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SOUTH SUDANESE YOUTH AGENCY IN A TIME OF COVID-19.

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IN SUMMARY

- The emerging picture and activities of youth in South Sudan challenges and transcends the uncritical conceptions and imagery of young South Sudanese as a characteristically violent, dangerous and criminal constituency.
- Although they are precluded from social, economic, cultural and political structures of power, young people continue to create and consolidate spaces to exercise and exhibit their agency.
- Knowing that a significant population is offline, youth peace activists in South Sudan have painted wall murals depicting COVID-19 preventive measures, including paintings of people wearing facemasks or washing their hands.
- The COVID-19 crisis is characteristically paradoxical; it exposes the brazen failures of extant formal leadership structures on the one hand, and enables leadership emergence from the least expected constituencies on the other hand.

The term 'African youth' has been and continues to be mis-characterised by connotations of violent and disruptive tendencies. The picture of young people who are inherently entangled in different forms of political violence is often overhyped and it overshadows their commendable contributions to peace, security, and development in society. Worse still are those who come from contexts of protracted conflict like South Sudan, where the chequered political-security history blurs the potential and actual contributions of its vibrant, young population to peace and development. During the vicissitude wrought by COVID-19, however, the overlooked and underestimated youth of South Sudan have emerged as innovators and self-empowered political actors. Young South Sudanese are creating new ways of spreading awareness and sensitising the population about the virus, including protective measures. They are also engaging the transitional government on pending state issues (peace process). This op-ed x-rays the initiatives by the [Juba Open Space](#) and [Ana Taban](#) in response to the COVID-19 outbreak as examples of youth innovations in South Sudan.

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic came at a time when South Sudan had just formed a transitional government ([R-TGoNU](#)), a key step in the implementation of the 2018 [Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan](#) (R-ARCSS). This agreement provides new hope for peace and stability in the country, however, the beginning of the transitional period was marred by numerous challenges, especially political disagreements and human development deficits such as poor infrastructure, an underdeveloped healthcare system, social and economic dependency, poor communication systems and low literacy rates. Furthermore, the recent UN [Global Report on Food Crises](#) ranked South Sudan among one of the five countries most at risk of famine in 2020, posing a huge threat to food security and livelihoods. With the start of the rainy season, more health related challenges are expected such as the outbreak of cholera, which is endemic in South Sudan due to many risk factors such as poor sewerage systems and lack of access to clean water for the majority of the population. Amid these challenges, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbates the vulnerability of South Sudan and its citizens.

As of [15th July, 2020](#), South Sudan had a total of 2,153 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 41 deaths. There are concerns that the situation might drastically deteriorate due to poor enforcement and adherence to the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health, and the South Sudan National COVID-19 Steering Committee. Most local markets are still overcrowded with people running businesses as usual. Pre-COVID-19 socialization practices persist despite directives to adhere to physical distance measures. Evening

rituals of playing cards, sipping tea and smoking shisha remain the norm. This has been perpetuated by the collective denial and misperceptions regarding the virus; most people believe that the virus is not real or hold the myth that COVID-19 cannot survive the hot weather of South Sudan. This underlines the importance of continuous sensitization.

In recognition of the need for a shift in perceptions and attitudes towards the virus, actors, within communities especially youth and youth groups, have emerged to raise awareness and sensitize the population. Youth leaders such as Wani Michael wrote an [open letter](#) to the president advocating for the free flow of factual information about the virus. Several other young people have taken the initiative to help those in their communities. Although they are precluded from social, economic, cultural, and political structures of power, young people continue to create and consolidate spaces to exercise and exhibit their agency. The spaces symbolic and instrumental to young South Sudanese; the spaces are free from the gaze and control of formal systems and structures that have marginalised young people from mainstream (official) decision-making processes.

The [Junub Open Space \(JOS\)](#), a youth-led community-based organisation that engages in peacebuilding through education and knowledge sharing among the youth, is an example of the spaces and platforms created and used by youth to advance their agency. The JOS, in partnership with Voice Post Organisation and with the support of the Ministry of Health, initiated an innovative information-sharing tool called the **Blue Messenger Bicycle (BMB)**. The bicycle is designed in a way that it uses megaphones, amplifiers, and batteries to pass information on the coronavirus in the streets and neighbourhoods of Juba. One fully mounted [blue messenger bicycle](#) can reach up to 200 households in a day. The BMB initially started with three fully mounted bicycles but received a donation of 15 bicycles from the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health to increase its fleet and enhance its outreach.

Another initiative is the [Ana Taban](#) a youth artist collective that initiated the [#wagifcorona](#) (meaning stop corona) campaign on social media. The campaign urges people to wear masks, wash their hands and maintain physical distancing. It also aims to [counter misinformation](#) on the virus, such as the allegation that it is a government money making scheme or the unproven view that COVID-19 can be cured by a local brew. The artist collective has previously used social media campaigns such as [#AnaTaban](#) expressing frustration about the armed conflict and advocating for change in South Sudan; the [#Bloodshedfree2017](#) calling for an end to the renewed violence of the civil war in 2016; and the [#SouthSudanIsWatching](#) campaign that engaged several African dignitaries during the High-level Revitalization Forum (HLRF) in February 2018.

Knowing that a significant population is offline, youth peace activists in South Sudan have painted wall murals depicting COVID-19 preventive measures, including paintings of people wearing facemasks or washing their hands. Youth activists also conduct radio interviews as a means of increasing awareness and sensitization the population about the virus. Furthermore, some of the group members have been engaged in making masks and soap for the South Sudanese refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya.

Some analysts have pinpointed that COVID-19 exacerbates [social issues](#). Accordingly, it has brought to the fore the slow implementation of the R-ARCSS, which is reminiscent of previous attempts by the political elite to maintain their grasp on power and consequently defer citizens' [access to justice](#). Capitalizing on the digital space and utilizing [art as a tool](#) to discuss the prevailing issues in South Sudan, *Ana Taban* released a [video](#) on their social media platforms. The video expresses their hopes and expectations after the signing of the peace agreement, as well as their discontent on the delays in implementation. With their identities disguised by a face painting of the South Sudan national flag, the youth collective calls out inadequate leadership and warns about the severe implications of delaying or failing to implement the R-ARCSS. *Ana Taban* is a variant of how young people across Africa are manifesting their agency by leveraging technology and advocacy campaigns to envision and mobilise for positive change and a 'new order' in their respective countries.

The COVID-19 crisis is characteristically paradoxical; it exposes the brazen failures of extant formal leadership structures on the one hand, and enables [leadership emergence](#) from the least expected constituencies on the other hand. This duality is well visible in South Sudan; failure of extant leadership is seen in the cycle of violence and insecurity and poor responses by the government to COVID-19. Still, youth in South Sudan have emerged as leaders capable of offering solutions by campaigning, sensitizing, and mobilizing the population. It is remarkable that young South Sudanese manifest this form of agency in the context of little or no investment in human capital and poor governance. Youth South Sudanese are also carving out spaces of engagement and influence outside of officialdom using innovative, context-aware communication tools that are working to benefit the citizenry. The emerging picture and activities of youth in South Sudan challenges and transcends the uncritical conceptions and imagery of young South Sudanese as a characteristically violent, dangerous and criminal constituency.

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