

## **Joint declaration**

### **Protecting health and social wellbeing of young people during and beyond moments of crisis**

Covid-19 has created the largest health and socio-economic crisis of our generation. Many health systems were devastated due to the hasty restrictive measures implemented, attempting to soothe the consequences of the pandemic. Covid-19 had a negative impact on the provision of basic Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) care of young people, and access to family planning, antenatal care, and prevention from violence became challenging. There were clear indications around the entire world that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it impossible to obtain reliable information on a variety of issues related to SRH and rights, as well as information about provision of related services by the institutions. Misinformation about the topics of sexuality education for young people was rampant in the media and due to the closure of schools, access to information on these topics in the education system was limited. As a result of social isolation, the mental health of young people suffered greatly, especially of those in vulnerable and marginalised communities. The pandemic has only exacerbated the social stigma and discrimination of sexual rights, with the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian youth and LGBTI communities being particularly affected. Violence and online harassment against girls increased, while the system in many countries was unable to respond adequately to young people's needs and provide the care they deserved. The pandemic only demonstrated at great lengths how fragile the systems are and the extent to which countries were not prepared to cope with the health crisis.

Strong political and financial commitment and collaboration between different stakeholders is needed to strengthen our systems and improve access to health and social care.

We, representatives of educational and health institutions,  
We, representatives of civil society organisations,  
We, young people from the Western Balkans,

- **Confirm our determination to **work with and for young people!****

- by **including young people in decision making** processes concerning their own SRH needs and rights and by creating and promoting opportunities for their voices to be heard;
- by **respecting and supporting young people's choices** and place the interest of children and young people at the centre of our work;
- by **creating an environment of transparency, equal partnership and trust** which are important conditions for their health and education and for an improved access for young people to the institutions.

- **Confirm our determination to **advocate for sustainable, integrated and youth-friendly solutions,** built on acquired scientific and evidence-based knowledge and guided by verified and credible sources of information.**

- by **strengthening an institutional and political climate** that is supportive for the implementation of science-based and proven effective CSE and youth health programs;
- by **strengthening society's resilience** to inaccurate and distorted information about SRHR;

- by **collecting evidence and exchanging information** with third parties such as other local and international institutions, to synergise knowledge, synchronise accelerated institutional learning and encourage social development;
  - by helping **improve the health and social care services for young people** and the adaptation of services to the specific context of young people and the area where they live and grow up in;
  - by advocating for the **introduction of new health service packages** for young people within primary health care based on their needs.
- **Will actively work towards education that is in line with the developmental, health, sociocultural needs of children and young people, guided by their best interests and the principle of "no one left behind".**
- by actively working towards **youth knowledge and health literacy** and ensuring equal access for all to this;
  - by **raising public awareness** of youth rights and rights protection mechanisms;
  - by **fighting against prejudices and misinformation** that hinder progress and prevent the integration of an age-appropriate, comprehensive, science-based model of formal sexuality education.
- **Will defend human dignity and human rights, especially the rights of girls, young people, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian youth, young people living in rural areas, and other socially-vulnerable and underserved groups.**
- by **promoting zero tolerance** towards stigma, discrimination and violence through our work;
  - by **recognising that the sexual and reproductive health of young people** is neither a luxury nor a privilege and defending that all young people, regardless of colour, race, nationality, religion or gender, have equal opportunities to enjoy and exercise their rights;
  - by equally supporting and defending the implementation of **systems that address the mental health** of young people, especially in periods of crisis;
  - by **welcoming innovative and evidence-based mediation and outreach programs**, that contribute to improving access and availability of SRH services to marginalised and socially disadvantaged populations;
  - by **eradicating socio-cultural factors** that marginalise or minimise the importance of young people's SRHR.

We welcome the exceptional IPPF EN and regional partners consortium (health and educational institutions, young people and civil society organisations) established within the context of the YVYC project that actively contributes to the recovery from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to the creation of youth and system resilience towards the future and possible new crises.

We therefore support and sign up to the above: