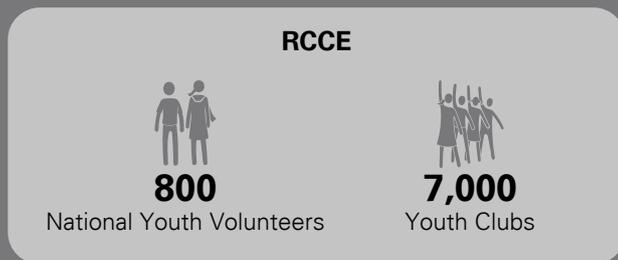


COMBATING COVID-19 STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION THROUGH YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



UNICEF West Bengal has been closely working with its partner, Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), under the Ministry of Sports & Youth Affairs, GoI since 2018 for engagement of young people in the prevention of child marriage and violence. Responding to the COVID-19 crisis across the state, the partnership has been instrumental in leveraging the pool of National Youth Volunteers (NYVs) and youth clubs for risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) on the one hand while on the other hand engaging with adolescents and young people and promoting their participation in the pandemic response.



In the initial phase of the outbreak, State officials, District Youth Coordinators (DYCs) from all districts and youth volunteers were directly trained by UNICEF on prevention, standard guidelines and protocols as well as addressing key child protection issues followed by another state level training in collaboration with the Health section. Youth members are rising up to meet the challenge of this pandemic across the state and working as an important state resource in mitigating risks and facilitating community outreach with necessary relief measures. They are using online platforms and digital media to share correct messages on COVID-19 prevention, key information on child protection issues and recommendations shared by the government. More than 80,000 young people have been reached so far through online/offline platforms with key messages on COVID-19 prevention and protection of children, thus fulfilling the four key action areas as part of the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action viz. Capacity, Participation, Services and Resources.

Taking into account the efficacy of this mechanism and the felt need to intervene in highly vulnerable

urban slums, UNICEF West Bengal in collaboration with the Department of Urban Development and Municipal Affairs, Government of West Bengal and KMC has planned a multi-sectoral response as part of which an initiative to combat stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19 will be undertaken through active engagement of youth in identified wards of Kolkata. Slum dwellers and informal settlers of Kolkata are not only most at risk of the pandemic due to overcrowded dwellings, but they are often discriminated against, stigmatised and treated separately since they are perceived as carriers of the coronavirus, thus fueling fear and denial of health services. UNICEF realised that youth represent a valuable resource and network during crises and emergencies and with the right training, they can effectively address stigma and discrimination related to the disease among communities. As part of this focused initiative, more than 50 youth members from Kolkata and Howrah were trained on 30th May and roll out in urban deprived areas will start from June 2020.

Additionally, a resource package in Bengali has been developed on youth actions for the prevention of stigma and discrimination and shared over digital platforms for their understanding and wider dissemination. An online poster competition with the theme 'Anti-stigma and discrimination' was organised in May 2020 in which more than 2,000 adolescents and youth sent entries and the best ones are being developed as posters. Various approaches are being adopted to reach out to a large number of people through means such as miking, wall and road paintings, and distributing IEC materials in the local language in order to make people aware about stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19.

In 2019, UNICEF had trained 90 youth volunteers from 12 districts on the prevention of child marriage and violence through street plays. Gearing up for the COVID-19 response, members from a Kolkata group developed short plays/songs etc. to create mass awareness around stigma and discrimination and ensured that these are disseminated for raising awareness around social stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19.

