

## **The 2020 “EndSARS” Protest: Propelling factors and government approach to managing the protest in Lagos State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Civil disobedience and protests around the world are geared towards a demand for improved quality of life. Nigeria’s 2020 EndSARS protest was the largest in the history of the country. The protest was geared toward the need to bring about significant change in governance and people-oriented policies. However, the government’s approach to managing the protest has been generally criticized with the deployment of the army and police which resulted in the killing of some protesters. This examined the government’s approach in the management of the EndSARS protest in Lagos State, Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection using in-depth interviews (IDI). Twelve (12) respondents who were involved in the protest were purposively selected based on their willingness and availability. The data collected were coded using NVivo version 11 and analyzed with content and thematic analysis while a distribution table was used to present the demographic information of the respondents. Findings highlighted the propelling and sustaining factors during the protest and the expectations of the protesters from the government. The study recommends the need for an improved communication channel between the government and the people which social workers can facilitate. There is also the need for improved social welfare programmes that create economic opportunities for Nigerian citizens, especially the youth.

**Keywords:** EndSARS, protest, government, Lagos state, social workers

### **Introduction**

In the past decades, Nigeria has witnessed the insurgence of conflicts and acts of terrorism that many scholars have sometimes regarded as a protest against inequitable distribution of resources, corruption, injustice, and gross alienation (Mamokhere, 2020; Power, 2018; Pu & Scanlan, 2012). However, due to poor approaches to managing these protests, they escalate into social vices that affect the country negatively (Alao, Atere, & Alao, 2012; Aro, 2013; Aytaç, Schiumerini, & Stokes, 2018). A good example is what we know now as Boko haram, bandits, and other ethnic-based militias that started as protests but the approach of the government helped radicalized them into what they have

become today. The 2020 youth-led social movement for good governance in Nigeria spread across the 36 states of the country and other African countries including the United Kingdom. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with approximately 240 million people, the largest African economy, the largest oil producer, and the most ethnically diverse, with over 250 ethnic and 350 linguistic groups (World Bank, 2018; 2019; 2020).

The World Bank (2020) reported that Nigeria's economy was rebased from \$264 billion in 2012 to \$509.9 billion in 2015, with a 6-8% GDP growth rate and a large informal sector. However, oil (petroleum), which became commercially available in 1958, accounts for roughly 85 percent of Nigeria's net income. The global economic slowdown in 2020 partly because of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact as the country was pushed into its second recession in five years, following a contraction in 2016. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated an already dire situation for workers. Tens of thousands of people have been laid off or had their wages reduced in both the public and private sectors. A third of states are yet to pay the new national minimum wage of \$77, over a year after it was legislated. The unemployment rate in the country increased from 23.1 percent in the third quarter of 2019 to 27.1 percent by the end of the second quarter of 2020. Underemployment rose from 20.1 percent to 28.6 percent over the same period, and in all these economic challenges, young people have borne the brunt of this sorry and terrible experience, with 13.9 million unemployed by the second quarter of 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

The demand for good governance is the right of every citizen in any country. It is therefore important to note that the primary bane of development in any country like Nigeria is governance and excellent leadership because the outcome of this will reflect true leadership (Ogundiya, 2010). This also translates to the number of resources mobilized and allocated to the growth of the country. The search for good governance and ending police brutality pushed the Nigerian youth to engage in the EndSARS protest as a medium to demand better governance and to improve the political and economic outlook of the country as well as resuscitate the dwindling revenue from the crude oil (Orizu, 2021).

The EndSARS movement began in 2017 when there was a hashtag on several social media platforms, to end police brutality and bad governance. The EndSARS protest was an avenue to share experiences of assault and violence perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The gross abuse of human rights and extra-judicial killings by the police were escalated on Twitter and Instagram. A tweet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, 2020 on the death of a young Nigerian who was killed by SARS officials and his body left on the roadside provoked a movement that started on social media. This singular act was widely

shared online on various social media platforms which later metamorphosed into a live protest all over the street of the country (Kabiru, 2020). The actions of the police violate article 3 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights; which provides the right to life, liberty, and security of a person. It also contravened the provisions of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which stipulates the function of the government is to protect the lives and properties of the citizens.

Furthermore, the protest was propelled by the activities of SARS and the brutality of the police, however, that was only an immediate cause as the protest was also the effect of years of bottled-up anger and frustration over the dehumanizing face of government policies and programs, absence of rule of law, poverty in the land as well as high energy costs (BBC, 2020). One of the factors associated with the protest was the need to end bad governance in Nigeria; the protest provided an opportunity to express grievances accumulated over the years. The spread of the protest cut across over 97 countries around the world with the support of developed countries like the UK, the USA, and Canada. The protest was a phenomenal one because it sent major signals to other countries especially in the African region to be conscious of good governance. There was an outstanding performance in five major states in the country which are Lagos, Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), Rivers, Oyo and Ogun. Lagos witnessed a large number of protests and has been described as the epicenter of all protests (CNN, 2020).

The structure and implementation of the protest could be described as well coordinated, and with excellent organization, food and water were provided as well as music to keep people from being distracted. Other provisions include medical equipment and medical personnel who volunteered and were on the ground to provide emergency services to injured protesters. Amnesty International, (2021) estimated that over 70% of the Nigerian population are below the age of 30 and are mostly affected by the harsh policies of government with the absence of public infrastructure and absence of a meaningful source of livelihood. This report makes it easier to understand why the EndSARS protest was organized and executed by youth below the age of 30 years. Also important to the causative factors of the protest was the unwholesome lifestyle of the political class in the country as several of the public resources move on into the hands of politicians through corrupt practices (Amnesty International, 2021). The social work profession upholds the ethical principles as espoused in the definition of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) as amended in 2018 which serves as a framework for ensuring the highest possible standard of professional practice. Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline that facilitates change and development, empowerment, and liberation of people, it upholds and promotes people's rights, dignity, and

worth in all professional practice. (IFSW, 2018). Historically, with the example of the settlement movement in the United Kingdom, social workers have a significant role to play in promoting social movement and good governance. Social workers perform major roles in serving frontline practitioners and social policy activists, standing in solidarity to address all forms of oppression and injustice (Noble, 2007; Dominelli, 2012; Mollaly, 2010). The anti-oppressive social work practice allows for freedom of expression and peaceful protest to bring about positive change in government policies and governance that meets the needs and aspirations of the people that the EndSARS protest represents. The EndSARS protest was aimed to bring about significant social change that would culminate in good governance, respect for human rights, peaceful co-existence, and a sense of unity among citizens in the country. Protests all over the world have been an avenue through which the populace expresses their grievances over political and economic hardship as well as draconic government policies.

Studies on the impact of protest and social movements are replete, however, there is a paucity of studies addressing the interchange of social work and governance amidst protest in Nigeria and other developed countries (Ekoh & George, 2021; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Mullaly, 2010; Eligon, 2020; Aderemi, et al, 2020; Ilegbinosa & Jumbo, 2019). Therefore, this study aims at examining government approaches as perceived by protesters in addressing some of the demands of the EndSARS protesters in Lagos state, Nigeria.

## **Materials and method**

### *Study area and sampling*

This study was conducted in Lagos State, the commercial hub of Nigeria. The rationale for adopting Lagos State was because the state was described as an epicenter of the EndSARS protest. Also, the choice of Lagos State was imperative because the EndSARS protest emanated from the State and spread to other States and other countries. The snowball sampling technique was employed to select participants of the study who were available and willing to share in detail, their experiences and had participated actively in the EndSARS protest.

### *Data collection*

This study employed a qualitative method of data collection using In-depth Interviews (IDI). The rationale for this approach was highlighted by Cooper and Schindler (2003) stating that the qualitative approach is best suited for exploratory research and allows for the identification of emerging themes throughout the research process. Given the nature of the study, we decided not to use a theoretical framework; instead, we used a qualitative inductive approach to allow for flexibility in method selection and to allow the study's findings to emerge naturally from thematic data. (Bryman, 2016; Gobena &

Hean, 2019). In-depth interviews granted us deeper insight into how participants think of and how the government is addressing the problem of governance during the EndSARS protest.

Data for this study were collected through phone interviews which were properly recorded. The IDIs were conducted with twelve (12) respondents who were members of the Lagos State Judiciary Panel of Enquiry, and who also participated in the EndSARS protest in October 2020. A pre-defined in-depth interview guide was sent to participants on their respective phones to fill and was used to direct the discussion with respondents and they were allowed to narrate their circumstances. The interviews were conducted in both pure English language and the local version of English popularly known as pidgin or broken English. Equal representation of men and women was considered appropriate to allow an equal proportion of the voices of men and women to be heard.

Verbal informed consent was obtained from each of the respondents after clarifying issues such as the respondent's willful participation and freedom to withdraw at any time. The respondents were also assured of absolute confidentiality and that every information given will be used for the purpose of this study only.

#### *Data analysis*

The process of the data analysis for this study began with the transcription of recorded audio of the interview along with field notes and thereafter coded accordingly using NVIVO 11. The coded data were grouped according to themes and crosschecked to ensure content validity and correctness in line with transcriptions and audio recordings to avoid losing the intended meanings. The data processing and analysis were done using thematic content analysis, and extracts and quotes were used to support the presented results. The socio-demographic information of the respondents is presented in a distribution table to give a clear view at a glance.

## **Results**

### *Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents*

The socio-demographic information of the respondents covered their sex, age and occupation. The study respondents were of mixed tribes, however, respondents from the Yoruba ethnic group were more in number (6) while the other five respondents were from other Nigerian tribes namely Igbo (4), Ijaw (1), and Hausa (1). The religious affiliations of the respondents comprise Christianity (7), Islam (4), and others (1).

Table 1 below shows the tabular presentation of the respondents' demographic information. The table reveals that the majority of the participants were above the age of 30 years with a mean age of 36years. Among the protesters, they are predominantly female. The study further revealed that all the participants had secondary school level of education.

*Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants N=12*

<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age (Years)</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
HP A	Male	34	Civil servants
HP B	Female	28	Lawyer
HP C	Male	31	Engineer
HP D	Female	31	Medical doctor
HP E	Male	36	Lawyer
HP F	Male	45	Consulting firm
HP G	Female	44	Tailoring
HP H	Male	35	Musician
HP I	Female	31	Musician
HP J	Female	30	Lawyer
HP K	Female	35	Artisan
HP L	Male	28	Engineer

**Source:** *Field survey 2021*

### ***Respondents' expression of concerns and desires that drove the protest***

The EndSARS protest was well planned and received massive participation and support from the generality of the youth population in Nigeria and beyond. It was one of a kind, hence, we sought to find out the driving forces behind the protest. The respondents provided information that pointed to the concerns and desires of the protesters. Some of the concerns and desires expressed by the respondents include:

#### ***General life and economic hardship***

The result revealed that the protest was driven by the general economic hardship and poor living conditions of the common man in the street. Information obtained from the twelve respondents all highlighted the government does not care about the welfare of young persons in the country occasioned by limited economic opportunities. One of the respondents captured it thus:

*The youth are really suffering in this country. All I want to ask is, how does the government intends to help the youth in this country because they are really suffering in this country. Meanwhile, the children of the people in power are not in the country, they know how to hide their own children from the hardship of this country (HP B, 36years, Lawyer)*

Another respondent stated that:

*We all have one skill or the other that we try to make money with. The government can find out the professions and skills of each of us and empower us with low-interest loans that would be repaid in instalments. We would appreciate this manner of help. Students' education can also be sponsored (HP G, 44, Driving).*

Issues about activities of government for youth in Nigeria are mostly skewed to the educated and individual with certificates while youth with limited educational opportunities are often denied and hence been used as thugs and hoodlums attacking households. The respondents were of the view that if the government is sincere, they can make concerted efforts to improve the youth, especially in designing various strategies that could be utilized to help youth in the country.

#### *Police brutality and gross injustice*

The respondents stated that the primary driver of the protest was the arbitrariness and brutality of the police against the youth population. This represented the views of all the respondents and they lamented the gross injustice going on in the country where innocent law-abiding citizens are made to suffer for crimes and offences they did not commit. The views of the respondents are reflected in thus:

*We work and try to make ends meet but we have almost nothing to show for it; to cap it all, policemen would still extort us and collect the little revenue we make. We no longer know the difference between armed robbers and innocent people. Policemen arrest people who have committed no offence and demand exorbitant amounts of money from them, meanwhile we already find it so difficult to make money" (HP D, 31years, Medical Doctor)*

Another respondent corroborated that:

*We'd like to say we no longer need policemen amongst civilians or in our midst; they should remain in their stations. Why do they still extort us when they get their monthly pay? None of us here gets paid monthly the way the policemen are paid, yet they collect the little money we have. They arrest innocent people and detain them till they can pay some amounts of money" (HP G, 44years, tailoring)*

A respondent who is an engineer by profession recounted his experience thus:

*We are not part of the youth that looted; we were pleased with the #EndSARS because the policemen are making life unbearable for us. I have had this leg pain since before the EndSARS, I was arrested for a crime I knew nothing about and even though I explained and pleaded with them that I was innocent, they didn't listen; they have no fear of*

*God. I still had to pay. Our desires are to be gainfully employed” (HP L, 28, Engineer)*

Another respondent recounted a live experience of police brutality, stating that: *A policeman from Itire-Ikate came to the community at midnight, broke down the door to our house with a kick, and arrested innocent people. We don't smoke anything other than cigarettes, yet we were arrested and we spent both Christmas and new-year holidays detained in their cell. We spent almost 6 months there and the matter is still in court. The officer in question is named Ezekiel (Name not real) from Itire-Ikate police station. His footprint is still on the door that he broke (HP C, 31, Engineer).*

The EndSARS protest stemmed from the disgustful feeling the youth population had against the police because of the police's highhandedness and brutality which has resulted in the death of many innocent young people. The respondents were of the view that the police easily attribute crime to young men to extort especially those driving flashy cars and wearing dreadlocked hair.

### ***Planned second Covid-19 lockdown in the country***

The respondents further stated their concerns and desires in engaging in the protest as a response to the questions posed to them. Some of the respondents saw the protest as an avenue to communicate their grievances about the happenings in the country and the government's approaches to handling their problems. The respondents expressed concern over the economic hardship in the country occasioned by the Covid-19 lockdown and frowned at the plan of the government to declare a second lockdown. This represented the viewpoint of the five respondents, and this is captured thus:

*The government cannot completely satisfy us, but the government needs to at least try to solve some of the problems affecting us. We're hearing rumors of a second lockdown due to the second wave of Covid, we are against this and we will resist it. Many of us cannot feed daily if we do not go out to work and we will not steal. We are not salary earners and we cannot survive another lockdown. The people proposing lockdowns have food and other necessities stocked up in their houses and they care nothing for the poor. I am willing to die in this struggle, so the government better act right (HP C, 31, Engineer)*

However, a respondent highlighted the capacity of the government to render help to the people to enable them to cope, stating that the resources are available only when the leaders are insensitive to the plight of the people. According to the respondent:

*“The government has the means and wherewithal to help and they should. We want to work and if jobs are available, we would gladly*



*work. But instead, our leaders prefer to ship our resources outside the country. (HP K, 35, Artisan)”*

### **Respondents' views on the expectations from the government and the society**

Information retrieved from the respondents about their expectations from government, society, and individuals in the society indicated that they are expectant of positive change, especially in the economic outlook, the government should be intentional with their actions in assisting people on the street, also there is a need for more platforms where people can discuss their desires and thoughts to the government, and participating in politics to promote good governance. The respondents also expressed that they expect and anticipate a life filled with several economic opportunities with the provision of social rehabilitation programs that would make positive changes in the life of their families. In addition, they opined that they do not expect law enforcement agencies especially police to interfere in domestic issues like family problems because they are only meant to stay on the street and protect the community. This reflected the viewpoint of all the respondents as captured in the quotes below:

*“We are all trained and received certificate of freedom but people are bringing jobs for us to do because they believe we are not educated, we expect better economic benefit” (HP L, 28, Engineer)*

*“Government can consider funding our individual businesses like Providing tricycles and motorcycles for us on installment payment basis, providing capital to set up small scale businesses (HP B, 28, Lawyer)*

Most of the respondents reported that they want a platform where they could ventilate their thoughts and demands from the government. This is captured in the view of one of the respondents who stated thus:

*“A forum like this is good where we can discuss our expectations, thoughts and desires to government so that we can live a more productive life (HP G, 44, tailoring)”*

Seven of the respondents further expressed their grievances towards the law enforcement agencies in terms of intrusiveness in domestic issues like family matters. The respondents stated that they expect that law enforcement agencies especially the police should be on the street to protect people and not to interfere in family matters as this is not within their jurisdiction. This is captured in the views thus:

*The police need to be properly monitored by the government. We know that without them there'll be increase in crime rates, they however must be made to act accordingly and appropriately, they should not interfere in domestic issues. We don't want them on our streets (HP E, 36, Lawyer)*

This was corroborated by another respondent:

*"We want them to do their jobs but their harassment is too much. They should stop coming into settlements and streets. Endsars is still on ohh ((HP F, 45, consulting)"*

The findings above revealed the importance of a novel and innovative government approach towards addressing the expressed concerns, desires, and expectations of the respondents after the EndSARS protest across the states in Nigeria. The findings revealed that government interventions are not adequately handled by qualified professionals, and more often than none the reports of such interventions are not well noted and acted upon. Also, it was noted from the findings that, the government approach should be directed towards providing economic opportunities for youth engagement and empowerment in the country.

## **Discussion**

This study investigated the government's approaches in the management of the EndSARS protest in Lagos State, Nigeria as perceived by protesters and how some of the demands of the EndSARS protesters are addressed. Evidence from the results of the study suggests that there is a magnitude of needs, desires, and concerns of protesters during the EndSARS protest in Lagos state. The study results highlighted the concerns and desires that sustained the protest and the expectations from the government in addressing the concerns. The result from the responses of the respondents indicated the concerns and desires that stimulated the action which pointed to the bottled issues around poor general welfare of young persons in the country, unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and police brutality against Nigerian residents. The study reported that the adverse effect of youth unemployment was a result of poor social support and frustration among the youth population which promoted the protest (Nkasis, 2020). Creating economic opportunities for Nigerian youth was identified as one of the key ingredients for good governance. Okoye, et al, (2014) reported that introducing entrepreneurship engagement would improve youth employability and help in the reduction of youth unemployment. It is argued that government policy initiatives should be directed at promoting entrepreneurship from secondary school. However, this has suffered a major setback due to corruption, inefficient infrastructural facilities, and poor maladministration (Bogoro, 2015), a situation that has stagnated youth development and promoted restiveness among the youth population. In their

study findings, Ukpong and George, (2012) noted that there was an association between socioeconomic development activities and the empowerment of young persons in Akwa Ibom State. Therefore, research evidence has shown that generating employment opportunities improve the quality of life of young persons (Ayoade & Agwu, 2016).

The study result highlighted that police brutality was among the major problems affecting good governance in Nigeria. The avalanche of reports of extrajudicial killings by police and other human rights violations have called to question the protocols and rules of engagement for police officers, as well as their efficiency and capacity to deal with the civilian population (AfricLaw 2020; BBC News 2020; Transparency International 2020). The Nigerian police's enforcement operations have come under scrutiny as a result of reports of abuse and extortion, however, this goes beyond newspaper and social media reports as a lot of the cases may have been unreported. Mostly, reports of police brutality against criminal suspects have been widely publicized to draw accolades from the public (Aborisade and Obileye 2017; Akinlabi 2017, 2020; Amnesty International 2014). Some of the study respondents especially the female ones stated that women have been victims of police sexual harassment and assault. This exposition is given voice by Itode (2020) who in a newspaper publication reported the case of a widow and mother of two children who claimed that a police officer in Rivers State, sexually assaulted her for violating COVID-19 protocol. Research previously conducted had pointed to police officers' sexual harassment and abuse of female arrestees, sex workers, and other female citizens (Aborisade 2019; Aborisade & Oni 2020).

Furthermore, the study results brought to light some of the expectations which centered on economic improvement such as the provision of grants to young persons to establish businesses and ensuring sustainable intervention across different sectors of the economy. In their study, Ortiz et al, (2013) reported that there is a need for improvement of funding for young persons in the promotion of economic growth and development across the different spectrums of the country. In his study, Silva (2015) further boosted the result of this study by stating that social grant for young persons is a right for the reduction of youth redundancy and incidences of unemployment. The study also reported that the EndSARS protest served as an avenue of reminding those in power about the inconsistencies and horrors in the lives of marginalized groups (Amnesty International, 2020). This approach appeared in principle as an excellent one enhancing good governance in the country and youth restiveness in the future, however, in practice, there seemed as though nothing has been done.

In addition, the study finding indicated that government should be intentional with its actions in assisting people on the street and providing more platforms

where people can discuss their concerns, thoughts, and desires with the government. The study respondents expressed that they expect and anticipate a life filled with several economic opportunities with the provision of social rehabilitation programs that would make positive changes in the life of their family and they do not expect law enforcement agencies especially police to interfere in domestic issues like family problems because they are only meant to stay on the street and protect the community. This study outcome is consistent with the findings of Aborisade and Obileye (2017) which emphasized the importance of social planning for young people towards the promotion of governance and peaceful co-existence among residents. Moreover, the study result hinted that youth political participation and inclusion in governance will be supportive of addressing the expectations and concerns during the protest. In a study conducted elsewhere, Ajodo-Adebanjoko, (2019) reported that the not-too-young-to-run bill as passed into law reduced the age for running for elective offices from 40 to 35 years for the Presidency; from 30 to 25 years for House of Representatives etc.. It was rather very unfortunate that less than 1% of the young persons were voted into the offices for election. However, whereas the age of vying for elective positions may have been reduced by law, other structural impediments limit youth's political participation. It is important to understand that power is not given on a platter, the youth position needs to leverage their energy, creativity, and number to turn the political situation around in their favour.

The findings also have a lot of implications for social work practice in Nigeria. Beginning with the settlement movement in the United Kingdom, social workers have always been involved in both conservative and progressive social movements. In recent years, social workers have also been frontline practitioners and social policy activists, fighting alongside protesters to end all forms of oppression and injustice. (Noble, 2007)). As a human rights profession with social justice as one of its core values, social work seeks to respond to and challenge unjust and unstable political, economic, and social systems that perpetuate injustice and violence in society.

It has been argued that for social work to play a major role in peace-building and the promotion of human rights and social justice in Africa, peace and human rights issues must be integrated into social work education and training, to enhance the effectiveness of the profession. It is also a critical time for Nigerian social workers to become politically aware and to fight for political and social justice systems. Social workers who participated in the End-Sars protest are expected to educate people about the reasons for the protest while also ensuring that it remains peaceful in the face of hoodlums who could easily use the protest to loot and destroy properties. Finally, social workers in Nigeria, as well as other social workers around the world, are encouraged not to give up

and to continue to protest against any form of inhumane action, in accordance with public health measures.

This study had obvious limitations that the researchers take into cognizance. The EndSARS protest had a national outlook and took place in all the state capitals and major cities in Nigeria, hence, conducting this study in Lagos state alone may not give a comprehensive understanding of what happened in other states. It is also important to note that the study samples were limited to 12 respondents, as such, it may not reflect the generality of the views of the EndSARS protesters. In line with the above limitations, we, therefore, encourage further studies in other states as well as a larger sample size.

Findings from this study indicated to importance of good governance in the management of persistent protest in any country. The EndSARS protest was an eye-opener for the government and the international committee to this truth which will likely prevent further reoccurrence. The study also highlighted some of the factors that fueled and sustained the protest in the country including police brutality. The study further revealed that creating economic opportunities for young persons is key to the promotion of entrepreneurship spirit in them and in reducing youth unemployment in the country. In addition, the study reported that youth participation in politics is germane in promoting good governance in the country. The study recommends the following to ensure good governance: There is a need for increased economic opportunities for young persons through grants and skills acquisitions promoted by the government of Nigeria. A productive workforce enhances excellent performance at the workplace and meaningful engagement of young persons in the country is highly recommended. The study suggests the importance of addressing the highhandedness, misconduct, and other abuses of power committed by Nigerian police officers in enforcing COVID-19 measures. Youth must be able to participate in politics in an inclusive and equal manner.

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