

In the last couple of years, societies have been facing challenges in many different fields, from climate change to gender equality. Now more than ever, we have to face a new challenge and overcome a widespread crisis together, due to a new and unknown coronavirus which has caused a global pandemic. This is affecting both our mental and physical health, our economies and social relations. It is only through a united response to this situation that we will once again enjoy what we were used to do. What surprised me most was the virulence of this virus, regardless of age, which has spread to all continents without exception.

Analysing recent data, we can surely affirm that middle-aged along with elderly people were the most vulnerable to contagion and still are. Youngsters seem either not to be affected by this crisis or to better deal with all related effects. In the first months of the epidemic, there were different and conflicting opinions about the best response in tackling the challenge, uncertainty and few effective precautions. However, in many European countries, including my beloved Italy, people, as well as myself, had never thought of what their future might hold: personal rights reduced, new measures of containment, lockdowns, face masks and online meetings.

I will never forget two dates, which have become central in this past year and forced me to completely change my lifestyle full of projects and international relations. Firstly, March 5th will be remembered by my fellow students due to nationwide school closure, which we welcomed as a lucky measure to dedicate ourselves to our extracurricular interests, activities and relax after an intense semester. Secondly, March 8th, the day Italy announced the first national lockdown, is a symbol of uncertainty and fear, due to measures restricting the most important right: freedom of movement. I was in Northern Italy for study when I realised I had to go back to my home city, as otherwise I risked remaining stuck and having to isolate without my family. Also, until then, I had never felt so vulnerable through my busy schedule. Something normal as travelling by train or bus suddenly became dangerous and noteworthy!

Moreover, after that trip and the last days of school, I did not know I was going to stay home for more than three months, could not meet my friends or above all celebrate my seventeenth birthday and, presumably and unfortunately, my eighteenth as well. Although the world has entered a new phase, where social distancing has become the new rule, many young people, including myself, got used to this new hectic life. It meant students, regardless of age, had to adapt to a new way of socialising, studying and staying fit. However, we need to bear in mind that, while there are many students succeeding in their goals despite COVID, there is a growing part of youths developing anxiety and bad habits too. Throughout these months, which marked the beginning of a new “era”, I reckon it was us, younger generations, who were the most affected. How?

There are many possible answers to this question. First things, how many times have we heard of national and international support to children and teenagers? Not many. I have not seen a big and meaningful leap towards a resolution safeguarding the future of our countries. Then, did politicians forget to involve youngsters in deciding future policies, regarding sectors that are extremely important to us, such as education and sport?

In my view, young peers need to be questioned to come up with fair decisions. Some local and international organisations have tried to involve the youth generation in thinking of potential responses to the crisis. In addition, just now, many associations have begun protesting for inclusion and equality across schools - indeed, many pupils feel disadvantaged due to poor internet connection. A good example of research on the impact of COVID is the “Growing up under COVID-19” project, supported by Ecorys and the University of Huddersfield (UK). I am proud to participate in this study investigating how social life and habits have changed during the pandemic, cutting across different issues such as climate change and Black Lives Matter. In this project, we are trying to interview as many people as possible to get a comprehensive overview of recommendations for action needed over the next few years. What makes this

project different from typical research is the researchers who are working on it: students aged between 14 and 19! An outstanding experience, which I really find beneficial thanks to the creation of a wide network of young people from four different countries; we are using this opportunity to meet online and discuss a range of topics. For instance, I am now studying how this pandemic has affected the Italian education system.

The result? It is possible to see how almost nothing has been done since the end of the previous school year, except from providing innovative desks with wheels, which in my opinion are useless. In fact, Italian students, especially those graduating, have not experienced any substantial improvements in infrastructures or exam preparation. Therefore, despite a situation of social distance leading to isolation, most students have teamed up to request more information and guidelines from the Ministry of Education.

We know we have undergone difficult times, but today is our day, and I am confident that my peers will shape our lives together with these kinds of actions. Adults are trusting us, even if it is not evident enough! It is increasingly clear that young people need to be involved in decision-making processes, so this may be the occasion to finally start!