

From 'Recovery' to 'Reimagination' in the face of Covid: YMCA 'Padare' talks discuss three big questions in July and August 2020

As the world came to a standstill due to the Covid-19 crisis, YMCAs around the world sprang into action. They responded to the most pressing needs of vulnerable communities by offering shelter, distributing food and supplies, checking people's wellbeing, and organizing emergency programs.

But YMCA leaders knew that providing immediate, one-time emergency response was not enough. The world had changed, and a global reflection about the future of the YMCA Movement was urgently needed.

Under the leadership and convening of the World Alliance of YMCAs, in July 185 YMCA staff and volunteers from local, regional, and national YMCAs – representing 56 countries from Albania to Zimbabwe – gathered in a series of virtual "Padares". Padare, a Shona word meaning meeting place, is a Zimbabwean tradition of people coming together to receive and share wisdom, especially concerning community problems.

The purpose of the YMCA Padares was to share wisdom, learning and knowledge to co-create a 'new and sustainable normal' for our YMCAs in the face of this crisis.

There were three Padare Groups addressing three different themes, and as traditional Zimbabwean Padares typically take place under a tree, each Padare Group was named after a tree.

THEME: A trusted and relevant partner for young people (4 groups) -

Question: How can YMCA evolve as a trusted partner for young people, building their resilience in the face of global crisis?

- Padare Group 1, "Sequoia Tree"
- Padare Group 2, "Cherry Blossom Tree"
- Padare Group 3, "Aprisquillo Pine Tree"
- Padare Group 4, "Sugar Maple Tree"

THEME: Building a Sustainable Recovery

Question: How can YMCA build a sustainable economic and financial recovery from this crisis?

- Padare Group 5, "Eucalyptus Bluegum"
- Padare Group 6, "Silver Birch Tree"

THEME: "Adaptive Y"

Question: How can YMCA become an 'adaptive' organisation, moving with the times and the needs?

- Padare Group 7, "Palo Borracho Tree"
- Padare Group 8, "Silky Oak Tree"
- Padare Group 9, "Baobab Tree"

Each Padare Group had between 20 and 25 participants, including one facilitator and one documenter. Facilitators and documenters were staff and volunteers from around the world who

had registered for the Padares and were invited to serve. They were trained by the World Alliance for the role. Each Padare Group housed people from at least 15 different countries.

In July, all Padares conducted two meetings of approximately two hours each following a methodology created by the team at the World Alliance of YMCAs. All groups discussed and analyzed five basic questions:

1. The trends that people are observing right now
2. The risks and opportunities for the YMCA
3. The areas for action
4. Responses from the YMCAs
5. Principles to guide future action

EMERGING TOPICS

I. A TRUSTED AND RELEVANT PARTNER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The four Padare groups that focused on Youth worked on the question ***“How can the YMCA become a relevant and trusted partner for young people, helping build their own and their communities' resilience in the face of global crisis?”***

Among the **trends** identified by these four Padare groups, highlights include an increase in mental health issues, the rapid growth of digitization as well as the growth of the digital divide, an increasing dependence on social media, youth leadership growth in grassroots social movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter), youth being more interested in getting involved in community, the increase in unemployment, poverty and inequality, the increase in family influence on young people because of the lockdown, the decline of the income-generating operating YMCA model, inequality in education, a growing generation gap and divide, and a declining trust in governments.



Padare Group 2 Cherry Blossom Tree

The Youth Padares identified **risks** including digital exclusion and its impact on education, internet safety, the loss of positive youth role models (due to camps and programs closures), the difficulties in meaningfully engaging youth online, increasing mental health issues among youth, the YMCA lagging behind in the digital adoption curve, the limited impact on immigration of family reunifications and scholarships, the need for the YMCA voice to be better heard among increasingly socially-aware and mobilized youth leaders.

The Youth Padares discussed **opportunities** for the YMCA, including helping people with new job skills and new careers, building youth digital competency, leveraging virtual meetings as more inclusive and accessible, using YMCA credibility to access new funding and support (especially from Government), shifting the YMCA mindset to better articulate the YMCA message, helping the private sector engage in social issues, launching new partnerships with NGOs, government and the private sector, capitalizing on local tourism growth and social activism, supporting mental and physical health, co-creating programs with young people that build trust (moving away from empowering them to provide the space for them to use their own power), continuing to provide assistance aid to communities, improving the YMCA digital presence, updating programs to the new reality, engaging youth in local advocacy, understanding who we are and building our brand identity.

“Young People are not looking for a religion or religious organization - I understand the YMCA’s values, but many young people don’t”

“We have forgotten who we are, and have focused on money/survival.”

The Youth Padares recommended the following **principles to guide future action**:

- Be self-reflective and revisit who we are as an organization
- Listen and understand youth, how they are different. Co-create with young people intentionally. Youth co-creation isn’t a favor, it’s the way forward. Take the YMCA to young people, instead of bringing young people to the YMCA
- Build digital competence and access
- Look to the community for answers
- Share what you learn with others internally
- Look outwards at what others are doing as well as inwards
- Keep young people and children as the primary focus
- Turn passion into action
- Stay true to our mission
- Be open and honest, like a child
- Entrepreneurship is key to boosting youth capacity
- Innovate: this is the time for us to have new and creative ideas to help adapt to the new situation
- Provide space for agency, trust, transparency, and sustainability.
- Empower people – let go of our own power and give others the opportunity to lead
- Mentor young people – provide structure for human to human relationships
- Stop being so focused on the operation and business model, as opposed to youth and community

The YMCA DNA is change.

**YMCA PADARE
Grains of Truth**

II. BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

The two Padare groups which focused on Building a Sustainable Recovery worked on the question, ***“How can we build a sustainable economic recovery for the YMCA from the Covid-19 crisis?”***

The Sustainability Padares identified **trends** including the move to digital, the demand for equity, the return to the need for basic assistance services (food, clothing, shelter), an increase in mental health issues, the erosion of safety nets, the shifts towards autocracy and growing unemployment, the cutting or suspending of revenue-generating programs, the increased pressure on governments from non-profit organisations to provide funding.

Among the **risks** identified by the Sustainability Padares are: financial pressure on the YMCAs that are highly dependent on one source of revenue, a decrease in membership and loss of revenue, physical assets and facilities turning into a burden, declining government support, weak YMCA cash reserves, underutilized volunteers, planning uncertainty, loss of jobs, a slowness in adapting to the digital world (often caused by a historic lack of investment), and a lack of influence on the government.

The Sustainability Padares identified **opportunities**, including partnerships with like-minded organizations and government agencies, on-demand innovative programs for youth, increased YMCA visibility, advocacy on key issues, new mental health programs, becoming an inclusive organization, cutting down on travel expenses, the opportunity to engage volunteers, the alignment of mission and capacity, the diversification of sources of income, the potential for collaboration among YMCAs at all levels including coordinated fundraising efforts at regional, national and world levels, improving outcome and impact measurement, developing a global voice and identity that positions the YMCA as a brand with donors, governments, corporations, building YMCAs' capacity in new operating models, scenario planning, and improving governance processes for better financial management.

The Sustainability Padares recommend the following **principles to guide future action**:

- Radically re-think how to shift towards multiple streams of income
- Leverage the YMCA future off global issues
- Move from a facility-based movement to a program-based movement
- Support the mental health of YMCA staff & members
- Stay ahead and lead in inclusion
- We need to act as a community to protect our brand and value it.
- “No stories without data; no data without stories”.
- Focus on the Core Mission
- Don't fight over the same small [funding] pie; grow the pie

III. ADAPTIVE YMCA

The three Padare groups that focused on Adaptive YMCA focused on the question **“What does an Adaptive YMCA look like?”**

The groups identified **trends** including: the sharp move to the digital world impacting work, education and daily life, fast growing youth unemployment, mental health issues, the

ADAPT: We should be flexible.
ADJUST: We need to move forward.
ADMIT: We are weak these days.
ACCEPT: We suffer, we are poor now. ACT: Administer actions.

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Accelerating new leadership development is more urgent than ever for the Ys to maintain relevance, recovery, and response.

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politicization of Covid-19 in some countries, increased domestic violence, misinformation and fake news, and youth leaders creating new networks.

Among the **risks** YMCAs are facing, the Adaptive YMCA Padares identified: difficulties in generating revenue, maintaining staff, overcoming the digital divide when serving communities with no access, and the impact on smaller YMCAs that may need to merge with other YMCAs or other organizations to survive.

Adaptive YMCA Padares discussed **opportunities** for the YMCA, including: the move online and the acceleration of digitization allowing it to expand its offerings and make further connect with youth, the potential of blending financial sources (sales of services and other sources such as government funding) to provide better sustainability, the increased demand for new virtual services including education and support for mental health (with a focus on youth), the opportunity to provide shelter to domestic violence survivors and the homeless, the scope for partnering with the government for long-term country-wide solutions, the development of new approaches to planning community solutions, collaborating with other organizations, creating nimble and inclusive YMCA structures, and advocating for communities.

*When the sky is dry, we
can see the stars shine...*

YMCA PADARE
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The Adaptive YMCA Padares recommend the following **principles to guide future action**:

- Ensure open, energetic, reflective, adaptive, pragmatic and inclusive leadership, prepared to make choices and embrace change as the new reality
- Deliver bold community solutions anchored in the YMCA mission and guided by core values
- Relationships, collaboration, and partnerships are foundational to new solutions
- Listen to new emerging community needs and create new solutions, new programs
- Speak less and listen more
- Develop lean, agile and nimble governance structures
- Diversify sources of funding
- Empower young people, inclusion is not enough
- Treat imagination, resilience and adaptability as values
- Provide safe spaces for people
- Strive for decreasing digital poverty
- Harness the power of the network
- Plan for resilience: focus on how we will respond to the next crises
- Create systemic change

NEXT STEPS

During the month of September, a small group of delegates across all Padares (one delegate per Padare group) will meet twice in 'Sensemaking' Sessions to build a shared picture of what's important for the YMCA across the themes of young people, financial sustainability, and adaptive YMCAs. The group will prioritize potential action areas to consider in responding to Covid-19, as well as drafting considerations for the future of the YMCA movement.

As a result, the group will create the basis for the **YMCA Adaptation Handbook**, which will cover the changes in the context in which YMCAs operate, the actions to which YMCAs should be paying attention in the short and medium-term in their response to Covid-19, and the principles that should guide YMCA action through this crisis.

In addition, the group will draft the inputs for the **YMCA North Star process** to respond to the question of how the YMCA will recover in a way that sets it up for a thriving future, including trends, future-oriented insights, prioritized principles to guide action, and a manifesto for an Adaptive YMCA.