

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE FRONTLINES

HOW AN INITIATIVE TO ENGAGE 100,000 OF SENEGAL'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS HAS IMPROVED COVID-19 RESPONSE AND COUNTRY CAPACITY BUILDING

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic will have lasting global impacts, but it presents greater obstacles for low- and middle-income countries, and the rapid transition to distance learning has further disproportionately affected those nations most struggling to improve their education systems.

In Senegal, the poverty rate, educational quality, and information and communications technology adoption rates have limited the capacity of the nation on its journey to self-reliance.¹ The impact of COVID-19 has added stress, with schools, universities, and research institutions ordered to close in mid-March.² Though the Ministry of National Education launched a national effort to deliver instructional material at all education levels via television and radio, which enabled some learners to keep learning, albeit on a diminished scale, many more were hindered by inequitable access to televisions, Internet, and other e-learning technology.³

Institutions were not the only partner in the nation's response to COVID-19. Students at the nation's public universities came together to assist with the transition through the organization *100,000 Students Against COVID-19*.⁴ This case study examines the practices and impacts of this initiative and showcases

KEY FEATURES

Location: Senegal

Project/Program Name: 100 Mille Etudiants Contre COVID-19 (100,000 students against COVID-19)

Initiative Website:
<http://www.etudiantscontrec19.sn/>

Case Theme: Youth Engagement in Higher Education

¹ "Journey to Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps: Senegal," USAID, accessed August 2020, <https://selfreliance.usaid.gov/country/senegal>.

² "Senegal: COVID-19 crisis will have a terrible impact on the country's education system," Education International, April 27, 2020, <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16751/senegal-covid-19-crisis-will-have-a-terrible-impact-on-the-country-s-education-system>.

³ Rokhaya Fall Diawara and Tidiane Sall, "COVID 19: how Senegal intends to ensure #LearningNeverStops," World Education Blog, April 3, 2020, <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/04/03/covid-19-how-senegal-intends-to-ensure-learningneverstops/>.

⁴ Translated from the French, 100 Mille Etudiants Contre COVID-19, <http://www.etudiantscontrec19.sn/>.

how a positive youth development approach⁵ can be utilized in higher education to provide youth the tools to leverage their agency and contribution to respond to current and future crises.

USAID’s Youth Development Policy empowers similar initiatives in pursuit of its primary goal: “Improve the capacities and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to and benefit from more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities and nations.”⁶

APPROACH

The *100,00 Students Against COVID-19* initiative created a platform for youth civic engagement on COVID-19. Developing youth’s assets, agency, and contribution, and holistically fostering an enabling environment across the positive youth development framework is key to increasing civic engagement at the local and national level. The role of young citizens in fighting the spread of a pandemic was previously seen as a success during the Congolese response to Ebola.⁷

Through this Senegalese youth-serving initiative, emerging youth leaders are identified and nascent societal shifts are embraced as part of a larger discussion of the nation’s development. The initiative was founded through a consortium of eight public universities in Senegal.⁸ The initiative is spearheaded by the Virtual University of Senegal, as well as the University of Gaston Berger St Louis; a faculty director at the latter coordinated all efforts.⁹

The initiative used volunteerism and commitment to national well-being as motivating factors for engagement, fostering partnerships not only with the country’s public universities but also with private universities, government, finance, healthcare, and development stakeholders across the nation. Bringing

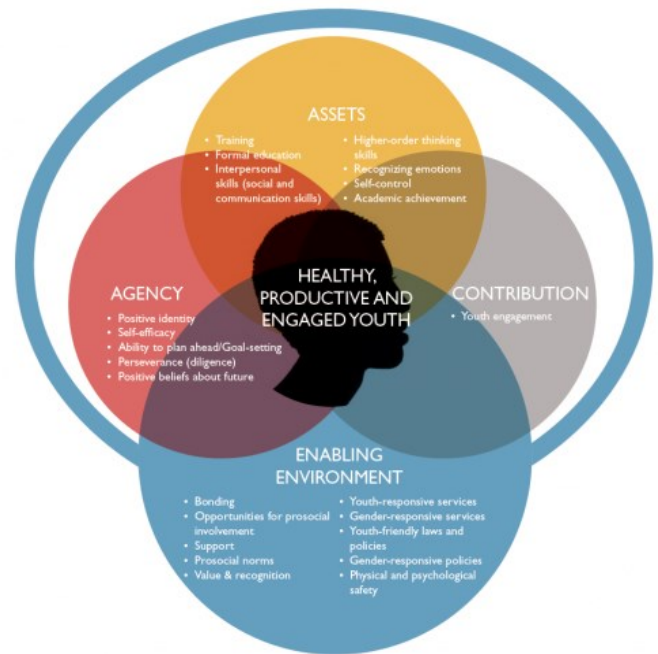


Figure 1. Graphic of the PYD framework. A larger version of this image can be found on the [YouthPower website](#).

⁵ “Promoting Positive Youth Development,” YouthPower2, accessed August 2020, <https://www.youthpower.org/positive-youth-development>.

⁶ “Youth in Development Policy,” USAID, accessed August 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/policy/youth>.

⁷ In 2019, WHO reported decreases in Ebola cases in regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo following engagement of youth leaders of pressure groups, religious associations, and other societies. This community engagement and prioritization of youth became a pillar of the WHO response to the disease. “Youth speaking to youth about dodging bullets and Ebola in Democratic Republic of the Congo,” WHO/DRC, April 3, 2020, <https://www.afro.who.int/news/youth-speaking-youth-about-dodging-bullets-and-ebola-democratic-republic-congo>.

⁸ Virtual University of Senegal; Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar; Gaston-Berger University of Saint-Louis; Alioune Diop University of Bambey; University of Thiès; Assane Seck University of Ziguinchor; University of Sine Saloum El Hadji Ibrahima Niass; Amadou Mahtar Mbow University. Private universities in the country have also been invited to support and encourage their students to join, though secondary research does not yield information on to what extent any have engaged with the program.

⁹ “Mame Penda Ba: Bio,” The Social Science Research Council, accessed August 2020, <https://www.ssrc.org/fellows/6E41AB8B-3F7E-E811-80CB-005056AB0BD9/>.

together these various groups strengthened, legitimized, and sustained outcomes. Funding and engagement from leaders across each of these institutions helped the initiative achieve sustainable success.

The initiative has four primary objectives, communicated on its webpage (translated from the original French):¹⁰

1. **Community Surveillance:** Initiate community-based surveillance by training and taking responsibility for sensitizing those around them to self-surveillance; send alerts to health authorities through toll-free numbers and health staff in huts, posts, centers, and hospitals.
2. **Awareness and Prevention:** Extend awareness and prevention activities as part of the response to the disease by: relaying the right information on social networks, fighting against rumors and disinformation, and managing the “infodemic;” promoting the viral pandemic slogan “Stay at home!”; and developing information and advisories in all local languages.
3. **Identification of Opinion Leaders:** Identify influential local community leaders who are capable of communicating risks, particularly through community radio stations.
4. **Innovation and Initiative:** Share new ideas and experiences from elsewhere, and develop practices more suited to Senegal and its cultural, social, and health environments.

The Health Emergency Operation Center serves as the primary beneficiary and dispatcher of the youth volunteers.¹¹ The center is a government agency, launched in 2014 in response to the Ebola crisis. It was designed to mitigate the impact of future infectious diseases and improve the health system’s response time. The center received support from USAID and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2016.¹²

Students register as volunteers via the initiative’s webpage. After signing an ethical compliance document and taking training provided by the center’s professionals and students specializing in medicine, pharmacology, public health, biology, psychology, and epidemiology, volunteers engage with local public health efforts.¹³

The initiative maintains a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, as well as utilizing its own easily navigable website¹⁴ for dissemination of relevant information such as public health information, seminars/webinars, and government communications. Students are encouraged to further their own involvement in the local community by either becoming influencers and distributing this information

¹⁰ “Homepage,” 100 Mille étudiants contre le COVID 19, <http://www.etudiantscontrec19.sn/>.

¹¹ Translated from original French, Centre des Operations d’Urgence Sanitaire

¹² The Health Emergencies Operations Center (COUS) of Senegal’s Ministry of Health and Social Action (MSAS) launched community-based surveillance (CBS) in 2016, with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and WHO. Using funds from Pillar IV of USAID’s Global Health Security Agenda to support Senegal’s post-Ebola response, MEASURE Evaluation provided technical support to implement the pilot stage of CBS in four districts in the regions of Saint Louis and Tambacounda. These regions border countries also affected by the 2013 Ebola outbreak. This initiative aimed to prevent infectious disease epidemics by reducing the lag between the onset of symptoms and the health system’s response. “On the Lookout for Infectious Diseases: Experiences from a Community-Based Surveillance Pilot Activity in Senegal,” MEASURE Evaluation, May 2018, <https://www.measureevaluation.org/resources/publications/fs-18-279>.

¹³ “Homepage,” 100 Mille étudiants contre le COVID 19, <http://www.etudiantscontrec19.sn/>.

¹⁴ Ibid

(through social media or word of mouth) or by finding and engaging with local community influencers and accessing their networks to increase the spread of this information.

In evaluating *100,000 Students Against COVID-19*, it is clear that the initiative offers opportunities for increased youth contribution and agency in addressing their nation's challenges. Through the COVID-19 crisis, Senegal's youth demonstrated their value to the survival and development of the nation.

CHALLENGES

While some challenges facing the initiative are not unique to Senegal (e.g. disinformation campaigns, immigration and mobility challenges of the infected, or limited financial sources for continued economic livelihood), *100,000 Students Against COVID-19* must also counter challenges stemming from digital accessibility and usage, governance and funding, and disparate healthcare supplies.¹⁵

According to data collected by the World Bank, only 46 percent of Senegal's population used the Internet in 2019.¹⁶ While *100,000 Students Against COVID-19* developed digital content to help vulnerable communities, the lack of Internet access is a roadblock. Allowing in-person volunteering is important to reaching rural and dispersed populations. Adequate budget planning and having a forward-looking strategy is also a challenge.¹⁷ The inclusion of private universities, private organizational partners, and local community donations offers new funding to add to government sources.

Despite advance planning and early warning systems put in place by the Health Emergency Operations Center after the Ebola outbreak, COVID-19 presents a significantly new challenge to the Government of Senegal in stemming the spread. Disparate healthcare facilities, resources, and personnel require strengthening and repurposing to mitigate the spread, not just among city populations around Dakar and St. Louis, but also in the more rural and cultural communities of the country.¹⁸

The initiative designed an awareness campaign to reach people in these regions and provide them with simple training on effective prevention measures in combating the virus and by reaching previously unreached populations.

¹⁵ Daouda Seck & Mthoba Chapi, "Covid-19 and Fake News: Experiences from Senegal," Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, July 20, 2020, <https://africa.fnst.org/content/covid-19-and-fake-news-experiences-senegal>; Cheikh Sokhna, "Senegal faces the coronavirus disease –19 challenge," *Travel Med Infect Dis.* 2020 September-October; 37: 101687; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7195138/>; "Senegal COVID-19 Response Gets Additional Financial Boost from World Bank," The World Bank, June 19, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/19/senegal-covid-19-response-gets-additional-financial-boost-from-world-bank>.

¹⁶ "Individuals Using the Internet (% of population): Senegal," The World Bank, accessed August 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=SN>.

¹⁷ "Senegal's universities: what needs to happen to avoid stagnation," *The Conversation*, March 5, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/senegals-universities-what-needs-to-happen-to-avoid-stagnation-130269>.

¹⁸ Cheikh Sokhna, "Senegal faces the coronavirus disease –19 challenge," *Travel Med Infect Dis.* 2020 September-October; 37: 101687; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7195138/>.

LESSONS LEARNED

The *100,00 Students Against COVID-19* initiative succeeded in raising awareness of the virus' impact, increasing the availability of public health resources and prevention knowledge,¹⁹ and prompting a surge of innovation and engagement by the nation's higher education students. Efforts launched or led by learners included:

- Students at the University of Gaston Berger in St. Louis, the host institution for the initiative, designing and producing visors and new alcoholic gel sanitizers that were distributed to local communities.²⁰
- Students at the Ecole Supérieure Polytechnique (ESP), a part of the University Cheik Anta de Diop Dakar, inventing a robot for use in local hospitals to bring meals and necessary items to patients and take temperature or blood pressure without doctors entering the room.²¹
- Students at the University of Thies designing, prototyping, and testing a fully automatic sink and hand dryer.²²

The young leaders found and fostered through this initiative are developing the skills and understanding required of leaders within a nation (assets) and embracing this charge to take ownership over their own futures (agency). Youth involvement in the initiative is increasing the ability of the Senegalese government to respond to this pandemic, increasing the sense of engagement and commitment among the nation's young workforce. This ultimately increases Senegal's resilience and capacity.²³

A few lessons from this case study include:

- **Active communication and engagement with educators, communities, and other stakeholders is essential to understanding local needs, generating buy-in for decisions, and building trust within communities.** *100,000 Students Against COVID-19* engaged a host of actors from within the higher education system in Senegal as well as local communities to deliver updates, information, and support in combating COVID-19. Locally led and owned communication efforts provide information in a way that the community can understand and respond to. This creates more effective crisis response messaging and engages social networks more meaningfully in generating positive response outcomes.

¹⁹ Facebook, Twitter, and the initiative's official website serve as platforms through which video and document content is actively shared and reshared throughout the network of students and community leaders in Senegal. <https://twitter.com/100ketudiantsn>; <https://www.facebook.com/100ketudiantsn/>; <http://www.etudiantscontrec19.sn/>.

²⁰ "Saint- Louis : Des étudiants produisent des visières pour le personnel médical et du gel hydroalcoolique....," SocialNetLink.org, May 7, 2020, <https://www.socialnetlink.org/2020/05/07/saint-louis-des-etudiants-produisent-des-visieres-pour-le-personnel-medical-et-du-gel-hydroalcoolique/>.

²¹ "Sénégal : "Docteur Car", un robot multitâches pour lutter contre le Covid-19," AfricaNews, May 21, 2020, <https://fr.africanews.com/2020/05/13/senegal-docteur-car-un-robot-multitaches-pour-lutter-contre-le-covid-19/>

²² Aziz Malick Diallo, "Coronavirus, Sénégal : des étudiants mettant au point un lavabo automatique," LeNouvelAfrik.com, April 28, 2020, <https://www.afrik.com/coronavirus-senegal-des-etudiants-mettant-au-point-un-lavabo-automatique>.

²³ Students at ESP claim their involvement in fighting this crisis has increased their sense of social responsibility and patriotism and reinforced the ties that connect their education to the public good. "Sénégal : 'Docteur Car', un robot multitâches pour lutter contre le Covid-19," AfricaNews, May 21, 2020, <https://fr.africanews.com/2020/05/13/senegal-docteur-car-un-robot-multitaches-pour-lutter-contre-le-covid-19/>.

- **Youth have the capacity to be changemakers and invaluable assets to the success of a community's response in a crisis.** Through this initiative, Senegal's youth population was directly engaged in the country's response to COVID-19. Students received information on the virus, the risk of transmission, and mitigation strategies that would keep them and their community safe through virtual training. They were then challenged to disseminate this information through their social networks and heighten awareness of effective strategies to combat the spread. Finally, students were active in, in some cases leading, response efforts in their community through volunteer work and the creation of innovations addressing challenges posed by the virus.

The vision behind *100,000 Students Against COVID-19* directly aligns with that of Positive Youth Development: a healthy, productive, and engaged youth. However, while the initiative fosters improvement of two of the four key domains in Positive Youth Development (Contribution and Enabling Environment), there is an opportunity for additional planning and programmatic design to empower youth with increased skill development (Assets) and sense of personal agency. Investment in educational and social programs can continue to improve the human capital of Senegal's youth both before and during their higher education years. Imbued with skills, belief, and an environment that fosters and values engagement will improve the chances for future productivity, to react to and diffuse future crises, and opportunities as emerging leaders of country-wide development efforts.

In the words of Professor and Deputy Dean Mame Penda Ba, the COVID-19 crisis must be seized as an opportunity for the nation to design and implement a more just, equitable, and resilient society in the post-COVID-19 world.²⁴ The initiative she leads and the increase in youth civic engagement is certainly a strong step in that direction.

This case study was developed by Josh Dockser (Tufts University), a master's student participating in the Summer 2020 [Virtual Student Federal Service](#) internship program. Recommended citation:

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USAID is actively assisting countries that are affected by or at risk of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19. USAID is working directly with host country governments and through organizations responding on the ground to contain and combat the outbreak. For additional resources, please visit <https://www.edu-links.org/COVID-19>.

²⁴ "Impact de la Covid-19 et problématiques de genre : L'UVS et Plan international posent le débat, à travers un panel animé par des étudiants et de jeunes activists," UVS, June 26, 2020, <https://www.uvs.sn/impact-de-la-covid-19-et-problematiques-de-genre/>.