



COVID-19

Digital Response



A case study capturing the response of CARE and partner organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic

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COVID-19 DIGITAL RESPONSE

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CARE International

CARE International has over 25 years of experience in program implementation in the Balkans. During the 1990s wars and conflicts, CARE responded to the destruction, traumatization, displacement and inter-ethnic hatred with its massive humanitarian and life-saving activities all over the Balkans. Since the year 2000, CARE's orientation has shifted to developmental work and its aim in the Balkans today is to ensure that social, economic and political rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups are recognized and fulfilled, contributing to sustainable peace in the region. CARE's Program Strategy is based on two pillars: a) socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable minorities and other marginalized groups by contributing to stronger capacities and creating better opportunities for them, enabling them to integrate into society and fulfil their rights; b) gender equality among vulnerable and marginalized groups by promoting the values and practices of gender equality, diversity and non-violence, strengthening the capacities of local, national and regional human rights and social justice actors, as well as creating opportunities for innovation, participation, learning, cooperation and advocacy. CARE nourishes partnerships with the local civil society sector and governments dedicated to creating positive changes in societies.

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Executive Summary

The Young Men Initiative (YMI) project started in 2006 and is being implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo* and Serbia by CARE International Balkans and local partner organizations. The project is a follow-up to CARE's comprehensive and programmatic efforts to prevent interpersonal and gender-based violence (GBV), as well as to promote gender equality in the region. The YMI targets youth in order to build their knowledge and attitudes concerning gender equality and healthy lifestyles, and to reduce all types of violence. The YMI started with a small size qualitative research exploring young men's attitudes and behaviors, then over the years grew into a comprehensive program with different components targeting young people, parents, teachers, educational workers, university students, journalists, and other important stakeholders. Since the beginning, the program has directly reached over 600,000 people (mostly youth) in over 130 communities through the implementation of thousands of different project activities.

The ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 has had a major influence on YMI's activities, since all of the project targeted countries were under complete lockdown during the period March-May, and most are currently under safety and prevention measures, which include partial curfews, minor restrictions of movement and other civic liberties, including social and cultural gatherings and events. Considering that the project activities mainly focus on working with youth in communities and educational institutions across the region, the COVID-19 crisis has significantly impacted project implementation.

The case study captures and documents the process of YMI's adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic during the period March-July 2020, outlining the process and providing recommendations and lessons for the future. This case study serves as a unique product developed by CARE and partners, and represents a unique contribution and source for others organizations that are going through the same process of adaptation.

In 2020, YMI's approach demonstrated its resilience to crisis and ability to adapt to the specific circumstances of target groups. The YMI was created for young people, to respond to the needs of young people, wherever young people may be. The digitalization of activities was the main focus of all partner organizations, which can be seen as an upgrade of the previous digital work that resulted in great success and brought outstanding innovation to the YMI. This included the adjustment of workshops, endline research, school and community based campaigns, and BMC meetings, as well as the introduction of podcasts, social media live shows, online quizzes and challenges, and psychological support. ***In the period March-July 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, partners implemented over 600 activities with 68,525 direct participants, of which 90% were young people ages 15-30.***



About Young Men Initiative



1. About Young Men Initiative

The Young Men Initiative (YMI) project started in 2006 and is being implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo*, and Serbia by CARE International Balkans and local partner organizations. The project is a follow-up to CARE's comprehensive and programmatic effort to prevent interpersonal and gender-based violence (GBV) as well as to promote gender equality in the region. The YMI targets youth to build their knowledge and attitudes concerning gender equality and healthy lifestyles, and to reduce all types of violence. The YMI started with a small size qualitative research exploring young men's attitudes and behaviors, then over the years grew into a comprehensive program with different components targeting young people, parents, teachers, educational workers, university students, journalists, and other important stakeholders. Since the beginning, the program has directly reached over 600,000 people (mostly youth) in over 130 communities through the implementation of thousands of different project activities.

The core of YMI's intervention¹ is a series of group educational workshops along with a social norms campaign, and the establishment of "Be a Man" clubs that are part of regionally recognized *Manual Program Y(outh) – Innovative Approaches in GBV Prevention and Healthy Lifestyle Promotion for Young Men and Women* which has been a documented success in the Western Balkans. The program is focused on transforming the school environment into an environment that supports and nurtures gender equality and promotes a culture of nonviolence. Program Y is grounded in the belief that if students learn to recognize harmful gender norms and are provided safe spaces to question these constructs, there is a greater likelihood of internalizing new ideas in support of gender-equitable, healthy, and non-violent behaviors.

"Be a Man" clubs (BMC) are established as clubs of high school students engaged in a creative way in the design and implementation of social norms campaigns that are youth-led. BMC's members are allowed to build themselves and encourage others to be better, by providing a safe zone for young people, where there is no judgment, where opinions are challenged, and where a dialogue and self-critical thinking are encouraged. In addition, they participate in motivational activities such as movie nights, going to the theater and concerts, sports games, traveling and meeting other young people and sharing experiences with them through various types of youth camps and camps for youth leaders.

¹ For more information about the Young Men Initiative please refer to the Program brochure or <https://youngmeninitiative.net/en/>

* 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. Applies to the whole document

“Be a Man” clubs include both young men and women with the goal of building a healthy lifestyle for all of them. Today, there are 34 BMCs in more than 30 cities in the Balkans, gathering over 2,600 young men and women.

One of the most important CARE and partner organizations' goals is to introduce Life Skills Education based on Program Y into the official high school curriculum across the Balkans. So far, the program has been implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo*, Serbia, and has obtained official accreditation in Croatia, Serbia, and Kosovo* from ministries of education. Most importantly, in cooperation with the Ministries of Education, it has become mandatory in Herzegovina-Neretva and Bosnian-Podrinje Cantons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and homeroom teachers are obliged to dedicate a quarter of the meeting time to it.

Since its beginning, the YMI has been implemented by CARE and partner organizations – youth NGOs from the region. Over the years, YMI partners have become resource centers and most relevant stakeholders regarding topics such as: engaging men and boys in violence prevention and the promotion of gender equality. CARE's main partners are: Status M from Zagreb, Center E8 from Belgrade, SMART Kolektiv from Belgrade, Association XY from Sarajevo, Institute Perpetuum Mobile from Banja Luka, Youth Power Mostar, Educational Youth Club Synergy from Kosovska Mitrovica, SIT - Center for Counseling, Social Services and Research and YMCA from Pristina, and Centre Act for Society from Tirana.

During the first six years, the YMI was supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the last seven years, the Young Men Initiative has gained support of the Austrian Development Cooperation, Oak Foundation, and Swiss Development Cooperation for two of its projects: Men and Boys as Partners in Promoting Gender Equality and the Prevention of Youth Extremism and Violence in the Balkans implemented in the region, and Promoting Healthier Lifestyles among Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Challenging Gender Stereotypes implemented in B&H.





Background and Methodology



2. Background and Methodology

2.1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change the social, educational, and daily life in the Balkans?

The first cases of COVID-19 were documented sporadically in countries of the region from mid-February until the beginning of March 2020. In the initial phase of the epidemic the cases were, seemingly, well controlled and most countries introduced various epidemiological measures to prevent the spread of the new virus among the population. Most of the measures remained in place until the end of June, and some remained active until the end of July. Governments and health officials of the countries had their own way of dealing with the pandemic – some parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Albania, and Serbia decided to follow the lockdown strategy and limit the movement of its citizens, partially or completely. Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania enforced curfews, with a partially or no predicted timeline for shopping at groceries stores or pharmacies. Serbia endured the longest curfew during the Easter weekend in April – from Friday to Monday morning, the whole country was put on pause and remained in their homes or facilities.

Schools switched to distance learning and online teaching methods, which implied homeschooling, isolation and separation from peers. Homes became playgrounds, nightclubs, classrooms, and safe (or not so safe) places. Even though the teachers and school staff swiftly adapted to the changed circumstances, the stress and fear of uncertainty prevailed among the youth population. Mental health, emotional well-being, and stability became the biggest concerns of youth workers and educators across the region. *The isolation and physical distancing measures became the new reality, along with the stress and fear of uncertainty.*

Homeschooling has also brought about different types of stress, previously unknown by the majority of young people – many high school students expressed their concerns about the amount of homework, the tasks they were assigned and the lack of free time, essential for their emotional well-being and personal growth. The overwhelming social climate, limited freedom of movement and changed socialization became the new everyday life for the majority of young people across the region. The biggest challenge for everyone involved in working with youth was to reduce the anxiety, express solidarity, and learn to be supportive without the physical presence. That is why various methodologies were developed and various techniques used for overcoming this obstacle.

The COVID-19 outbreak revealed the flaws and weak spots of societies globally, not just in the Western Balkans region. Besides the health system, other parts of society were also put on an endurance test, along with educational systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo. Even though the educational systems in countries where the Young Men Initiative project is being implemented are different, before the COVID-19 outbreak they had at least one thing in common – they relied on the traditional teaching methodology which slowly changed under the influence of various factors. The COVID-19 outbreak accelerated the process of transition to online teaching, pushed school staff and students to embrace new approaches, techniques, and online

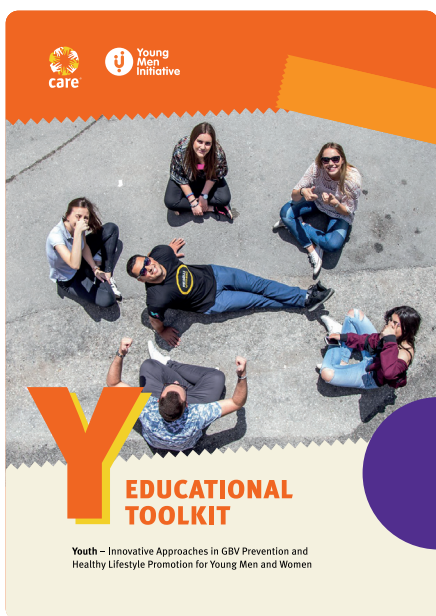
platforms. The school systems began their transformation towards something that seems like a more participative and more adequate, generationally-tailored way of teaching and learning, which leaves enough space for further improvements, interventions, and encouragement.

Despite being more flexible and resilient, NGOs had to adjust their activities as well. Leaving the face-to-face contact used in the majority of the activities, NGOs had to invent new activities and explore all the possibilities offered by the online reality, in order to stay present, relevant and useful to their beneficiaries. Micromanagement and project coordination had moved to virtual reality and both colleagues and beneficiaries became avatars during long Zoom or Skype calls. The whole process of project coordination moved from offices to living rooms, erasing the limits between work and private life. The biggest challenge was providing support in difficult times, while remaining safe and productive, respecting deadlines, parameters and indicators predicted by project proposals. Within the framework of the Young Men Initiative project, coordinators, educators and Be a Man Club members not only managed to reshape existing activities, but also to invent, design and implement completely new ones, using the well-known Program Y methodology and its unique, fresh, and inspiring approach.

2.2. How YMI responded to the COVID-19 challenge

It was planned for YMI to reach the peak of its endeavors in the Balkans in 2020. CARE and partners planned *a region-wide scaling up process of Program Y* implementation to engage more than 100 schools, the launching of *a new campaign* on the prevention of radicalization and extremism across the Balkans, and the official launch of the community-based *Future4Youth movement* campaign for the introduction of Life Skills Education in the official school curriculum.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged YMI in ways that we could not predict.



Partial curfews, minor restrictions of movement and other civic liberties, including social and cultural gatherings and events, disrupted YMI's regular plans. Considering that project activities mainly focus on working with youth in communities and educational institutions across the region, the COVID-19 crisis has significantly impacted the project implementation.

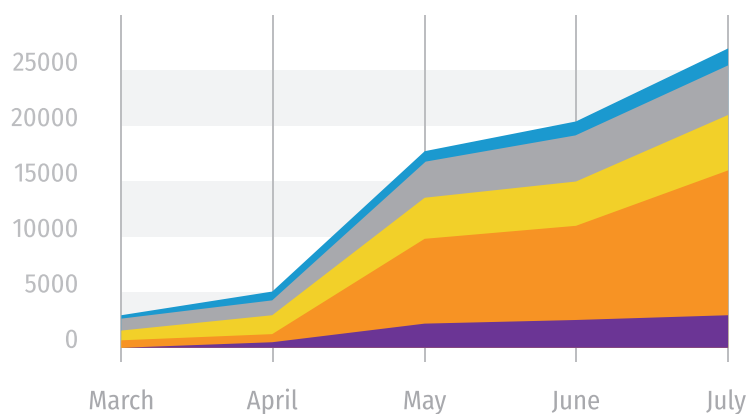
Since the COVID-19 outbreak, CARE has been closely monitoring the situation in all countries and communities where the project is being implemented to ensure the safety and security of CARE's staff, programs, partner organizations, and beneficiaries. CARE has coordinated the process of contingency- planning in March 2020, which involved emergency Skype calls and the development of country level and regional level plans and mitigation measures. The main purpose of this was to enable rapid responses and adaptation to the coronavirus crisis. The plan was made in accordance with the WHO and CARE International recommendations, and considered the well-being of all stakeholders and beneficiaries involved. CARE and partners have developed a COVID-19 contingency plan for the first three months. After the initial three months of severe lockdowns in all countries, CARE and partners managed to find an innovative, youth-designed, efficient, and effective modus operandi which resulted in significant progress in each of the project components, despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

The digitalization of activities was the main focus of all partner organizations, which can be seen as an upgrade of previous digital activities. All partners obtain sufficient digital skills, practiced even before the pandemic, but they put additional efforts into adapting and designing online activities in order to keep up with beneficiaries on a daily level. The main outcome of the process is that partners successfully adjusted the main field activities to an online environment, achieving outstanding innovation and introducing new types of activities.



In the period March-July 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, partners implemented over 600 activities with 68,525 direct participants of which 90% were young people ages 15-30.

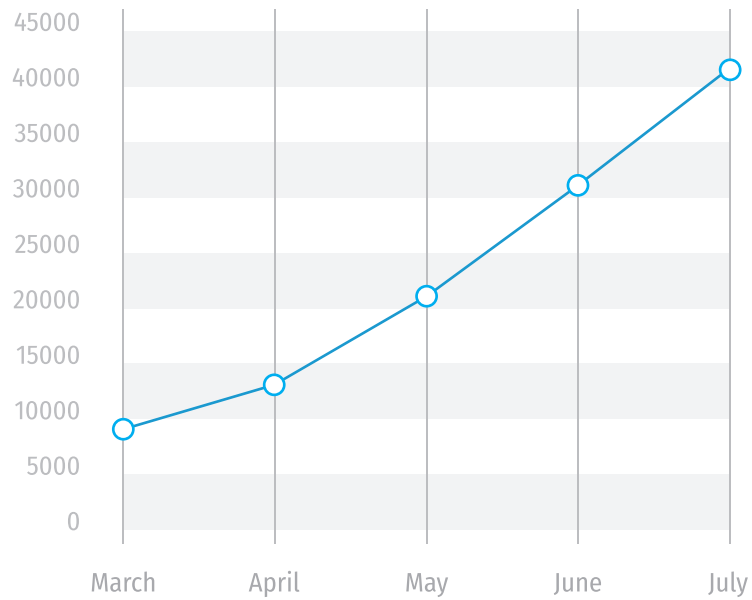
YMI digital COVID -19 response participants in March- July 2020



	March	April	May	June	July
Psychological support	121	648	959	1097	1314
Quizzes, challenges ets.	1015	1813	2769	3162	4813
Podcasts	906	2075	3760	4328	5353
Events & meetings	695	931	7684	8519	12511
Program Y Workshops	41	469	2418	2892	2991

During the same period, YMI enhanced its online presence and implemented social norms campaigns to reduce harmful gender-related stereotypes and the culture of violence among adolescents. These campaigns were adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic situation and provided a variety of advices on how to maintain physical and mental health and protect oneself during the pandemic.

YMI social norms campaigns engagment during quarantine 2020



No of engaged participants

8562

13321

21758

31087

41543

The YMI has proved again that its approach is resilient and adaptable to the specific context of each target group. The YMI was created for young people, to respond to the needs of young people, wherever young people may be. The ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 has had a major influence on YMI's activities, but it did not cease its activities – instead, the YMI gained more space to become innovative, to rethink and use youth designed solutions to create safe spaces for our participants.



2.3. Methodology

In the development of this case study, mixed-methods or research were used for collecting qualitative or quantitative datasets:

1. Desk review and document analysis: project documentation, partners' monthly reports, contingency plans, news and official websites from national authorities related to COVID-19 and relevant countries' policies, including publications and available media
2. Questionnaire data about YMI's partners' adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic (9)
3. Online consultations with all partner organizations based on a semi-structured interview (10)
4. Analysis of collected stories from program participants based on the inputs from partners (up to 10)

In addition, quantitative data gathered through YMI partners' monthly COVID-19 response monitoring tables enabled comprehensive analyses and the implementation of the triangulation methodology to capture the process of project adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The reasons behind the selection of specific methods for data collection lie in the very nature of the methods: the questionnaire is crucial for analysts to collect all necessary data in order to get a clear picture of the situation, having in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic occurred suddenly and partners had to adapt to the situation and adjust approaches on a monthly, even daily basis.

Based on qualitative and quantitative data, authors conducted online consultations (based on a semi-structured interview) with all YMI's partners to collect further information and see mutual relations and similarities/differences in understanding the means of adaptation and mitigation. Additionally, online consultations with partners and stories from program participants have been collected to gain a more comprehensive knowledge on the overall impact of COVID-19 on young people.



The YMI digital response



3. The YMI digital response

3.1 Be a Man Clubs

One of the most important pillars of the YMI project are the “Be a Man” clubs across the region. In the 13 years of project implementation, the BMCs have been the propelling mechanism driving the project, as its members have been engaged as peer educators and role models for youth in their respective countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded CARE and partner organization of the immense potential of “Be a Man” clubs in the region, which managed to gather on a daily and weekly basis almost 1000 young people to participate in its activities, and managed to rapidly adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic.

BMCs offer a safe space both offline and online for young people to express their opinions, find solace and amusement with their peers, and unleash their potentials, which is of great importance during the COVID-19 period.

All BMCs provided guidance, psychosocial support and peer support in dealing with the crisis. A variety of different online activities took place since March 2020, including the development of podcasts in Banja Luka and Belgrade, the development of online shows, yoga sessions, innovative adjustments of the regular campaign to COVID-19, online quizzes and games for young people, as well as online educational workshops and brainstorming new campaigns. BMCs’ members represent the core element in the movement building and advocacy issues related to the prevention of violence and promotion of gender equality in this initiative.

“Be a Man” clubs (BMC) are established as clubs of high school students engaged in a creative way in the design and implementation of social norms campaigns and other youth-led activities. BMC’s members are allowed to build themselves and encourage others to be better, by providing a safe zone for young people, where there is no judgment, where opinions are challenged, and where a dialogue and self-critical thinking are encouraged. In addition, they participate in motivational activities such as movie nights, going to the theater and concerts, sports games, traveling and meeting other young people and sharing experiences with them through various types of youth camps and camps for youth leaders.



33

Ba a Man Clubs



30

Towns



2600

Members

There are currently

33 BMCs in 30 towns

with over

2600 active members

that work online and

in their communities.

Without them, the YMI project would not be possible.

During the period March-July, hundred online meetings of BMC members were organized, which served as the base for all YMI activities.

BMC humanitarian response

Being human and helping others in trouble are the core values of volunteers and BMC members participating in the YMI. In Kosovska Mitrovica, five BMC members participated in the initiative to help the elderly on a daily basis, organized by YMI partner Synergy. The goal was to deliver medicaments and groceries to older people who needed help and were at high risk of COVID-19 infection.

3.2. Online Workshops

In March 2020, partners held their last workshops in classrooms for the school year 2019/2020 due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by governments in all countries. CARE and all partner organizations started making plans to conduct the planned workshops from Program Y online, which was included in their YMI contingency plans. The idea was to try to organize workshops with 10-20 students per group from target schools and two peer educators to emulate a regular school environment.

After one month of technical, safety and personnel preparation and obtaining permission from relevant schools and educational institutions, three partner organization – SIT and YMCA from Kosovo, and AfS from Albania – managed to organize workshops with young people in accordance with the contingency plan.

In Croatia, Status M managed to bring together a group of young Roma people to continue discussions on gender norms, gender-based violence and healthy lifestyles based on Program Y. The online safe space that they created brought together young people from different parts of Croatia in moments of isolation, giving them the opportunity to talk about their feelings, concerns and fears and helping them to endure this overwhelming situation. During each meeting, educators left participants with enough time to share with others how they spend time in isolation, to recommend books, TV series and movies, sing and play, and thus help each other to constructively spend time.

The group that Status M implements workshops with initially had 6-10 participants, but with the possibility of participating in workshops from a distance, the number of participants increased to 15. Workshops are held once a week on the Zoom platform with the help of various apps for online presentation and interaction.

In Serbia, Center E8 prepared workshops, but the school administration did not obtain permission from the ministry to grant them access to the students during lockdown, thus Center E8 launched a call for all young people to join the workshops from Program Y. The response was higher than expected and 336 young people not only from Belgrade, but from the entire region, participated in 24 workshops from Program Y.

As an alternative to Program Y workshops, partners in B&H and Kosovska Mitrovica organized tailor-made workshops for BMC members to discuss mental health, human rights and to make them more resilient to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Albania, AfS managed not only to implement Program Y workshops in the target school, but also to obtain permission to scale up the Program Y implementation to the Kruja district and received support for the inclusion of additional eight schools in the school year 2020/2021, which is a major success. During the period April-June, AfS trainers and peer educators worked together with teachers and helped them carry out their classes by organizing workshops and helping with students.



151

Online workshops



39%

Young men



2991

Students



61%

Young women

During the April-June period, partner organizations implemented 151 online workshops via Zoom with 2991 students (39% M, 61% F) in Albania, Croatia, BiH, Kosovo*, and Serbia.

Depending on the context, partners prepared workshops and started working in the online environment, in an enthusiastic and devoted manner. For some of them, using online platforms and inventing creative approaches to motivate young people was challenging at the beginning, but they managed to educate themselves with the help of their peers – colleagues or even Be a Man Club members.

By using innovative approaches, technologies and platforms, partners have managed to decrease stress and support their beneficiaries in these changed circumstances. The YMI workshops quickly continued their course in the “new normal” induced by COVID-19 and demonstrated their resilience to crisis and changes.

3.3. Podcasts

Podcasts are one of the most innovative way for providing informative, creative, and useful content, and for reaching an audience. This was the logic behind the podcasts that were used as part of YMI's COVID-19 adaptations. Podcasts emerged as an appropriate solution for coping with the lockdown and induced stress. Considering that everything takes place online, the YMI teams knew that their content needed to be unique and special. The criteria for the podcast's relevance was quite strict – it had to address the particular needs of the youth during the pandemic without the pandemic in focus; it had to be funny, YMI-based, informative and, most importantly, it had to be authentic in order to reach our target group.

The idea was to distract YMI's audience and reassure them that life will go on, despite isolation, by reminding them about their happy places and favorite music and in that way brings joy and calm during these difficult times.



29

Podcasts



5.353

Young people



200.000

Users via social media

During the period April-July, partners produced 29 podcasts that were listened to by 5353 young people and reached more than 200,000 users via social media.

In Belgrade, Center E8 had developed its podcast YOUTH at the beginning of April, two weeks after the official lockdown and state of emergency measures were introduced. Staff members wanted to offer a useful coping mechanism, create educative content designed for youth, that will engage them into supporting the YMI movement, on healthy lifestyles, violence prevention and gender equality. Podcasts had eventually reached an even wider audience. The podcasts' guests were marked as "superheroes" i.e. youth role models – activists, journalists, artists and youth idols from Serbia or the region. They were asked to choose special image that represents their happy place and play their favorite music in the show.

The Eggplants in Pajamas podcast was developed and produced in Croatia as a space for a series of fun and honest discussions about issues that matter to young people in these times of crisis. Status M young volunteers identify pressing topics related to gender equality, mental health, violence and other issues that affect young people's lives during the lockdown. They are joined by experts who offer interesting views and advice concerning issues such as social distancing, pornography, equitable division of care work, or the rise of domestic violence.

The YMI partners produced podcasts during the lockdown and state of emergency that have a tremendous potential to outgrow the circumstances they were created in. Furthermore, they will continue with the production of podcast in the future. The podcasts improved the visibility of YMI's activities, established connection with other actors on the public scene, demonstrated the relevance and adaptation capacities of YMI partners, and brought a fresh new dimension to the project. Finally, podcast production helped partners gain and improve technical skills necessary for the online world we are currently living in.

3.4. Social media challenges, quizzes, and puzzles

In order to keep the youth beneficiaries active, all partner organizations planned online activities for young people to offer online educational content in a fun way. All partners explored additional apps and social networks that can be used to provide online content related to the promotion of gender equality, non-violence, and healthy lifestyles.

In the period March-July, all partner organizations used Instagram and Facebook stories, other apps such as Mentimeter, Kahoot!, Chatbot, as well as Youtube channels, and implemented 17 quizzes and similar games in which 4813 beneficiaries directly participated and over 500,000 were reached via social media.

SMART kolektiv, a partner organization from Belgrade in charge of the YMI campaign development, adjusted the “Are You OK” campaign material to COVID-19. One of the joint regional YMI activities was the #BMC memories Instagram challenge, where BMC members posted their photos from previous YMI activities on Instagram.

In Kosovo, the Be a Man Club organized a quiz via the Kahoot! platform to discuss hate speech as a driver of youth extremism and violence. The quiz was based on the YMI’s “Turn ON knowledge, turn OFF hate” campaign against extremism and violence and consisted of 10 questions. Dozens of BMC members participated online through Zoom and Kahoot! platforms and three best scoring BMC members received books related to positive thinking, open conversation, and peaceful conflict resolution as a prize.

Center E8 has designed “pigeon Mirko and & pigeoness Marina” online quiz related to “Turn ON knowledge, turn OFF hate” campaign against radicalization and violence among young people. The quiz started on May 25th, using the Manybot platform connected to Facebook Messenger, and consisted of 10 questions which were followed by an explanation and educative content. The quiz lasted for ten consecutive days and was completed by 600 young people from Serbia and the region. Pigeon Mirko and pigeoness Marina rewarded the participants by randomly picking out ten people every day on Instagram live, who then received YMI promotional material such as backpacks, hats, and headphones. The quiz and Instagram live stories received much publicity and over 200,000 people were reached via social networks.

Perpetuum Mobile together with BMC members created two Instagram challenges to keep up with young people. In March, the challenge was that young people nominate their peers to recommend a book and a movie to watch in isolation, and to write a short description of what the book and movie were about. At the same time, they spread the #stayathome message to tell young people that it is necessary to follow the rules in their current situation and stay home – but not alone! The April challenge was focused on quizzes, riddles, and crossword puzzles that were posted on Instagram Story to talk about healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, they developed a Facebook photo frame as well as Viber and Whatsapp stickers to spread the messages of the YMI project.

3.5. Online events

All partner organizations stated online events as one of the main adjustments to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to interact with beneficiaries, they switched planned events to online mode, mostly by using Zoom or similar platforms. This was not a novelty for the project, since YMI partners held online meetings on a monthly basis and are part of European and Global networks that rely on online meetings. Partners adjusted quickly, and the main challenge was engaging teachers and institutional stakeholders to attend, since they were burdened with setting up online schooling and other similar activities during total lockdown. During the period March-July, partners participated

and organized 248 online meetings of which 36 were in the form of online conferences or webinars gathering 12,511 participants.

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on June 30th, 2020, Center E8 organized a 24 hours long global conference MAN2020 dedicated to the YMI movement building. This year, the MAN conference celebrated its tenth anniversary and brought together experts and practitioners from all around the globe. The program consisted of online webinars, keynote speeches, audio-visual performances, virtual and movie screening, as well as graffiti making related to gender equality and masculinity. This year, 4121 people from all around the globe participated as audience in one or several panels.

With online debates to healthy lifestyles during quarantine!

In Banja Luka, Perpetuum Mobile, launched online debates with students of Banja Luka high schools to enable young people to express their views, foster a culture of dialogue and non-violent communication, as well as to find solutions for identified youth issues and problems. The main topics of the debate derived from Program Y and included:

- Public health care is better than private care
- A man's emotional distress leads to his negative perception in society
- The media are responsible for eating disorders of young people
- All people should be vegetarians
- Violence is more common in poor areas

Yoga to clear the mind and body!

SIT and YMCA from Kosovo* organized online yoga exercises for 529 participants from Kosovo and the region with professional teachers and yoga instructors, as an answer to the low level of physical activities of young people during quarantine. Yoga sessions were highly popular and inspiring events that gathered not only BMC members and other regular beneficiaries, but also engaged other participants that probably would not be reached by regular events in target cities.

“Chat Room” – a live show by Be a Man Club and Real Girls Sarajevo

The show was invented by BMC members from the XY Association to provide entertainment and educational content to young people on Instagram. Every Friday starting at 7pm, Chat Room aired with a BMC host having relaxed conversations with his guests, role models from the local community, discussing current youth trends and offering innovative perspectives to promote gender equality, healthy lifestyles, and nonviolence during the pandemic.

3.6. Producing video materials to engage youth

Young people use videos and social media all the time, and since youth is the driving force for change in the YMI, it is in YMI's best interest to have an online presence as well. YMI with its partners and BMCs have different communication tools for reaching youth across the Balkans. Through the video materials produced, it is much easier to reach a higher number of youth, following CARE's/ YMI's idea that no youth should be left behind. Video creation is a regular activity of YMI and hundreds of different videos have been produced over the years. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic began, partners have put more effort in producing videos with young people that are role models to their peers, to support youngsters in quarantine.

Throughout the period, YMI has produced numerous videos that tackle social topics such as prevention of gender-based violence and all types of violence, extremism and radicalization, youth work and the likes, and each video has a message that targets not only youth but also the community as a whole. During COVID-19, the production of videos is the ultimate tool for YMI to convey messages to youth so they can stay positive during isolation, and also a means to provide recommendations on how to cope with the situation. Some of the produced video include the video about YMI, Mental health and COVID-19, 7 BMC podcasts and 7 Program Y educational videos produced by PM, creative ideas by BMC members in Tirana in isolation, 24 videos by Centre E8 related to the online experience from Program Y workshops, motivational video by BMC members, marking Friendship Day and Youth Skills Day in Pristina, and many more.

Program Y educational videos for social networks

In Mostar, BMC members of Youth Power created 12 educational videos with 12 themes from Program Y. The goal of the videos is to educate young people about gender equality, healthy lifestyles and nonviolence, and to underline key messages of educational workshops. Educational videos were developed in the form of sketches, doodles, each lasting from 1 to 2 minutes. The video narrators were peer educators coming from targeted high schools and BMC Mostar members who expressed their desire to participate in the development of these videos.

The videos are narrated in the local language, with English subtitles, and posted on Youth Power and BMC Facebook and Instagram pages.

3.7. Psychological support

Uncertainty caused by the coronavirus pandemic has had a strong impact on mental health, which is of high importance for adolescents and their transformation from childhood to adulthood. Mental

health was one of the key topics of YMI programming and all partner organizations put additional efforts to meet the needs of BMC members, targeted young people, and communities.

Across the region, all BMCs provided guidance and peer support in dealing with the crisis, by holding yoga sessions, online sessions with psychologists, and introducing online counseling sessions in some countries. Furthermore, partner organizations Association XY and SIT enhanced their regular activities regarding psychosocial support to young people and parents since March 2020 and established additional hotlines, engaged experts psychologists, and focused more on the mental health of beneficiaries.

1314 youth and adults have received peer or professional support during the period March-May directly from partner organizations.

We are not alone!

BMC Mostar member organized workshops on mental health with psychologist and created a set of graphics about preserving and taking care of mental health during the coronavirus pandemic and home isolation. 20 advices presented in the form of five graphics and an article have been created and shared on social media. The key messages shared within the campaign was: We are not alone! We are not helpless neither, unless we choose to be helpless because, whatever befalls us, we have the possibility to get out of that situation.

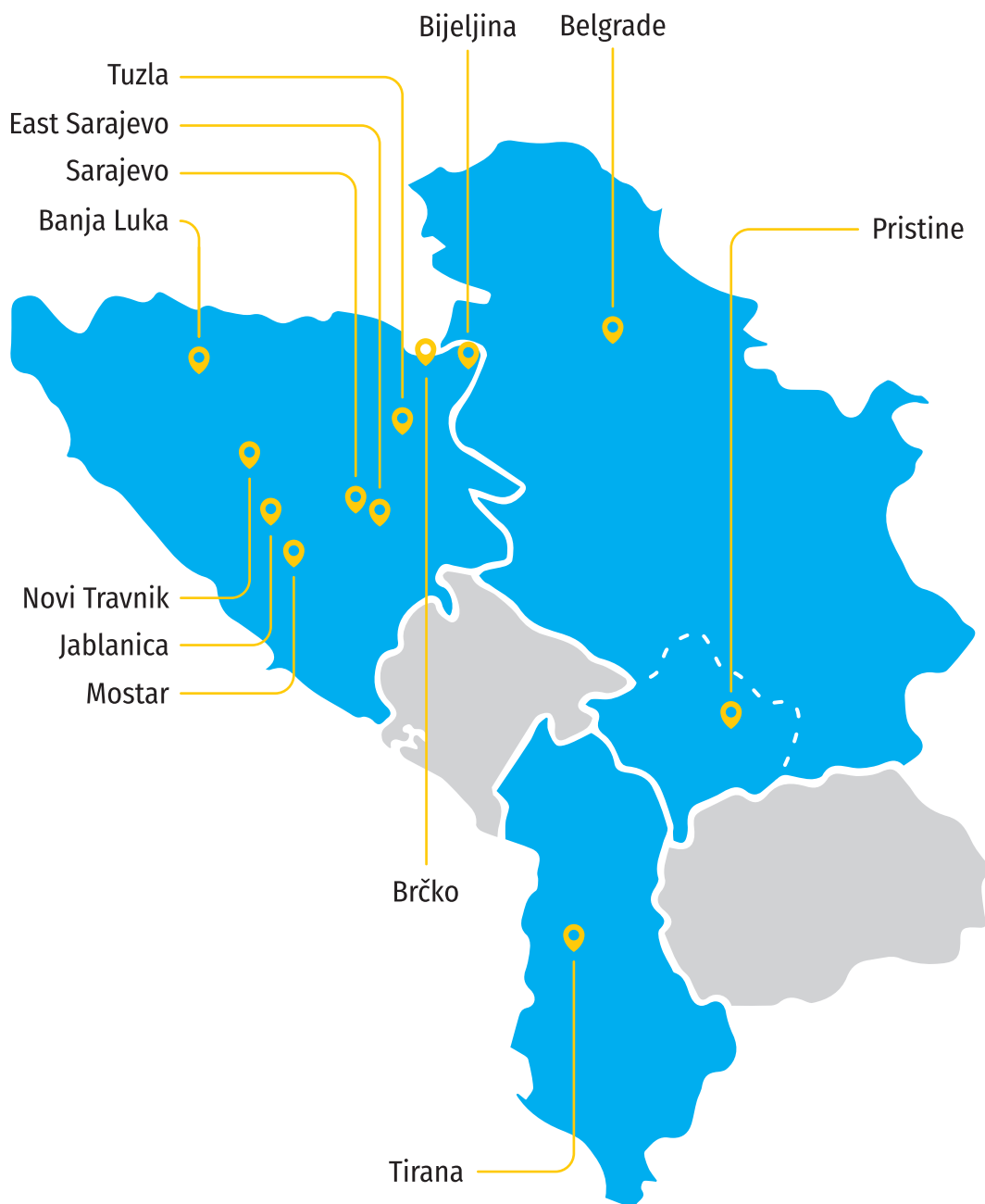
The partner organization in Kosovo SIT has given significant importance to mental health and providing services to help youth in need. Considering their experience in giving psychosocial support, including in-house experts, they have created a hotline to help people going through tough times and/or experiencing violence. There are online counseling sessions and hotlines with two psychologists, and around 20 regular beneficiaries have asked for help. They have used all available means of communication (social networks, Whatsapp, Viber, Messenger, as well as phone calls and e-mails). Some of their main issues are: anger prevention, coping with loneliness, dealing with quarantine, and missing regular school and work environment.

Parental Advisor in times of coronavirus

Over the last three years, Association XY has been successfully implementing the “XY Parental Advisor” to provide information and support to parents of teenagers and children of all age via digital platforms. At start of the COVID-19 outbreak, activities within Parental Advisor came to prominence and the platform started offering advice emphasizing the preservation of mental health during lockdown, organization and finding ways to fulfil obligations, but also creative solutions for children, teenagers and parents regarding learning and leisure. Furthermore, the Association XY psychosocial counseling services were accessible online to both youth and their parents, which was promoted during and after the campaign.

3.8. Endline evaluation

Endline assessment of the Program Y implementation in target schools was planned to be conducted at the end of the school year 2019/2020 in high schools via pen-paper method. However, the COVID-19 lockdown has challenged CARE and partners to find new means of implementation. School principals, teachers and other school staff have been highly devoted and worked jointly with CARE and partner organizations to find online solutions and engage students to fill in the questionnaires. With some delays, the endline assessment was successfully carried out in all target schools using a google form of questionnaires, google classrooms, and other platforms used by schools.



The endline assessment examined the effects of project activities on views regarding gender relations; health of young men and women, including mental health; use of psychoactive substances; knowledge about sexual reproductive health; experience of young people who suffered and perpetrated violence. *In the endline research, 1895 participants (853 young men and 1042 young women) from all project target schools where there was intervention filled in the survey.*

In the endline research, the number of respondents was 40% lower due to the pandemic which resulted in the closure of schools, where at least 20% of the students did not have access to internet.

The recommendations and findings of the endline assessment showed positive results of the project intervention and CARE and partners' contributions to changing the school environment and educating new generations of young people in the Balkans about healthier lifestyles, respecting gender equality and behaving less violently, which encourages us to continue with these efforts, even during the coronavirus pandemic.

3.9. Social Norms Campaigns and COVID-19

Social media campaigns are not a novelty in the YMI project – every partner designs its own way to implement an activity and every partner follows regional YMI campaign guidelines adjusting them to the specific context. The use of social media tools and platforms has been present since the beginning of the project, but in these particular circumstances, partners had a more serious task – to adapt their campaigns to the COVID-19 situation, to remain up-to-date and relevant, and of course, to continue with all the important activities.

During the pandemic, when everyone started working and implementing activities online, partners almost immediately followed the pace, thematically dividing campaigns into various categories:



COVID-19 related campaign used in order to promote safety measures and physical health. These kinds of activities used social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook in order to deliver important messages about washing hands, keeping distance, and wearing facemasks. Youth Power from Mostar, AfS from Tirana, YMCA together with SIT from Kosovo promoted safety measure with photos of their volunteers wearing PPE.

Program Y - COVID 19 adapted campaigns were created from existing Program Y content which was tailored to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. These campaigns were implemented by XY Association from Sarajevo, “Be a Man” club from Sarajevo, Perpetuum Mobile from Banja Luka, Youth Power from Mostar, and Status M with the creation of educative cards deconstructing the gender roles and expectations in crisis.



Social campaigns designed to remind the public about increased **cases of violence**, due to long-term isolation, lockdowns, and higher levels of stress. These kinds of campaigns were implemented by XY Association in Sarajevo, AFS from Tirana and SIT from Pristina, addressing the problems of domestic abuse and the safety of women and girls during the pandemic.



Mental health related campaigns were designed to emphasize the importance of mental health in a time when everyone’s biggest concern is physical health. The promotion of healthy lifestyles was also a big part of these campaigns, which served as a reminder that alcohol and substance abuse will not bring joy and stress relief. Innovative approaches came from the Be a Man Club in Sarajevo, Youth Power, Center E8, and Perpetuum Mobile.



Partners shared video materials, animations, photos and instructions via social media, on how to protect themselves and others, as well as important places for seeking assistance and help. This type of content was used for raising awareness on important topics that could have been neglected during the state of emergency. Social media has an enormous influence on young people, so YMI partners enhanced its online presence to spread the important messages.



No one is alone, even in these extraordinary and confusing times.

The stress and isolation are not an excuse for violence, and finally mental health is equally important as physical health.

During the period March-July, partners organized 57 online campaigns that directly engaged **41,543 participants**. Out of this number, **8145** people were engaged in specially tailored campaigns created by partners to send strong messages related to #StayatHome and COVID-19 prevention measures, and created promotional materials such as masks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has motivated CARE and partners to use all previous campaigns and adapt them to the current situation, thus all partners used previous “Are You OK?” and “React as a Human” campaigns to discuss mental health, the position of young people during quarantine, and to raise awareness of domestic violence and gender-based violence as well as to help young people cope with the crisis.

Under the coordination of SMART Kolektiv, all partners have worked together to find ways to support young people and communities during the crisis. In addition, social norms campaigns provided a window of opportunity to adjust to the current circumstances caused by COVID-19 and reach target beneficiaries. The YMI has used the latest developed campaign “Turn ON Knowledge, Turn OFF Hate” to help and support young people in self-isolation during this time of global crisis. The main idea behind the campaign was to promote prosocial behavior among young people in high schools (ages 14-20) by setting examples of good behavior and breaking stereotypes that cause extreme attitudes and behavior, thus diverting young people from risky or extreme behavior.



Conclusions & Lessons Learned





4. Conclusions & Lessons Learned

The ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 has had a major influence on YMI activities, since all of the project targeted countries were under complete lockdown during the period March-May, and most of them are currently under safety and prevention measures that include partial curfews, minor restriction of movement and other civic liberties, including social and cultural gatherings and events. Since the project activities mainly focus on working with youth in communities and educational institutions across the region, the COVID-19 crisis has significantly impacted the project implementation.

The YMI has proved again that its approach is resilient and adaptable to the given context. The YMI was created for young people, to respond to the needs of young people, wherever young people may be. As already mentioned, although the COVID-19 outbreak has significantly affected project activities, it did not stop them. On the contrary, it inspired young people and partners to become innovative, to rethink and use youth designed solutions in order to create safe spaces for our participants.

The collective experience of YMI, represented in this case study, leads to the conclusion that YMI is highly resilient to crisis and driven by its motto – to work with youth and for youth in all times.

Here are the key lessons learned that hopefully might be applied to other contexts or similar types of crisis in the future:



Conclusions:

- The digitalization of activities that took place was an upgrade and expansion of the previous digital work. The quick adaptation was made possible due to CARE's long-term support and investment into partners' technical capacities and creative endeavors.
- All partners have over years established solid, trustworthy relationships with the main stakeholders, above all with the young people as the project's target group. Partners' knowledge and understanding of the key issues has enabled them to respond in an adequate manner to the needs of young people by introducing innovative online activities that have proved to be immensely successful.
- The expectations were set low, but CARE and partners have bravely entered the uncharted territory in terms of testing the approaches that work best which required high level of flexibility and "thinking on our feet".



Lessons Learned: Online World

- Constant communication and flexibility among CARE and partners brought space for innovation through a participatory approach.

- Online workshops and other activities cannot be seen as long-term solutions when it comes to changing attitudes and behaviors of young people via the YMI methodology, but rather as a successful addition to the field work in the school environment. New systematic guidelines should be developed for online modes of working with youth.
- Conducting online evaluations should be considered a secondary solution, since there is no proof that it can completely replace field evaluations.
- Online means of communication save costs of organizing events in the field and enable reaching more participants from different communities and countries.
- The biggest burden of online adaptation was carried by the YMI project staff and BMC members in terms of adaptation, content creation and implementation, which has to be considered in future planning and budgeting.
- After every intensive implementation of online activities, lasting 3-4 weeks, saturation can be felt among beneficiaries as well staff implementing the project, thus one should carefully plan in order to avoid the risk of burnout and overall exhaustion. The same intensity is not something that should be regularly expected.
- Online activities brought bigger online presence and visibility of the project and partners' activities.



Lessons learned: Context and Institutional Capacities

- In crisis, institutions tend to close themselves even more and focus only on main priorities which impact the overall project implementation plans; existing models for working in schools are not adapted to online use and the implementation was successful where school principals, teachers and ministries seized the opportunity for innovation during crisis and introduced youth-led models of work.
- Beside workshop micro-organization instructions, handout and teaching techniques are not in line with the new schooling format, which is something to be considered in the future.
- It is necessary to give young people more space and opportunities to express their creativity and ideas, and consider them as key actors in developing new online tools and digital solutions.
- Reaching youth in juvenile centers and youth of lower economic status that did not have access to internet during lockdown was impossible, thus the marginalized groups were even more marginalized in crisis.



YMI partner organizations proved to be reliable partners to educational systems and schools' staff where they offered their expertise and helped teachers to respond efficiently to the needs of young people during the coronavirus pandemic.



Partner Organizations



Act for Society

Tirana, Albania

www.actforsocietycenter.org



Association XY

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

www.asocijacijaxy.org



Center E8

Belgrade, Serbia

www.e8.org.rs



SIT - Center for Counselling, Social Services and Research

Prishtina, Kosovo*

www.sit-ks.org



YMCA in Kosovo

Prishtina, Kosovo*

www.ymcakosovo.com



Perpetuum Mobile

Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina

 www.pm.rs.ba

SMART Kolektiv

Belgrade, Serbia

 smartkolektiv.org

Status M

Zagreb, Croatia

 www.status-m.hr

Youth Power

Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina

 eng.youth-power.org

Youth Educational Club - Synergy


Kosovska Mitrovica, Kosovo*



 www.oek-sinergija.org


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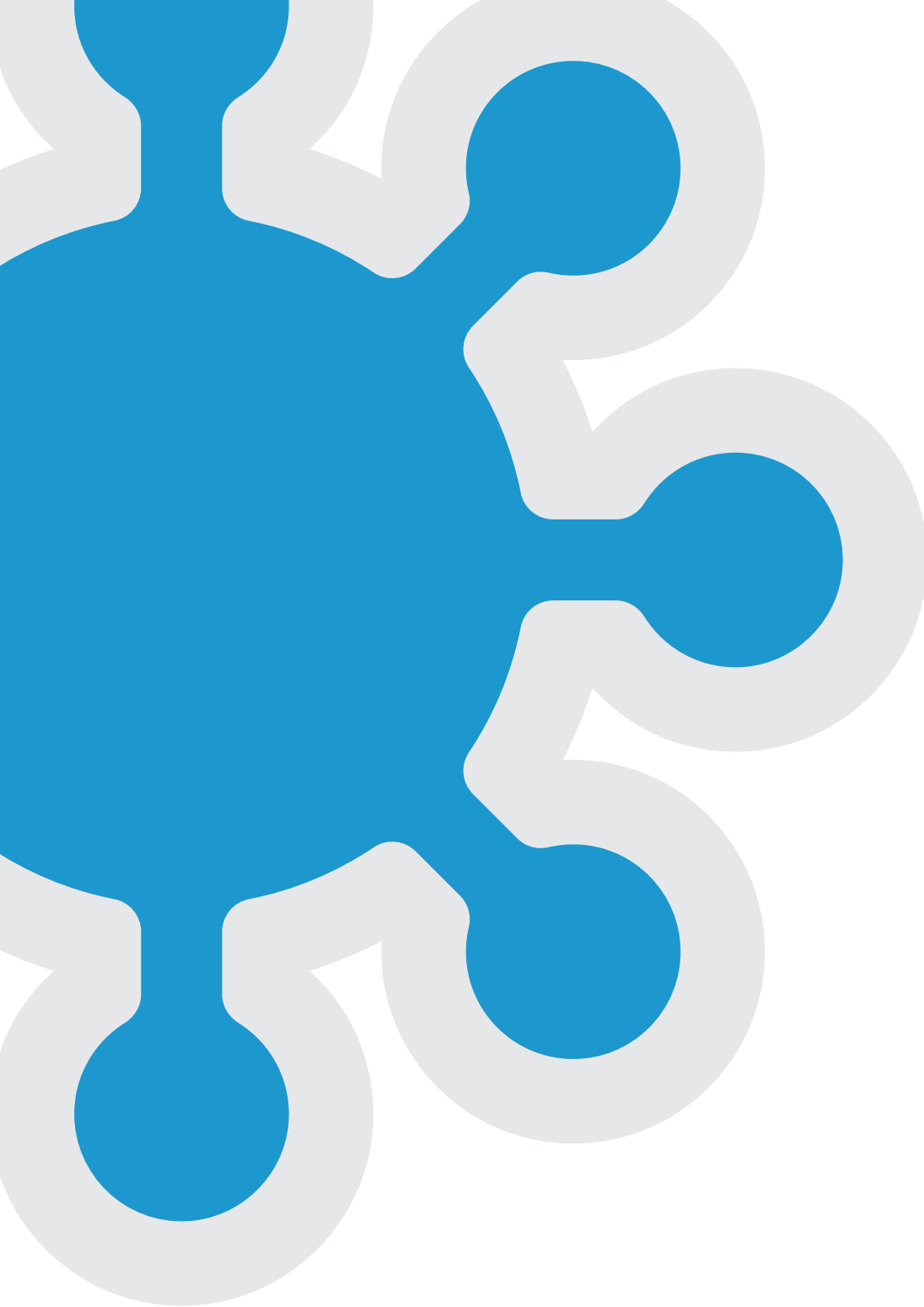


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