Bahrain's containment strategy. From the volunteers at Bahrain's COVID-19 call center to the supervisors and doctors in the task force nerve center, the country's indefatigable youth are proving their worth in the most difficult of times. I am confident that they will lead the charge to recovery and prosperity. **FD**

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**HAMAD ALMAHMEED** is undersecretary of research and public policy at the Office of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Bahrain and currently heads the war room established to combat COVID-19 in Bahrain.