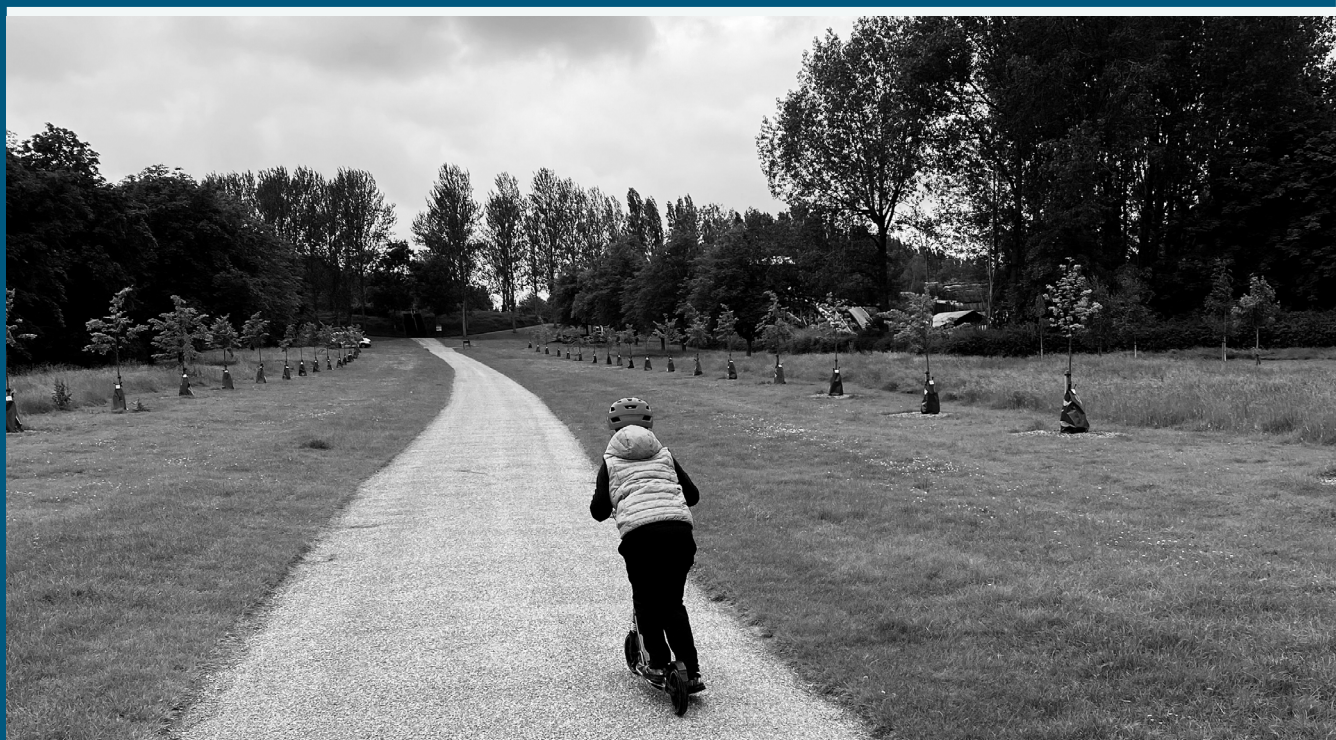


The Impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food & Play–Leisure and Related Adaptations for Children and Young People: International Overview

PANEX–Youth WP2 Short Report



***PANEX-Youth* - Adaptations of young people in
monetary-poor households for surviving and recovering
from COVID-19 and associated lockdowns**

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Education,
Food & Play-Leisure and Related
Adaptations for Children and Young People:
International Overview**
PANEX-Youth WP2 Short Report

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

This report presents and summarises the key results from the first stage of the PANEX-YOUTH research. It provides a summary of the global and national mapping exercise the team conducted through desk-based research. A more comprehensive version of this report, with more detailed country reviews, is available as a companion to this overview (Andres et al., 2023). Do email us if you require a copy, or visit our website (<https://panexyouth.com/>).

This report was built upon an extensive review of reports and literature on how COVID-19 affected young people and specifically their education, access to food, and their play and leisure. Situating the pandemic both in terms of path-dependent responses and intersectional impacts on young people, the report provides insights into the pre-pandemic context to situate the different COVID-19 specific policies and responses. The focus is on young people, and particularly those living in monetary poor households. It also highlights various types of adaptations, coping and resilience that arose from an overall failure of national and local governments to provide for the needs of vulnerable young people during the pandemic.

This report includes five key initial recommendations. Those are preliminary recommendations, with a key focus on pandemic and similar kinds of crisis preparedness. These recommendations will be elaborated further in the next stages of our research and more importantly final recommendations will be co-designed directly with young people.

Recommendation 1: Not at risk is a risk.

Children and young people have been ignored in mainstream policy streams as they were less at risk of the direct medical effects of COVID-19 (seen more as transmitters than receivers of the virus). This will have longer-term health implications on this age group which need to be immediately accounted and mitigated. Children and young people need to be at the forefront of political changes right now. They also need to be at the centre of pandemic preparedness efforts and political processes of rights assurance in contexts of ongoing and future crisis.

Recommendation 2: Hearing young voices.

The pandemic highlighted the overwhelming role of path-dependent intersectional¹ burdens in increasing the vulnerabilities of children and young people and of their families. Absolute priority and attention need to be given to the hidden voices and experiences of young people, and particularly those from monetary poor households, tackling severe socio-economic inequalities associated with pandemic and crises responses.

Recommendation 3: Schools as 'hubs'.

Schools and teachers have played a fundamental role before, during and after the pandemic as places for learning, playing, socially interacting, but also as places for welfare and places to eat. The multi-sectoral role of schools as life and care hubs needs to be recognised further through collating and sharing examples of good practice, nationally and internationally, and embedding in national educational policies where appropriate.

Recommendation 4: Playing is a right.

Play is a right and is fundamental in children and young people's development and exercise of citizenship. Ignoring children and young people's need to play, have leisure and socially interact is an adult-centric and excluding attitude and is fundamentally wrong. Opportunities for meaningful and diverse forms of play, within the constraints of pandemic and crisis restrictions, should be embedded in policies and guidance for pandemic preparedness and rights assurance in contexts of crisis.

Recommendation 5: Multisectoral caring in the face of support disparities.

Children and young people's survival during the pandemic has mostly relied on the extraordinary efforts and extra steps made by communities, individuals, teachers, schools and non-for profit organisations. While these are fundamental in everyday communities resilience, funding pressures and community fatigue need to be at the priority of governmental agenda. Here, more structured and systemic responses to multiple dimensions of risk from local and national responses are recommended based on a rigorous assessment of what worked and failed during the pandemic.

¹ We understand path dependency and intersectionality as followed. Path-dependency refers to the assumptions that any events, processes and decisions occurring in present time are influenced and constrained by events, processes and decisions that occurred in the past. Path dependency involves a process of 'locking' and 'un-locking' transformations and paths of change with various outcomes. Intersectionality concerns the relationships between different sectors/components. Drawing upon critical urban theories and feminist approaches to inequalities and vulnerabilities, intersectionality also allows to stress that age, migration and ethnicity, class, race and gender constitute intersectional layers of disadvantage which have been exacerbated with COVID-19.

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Introduction

PANEX-Youth was a large-scale research project (which ran 2022-2024), whose main aims were to understand how young people adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and assess the wider impact of such adaptation processes in South Africa, Brazil and the UK (England). It was jointly funded by the ESRC, the NRF and FAPESP, gathering researchers from 5 Universities: University College London (UCL) and the University of Birmingham, in the UK; University of the Free State (UFS) and University of Fort Hare in South Africa; and, the University of São Paulo, in Brazil.

Ambitions

PANEX-Youth aimed to understand how young people adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess the wider impact of such processes of adaptations. To do so, we adopted a nexus approach, focusing on the interconnections between three key elements of children and young people's everyday lives that were impacted by the pandemic: food, education, and play/leisure. These elements were embedded within a wider understanding of the settings (local places) and home/personal contexts (household composition and home/personal life) of children and young people.

The findings of the research aim to support global recovery and the longer-term resilience of societies in a post-pandemic world. To achieve this we used an action research methodology to co-create knowledge

with young people, and the communities in which they live, along with non-government bodies and non-profit organisations that focus on this age group. The findings from this later stage of research will be published in a subsequent report.

The Research Stages

Stage 1: Global Mapping Exercise

Aim: Map and develop typologies of the pandemic's impact on the food/education/play-leisure nexus with a focus on young people's vulnerabilities globally.

Stage 2: National and Regional Mappings

Aim: Situate and decrypt, in each of the three countries and regions (West Midlands/Birmingham, UK; Central RSA/Mangaung and Moqhaka, South Africa; and São Paulo State/Paraisópolis, Brazil), what have been the key impacts of pandemic-related policy towards the food, education, play/leisure nexus of issues facing young people during and after Covid, what policy/programmes/initiatives were developed, and how local places matter.

Stage 3: Zooming in on local adaptations of young people in monetary-poor households

Aim: Conduct an in-depth case study analysis in six case study areas, in each case study region indicated above, with a focus on incremental and innovative

strategies and the impact of those adaptations on everyday survival and recovery.

Stage 4: Co-design of multi-scalar solutions to foster young people's recovery and resilience

Aim: Co-design with our community of young people and our community of practice solutions that will help vulnerable young people to recover and be prepared in the eventuality of future major health and socio-economic crisis in line with the food, education, play/leisure nexus.

The research presented in this report

This report presents and summarises the key results from the first stage of our research, our global and national mapping exercise. This was conducted solely through desk-based research.

The methodology used in conducting this assessment involved the search and analysis of publicly available documents between the period of June 2022 and April 2023. The documents were retrieved from several sources: UK Government websites (e.g. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), Department of Education (DfE), Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), UK Parliament websites, HM Treasury website, Bank of England monetary publications, Republic of South Africa ; reports produced by Brazilian government websites (Department of Basic Education, Department of Health, Department of Higher Education and Training, The Presidency), Statistics South Africa website, National research institutes, such as IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), IPEA (Institute for Communicable Diseases, Global Burden of Disease website and reports, The Applied Economic Research), FJP (Joao Pinheiro Foundation), INEP (Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research), FIOCRUZ (Oswaldo Cruz Foundation), and the National Youth Council, Communicable Diseases of South Africa, RSA Government Gazette ; In addition, academic papers, press releases, multinational reports from INGOS (e.g. UN, UNESCO, UN Habitat, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP), IGOs (IMF, OECD, The World Bank, OECD), international advisory groups (e.g. KPMG), Think Tanks (e.g. The Brookings Institution) and reports from charitable and non-profit foundations (e.g. Catholic Relief Services, Carnegie UK Trust, Child Poverty Action Group, The Edge Foundation, Sutton Trust, Plan International), NGOs (e.g. Youth Employment UK) and collaborative networks - Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) and the Brazilian Internet

Steering Committee (CGI.br), PENSSAN Network (Brazilian Research Network on Food Sovereignty and Security and Nutrition), National Campaign for the Right to Education, and Civil Society Working Group on the 2030 Agenda - were also used. These documents were consulted several times during the study.

"The research findings aim to support global recovery and the longer-term resilience of societies in a post-pandemic world."

The following is an example of the search terms that were used coupled with "during COVID-19" at the end of each: "adaptation techniques", "digital divide", "vulnerable and disadvantaged young children", "Free School Meals (FSM)", "food insecurity", "physical activities and sports", "play and leisure", "community-led initiatives", "schools and teachers", "food banks and charities", "Impact on West Midlands schools", "young people's perception and trust", "government lockdown policies", "government and communities", "government and charities", "funding", "informal and formal approaches", "socio-economic implications", "policy coordination", "accessibility and mobility", "remote learning and VLE", "active travel", "young people's employment", "economic inactivity", "learning inequalities", "children's behaviour and mental wellbeing", "poor households", "BAME population", "home space and learning", "loneliness and isolation of young children" and "creative play". The total documents found were 435 across the board with 365 selected for their relevance.

The team extensively reviewed these reports and literature with a focus on our nexus. We identified the types of support mechanisms either led by communities or by non-profit organisations listed in such reports and literature. This led us to critically analyse the correlation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the policy and living conditions of young people in each country and situate them internationally.



1. Access to Education

From 16/02/2020 to 30/04/2022, the **global average for school closure was 142 days fully closed, 151 days partially closed**. Uganda for example closed schools for 83 weeks (UNESCO, 2021b). Ensuring learning continuity during school closures became a priority (as well as a key challenge) for governments around the world (UN, 2020).

A move to **online/remote delivery and increased use of ICT** (Information and Communication Technologies) was observed globally. Limited and lack of connectivity in some countries led to varied distance learning formats, such as reliance on television, radio programming, and paper-based learning by distributing print materials. Distance learning in high income countries involved up to 85 per cent of young people, dropping to less than 50 per cent in low income countries (UN, 2020). A majority of low-income countries reported using broadcast media TV (82%) and radio (92), predominantly in Africa and Asia (ibid). Furthermore, according to UNESCO (2021a), 94% of countries globally used multiple online tools for delivering education materials and providing instructions and feedback, which included basic communication means (e.g. use of SMS and phone calls). A quarter of countries pushed for school teachers to engage in in-person teaching via home visits; moreover, the 'paper-based take-home' model emerged as a popular approach across all countries (UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, OECD, 2021).

With the move to remote learning, a number of countries attempted to distribute electronic devices to ensure that learners from less wealthy households would not be excluded from remote teaching. Various policies

were introduced to attempt to ensure that all **children had access to online learning**. In England, for instance, a scheme in the summer 2020 was set up to distribute 220,000 laptops to pupils in need and six-month internet passes for pupils without consistent access and was followed by further 'waves' of equipment provision (a total of 1.313,449 million devices) (UNICEF and Carnegie UK Trust, 2021). In São Paulo, Brazil, the municipal network announced a program to distribute tablets in 2020 for remote teaching. However, these only began to be distributed in 2021, a year after the announcement, in an uneven pattern, and with several limitations on internet access, data protection vulnerabilities, and use of proprietary software (Rede NAI-FEUSP and Instituto Lidas, 2021).

In East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the majority of countries used online education exclusively, even if online education was combined with TV and radio to reach rural areas and those without Internet access (Vegas, 2020). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 28% of countries relied on TV and radio: slightly under 40% were offered online-only education, while 22% used a combination of online and broadcast options. In South Asia, close to 40% of countries used broadcast (radio or TV and radio), while half of the countries used a combination of online and broadcast learning opportunities. Finally, in sub-Saharan Africa, only 11% of countries deployed exclusively online learning, and only 23% used a combination of online and broadcast (ibid).

School closures led to significant disruptions in students' learning. In Brazil, over 40 weeks of school were missed (UNESCO, 2021), also impinging upon vulnerable pupils' access to school feeding programmes. UNICEF (2023) estimates South African children lost about 46% of school time over these two years. The pandemic also increased school dropouts in the country. Out-of-school children aged 5-18 increased from 260 000 in 2019 to nearly 880 000 in 2020 (Stats SA, 2021) and there is evidence to suggest that dropouts increased in many countries around the world, including the UK (although accurate figures are difficult to capture in many countries) (UNICEF, 2023).

Lockdowns had significant impacts on the **conduct of exams and more regular assessments**. Globally, 28% of countries cancelled examinations in lower secondary versus 18% in upper secondary (UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, OECD 2021). No low-income country cancelled examinations at either level but postponed them. End of year exams were replaced by continuous assessments or alternative formats, such as online testing for final exams (UN, 2020). In England, for instance, new grading scales and algorithms were introduced to exam systems for GCSEs/A levels and some schools were allowed to open for years 10 and 12 to support GCSEs and A level preparation (Howard et al., 2020). However due to maintaining prior-learning over newly taught materials as a priority, studies showed that in November 2021, students remained behind in Math and English skills by at least 2 months (Edge Foundation, 2021) and gaps persisted till January 2022 in mathematics, reading, languages and physical education (Ofsted, 2022).

All types and levels of education were impacted. Importantly, however, **vocational courses were the most at-risk** given the difficulties in delivering such practical skills through distance learning (Stone, 2021). These impacts have resulted in longer-term consequences for acquiring practical knowledge and increasing drop-out levels amongst students. In some countries, more flexibility in continuing vocational education was permitted and remote examinations were conducted. This was apparent in Estonia, Finland Latvia and Norway (OECD, 2020). However, despite such adjustments, technical skill gaps emerged with wider implications for young people's prospects for employment and career progression. Such challenges were exacerbated in low and middle income countries.

The shortfall in the ability of education providers to shift fully online can largely attributed to the **digital divide**, with the disadvantaged having limited access to basic

household services such as electricity, internet, and electronic devices. The lack of technology infrastructure was also often combined with low levels of digital literacy among students, parents, and teachers (ibid). Across the globe, education and particularly education for vulnerable young people was thus significantly disrupted due to a combination of a lack of access to devices (laptops/computers), poor internet connectivity and challenging living environment settings. This was combined with difficulties for teachers themselves in accessing working computers, relevant software and the internet. In Brazil, students faced several barriers to participate in remote classes or activities. On top of issues related to access to technology and interest, concerns emerged about the low quality of class content, the lack of access to study materials, and the inability to clarify doubts and seek help from tutors (CONJUVE, 2021; Silva et al., 2022a; Tebet et al., 2021).

"School closures led to significant disruptions in students' learning."

In addition, lower-class students in Brazil faced additional pressures related to the needs to look for a job, and to take care of the house, siblings, children or other relatives (Silva and Vaz, 2020). Similar issues were found in the UK, where 28% of pupils remained without proper internet access throughout the pandemic (Stone, 2021), and in South Africa, where only 11.7% of the schools in 2020 offered an e-learning plan (Nkomo et al., 2023). There were also stark geographical divides in countries like South Africa, where approximately 24.7% of learners in urban schools attended online, with the figure for rural schools being just 7.6% (Nkomo et al., 2023). Moreover, inequalities also existed along racial lines: again in South Africa, for example, 18.3% of white learners accessed online learning compared to 5.3% of black learners (Stats SA, 2021).

Skills and training for education providers were also crucial: there was a key training gap in terms of the skills required of teachers to lead online or distance learning at the start of the pandemic. The highest-income countries responded to this gap fairly quickly. For example, in Czechia, Estonia, Finland and Latvia, a series of technological support systems and webinars launched via Facebook and online information hubs

was implemented to train teachers and parents. These also helped develop and share guidelines and good teaching practices (OECD, 2020). Such public-private partnerships and collaboration between government, schools and communities emerged strongly in Portugal through the use of YouTube, where online classes were recorded, uploaded, and shared (OECD, 2020). Such initiatives were far more limited in low and middle-income countries.

In most countries, governments stepped in and progressively introduced **national financial support schemes targeting the education sector**. Financial investments were significantly higher in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America. This support did not solely focus on young people still at school, but also those who saw their professional education affected and as a result had to either improve their skills or re-train. This included student loans exemptions, increasing loan amounts and/or grants. In some of the above countries, financial support was channelled towards recruiting high school graduates in the job market and training new teachers and staff. It also included addressing specific inequalities, such as providing connected devices and safety equipment through schools (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). In England, for instance, additional adaptations introduced included extended hours where schools leaned on catch-up funding to pay teachers and staff extra hours, targeting students falling behind (ibid.). This came under the school-led tutoring of the NTP with 230,000 tutoring courses pupils kicked-off in December 2021 (House of Commons, 2022).

Such **national support was much more sporadic outside of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America** and constrained by various financial and political challenges. In countries where a shift to full online remote education could not be achieved, governmental programmes included other initiatives. These included: national-scale TV channels (e.g. Aprendo en Casa in Peru); the creation of call-in centres staffed by the Ministry of Education to provide real-time information and guidance to parents (State of Buenos Aires – Argentina); or, as in Himachal Pradesh State in India, the development of thousands of videos and digital worksheets supported by 48,000 teachers who connected with parents via mobile phones (Vegas and Winthrop, 2020). In South Africa, from May 2020 onwards, school governing bodies had the following options: daily and weekly rotation; bi-weekly rotation; platooning or shifts; traditional and daily attendance or a hybrid of the latter (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Bi-weekly rotation was a common choice in which 50% of learners would attend school in one week based on their grades (Macupe, 2020). The rotation meant that children attended school for one week and were home for one week (needing to work alone and having contact with teachers via social media) (Hoadley, 2020).

Key in global responses was the relative speed of the provision of support. In many cases, national governments responded slowly, leading to **ad hoc, informal and communal initiatives** that flourished worldwide with schools, charities, communities and groups of teachers taking extra steps to address issues of access to (online) education and pedagogical tools. Communal mobilisation and a sense of solidarity emerged to fill the gap left by governments. In Chile, for example, a network of teachers came together to develop a series of 30-minute radio lessons (La Radio Enseña) for secondary students who had no access to online learning. Similarly in the U.S. a coalition of actors set up a family hotline to guide parents and children with necessary resources. In the UK, the Oak National Academy was created in April 2020 by a group of teachers and partners; within two weeks an online classroom and resource hub was established to help educators, parents and children in their remote learning (Vegas and Winthrop, 2020). Such support was often cross-sectoral, also tackling food poverty and some occasions access to play and leisure.

As recently reported by the World Bank (Schady et al., 2023), “nearly 1 billion children in low- and middle-income countries missed at least one year of in-person schooling”. Combined with other factors, loss of learning and inequalities in the nature of that loss also impact young people’s employment prospects. In England, for instance, the numbers of 16-24 years old seeking employment doubled from March 2020 to 450,000 in mid-2021 (Youth Employment Group, 2021). Compared with other age groups, the 18-24 years old bracket lost one third of its workforce whilst the 35-44 years old counterparts less than 15%; this evidenced a “U-shaped impact” due to the pandemic (Henehan, 2021). These trends are estimated to lead to a loss of future earnings worldwide by US\$21 trillion (Youth Unemployment Group, 2021), as well as impacts on future health, well-being and family life.



2. Access to Food

During the pandemic, the **food supply chain was significantly disrupted**, particularly for those in monetary poor conditions, for three main reasons. First, for vulnerable children and young people, **school is the place where they can access food (breakfast, lunch and supper) and this provision was deeply challenged during lockdowns** in many countries. School meals are often the only meal(s) of the day for those living in the poorest conditions. In 2020, the number of missed in-school meals globally reached 39 billion. This included a range between 4 to 9 out of 10 in-school meals on average not provided to school children (Borkowski et al., 2021). The principal reasons for not providing food were food insecurity, disruption of food supply chains, conflict crises and dropping household incomes. The damages and disruptions of the pandemic on the global food systems are many and complex; these can last for years, affecting food price inflation and access difficulties, especially for most vulnerable populations (Panghal et al., 2022). According to UNICEF (2023), the most affected were poor households in areas such as the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and some countries in Latin America. In South Africa, for instance, approximately 9 million learners did not receive daily meals because schools were closed and hunger spread further; owing to school dropouts resulting from COVID-19, feeding schemes have also not recovered the number of children reached before the outbreak (Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2022).

Second, **restrictions on movement, fear of the virus and other impacts of lockdowns significantly shrank the ability of households to access food** but also nutritious

food. In higher income countries, this principally meant not being able to reach specific supermarkets where cheaper food was available and having to change diets and reduce food intake. In low and middle-income countries, the informal economy and hence the informal food value chain was compromised due to restrictions on movement and increased control over informal vendors (e.g. introduction of new permits) (Skinner and Watson, 2020). Many countries (for example Peru, Mexico, Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, India and Thailand) strictly limited the activities of informal food producers and distributors while others like South Africa imposed constraints and requirements which severely disrupted informal food supplies (ibid). This affected food provision and access to specific (nutritious) food.

Third, **the rise of unemployment led to food poverty**. Within vulnerable households, a significant amount of adults lost their jobs during the pandemic and saw their income reduced which impacted their ability to provide for their families. Unemployment also increased amongst young people of working age. According to the Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022 (ILO, 2022), between 2019 and 2020, 15 to 24 years old experienced a much higher percentage loss in employment than individuals aged over 25. Many young people dropped out of the labour force, or failed to enter it altogether, struggling to access the job market due to lockdowns, restrictions and economic downturns (ibid).

As a result, young people struggled to access food (and more importantly nutritiously diverse and healthy food), impacting their wellbeing and overall health

(including mental health) (McPherson, 2020; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2021). **There were important similarities and differences between countries** – both in terms of the number of children affected, and inequalities in accessing food within national populations, with our three case study countries being exemplary of these trends.

In England, because of the stigma of receiving assistance from food banks, fear of the virus (especially if some household members were vulnerable), loss of income (e.g. cost of public transport), and lack of awareness of community and charity schemes, many food-insecure households struggled to access support (Connors et al., 2020, Goudie and McIntyre, 2020).

In South Africa, access to food for children was also compromised by adults losing their jobs (van der Berg et al., 2022; Naicker & Richter, 2022; Jamieson & van Blerk, 2022). Gelo and Dikgang (2022) found that respondents who became unemployed during COVID-19 became 5.4 times more likely to report child hunger in the past seven days.

In Brazil, food insecurity dramatically increased during the pandemic (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). In 2022, 125.2 million Brazilians were living in households with some level of food insecurity and more than 33 million were in a situation of hunger (14 million more people than at the time of the same survey in 2020). Children, women, and the black population suffered most from hunger (Schall et al., 2021). Between 2020 and 2021/2022, severe food insecurity doubled in households with children up to 10 years old, going from 9.4% to 18.1% (Rede PENSSAN, 2022).

Most countries launched **national programmes** including providing food vouchers/cash, food aid benefits sent to families or distributing pre-packaged meals through schools, charity networks and Grab-and-Go sites. For example in Japan, the ‘school-based nutrition’ model was preserved, with free school meals offered to children and nutrition guidelines circulated for use in the preparation of food at home (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022). In England, weekly meal vouchers were handed to children eligible for free school meals and in Ireland, food packages with nutritious ingredients such as eggs, fruits and yoghurts were sent to children’s homes (ibid.). In the U.S. the prevalent approach was setting up Grab-and-Go sites, mostly outside school facilities, distributing daily food to parents and children. Additionally, a ‘Meals for Kids Site Finder’ was implemented through a national-scale online interactive map to assist families to find nearby

locations. School bus drivers delivered pre-packaged home meals directly to those who could not travel (Zaballos, 2021).

Low and middle income countries relied more on INGOs (e.g. Catholic Relief Services, Red Cross, UN Habitat, UNICEF, WFP) to distribute food in partnership with local and national governments, even if this concerned all countries globally (through an increased use and role of food banks). In South Africa, for instance, new programmes were created to provide food parcels directly to poor households through the COVID-19 Relief Grant (Jamieson and Blerk, 2022). Initially, the Department of Social Development identified food-insecure households, but later it included NGOs (including faith groups) and community based organisations (CBO) distributing these packages (this also happened after the NGOs threatened to go to court).

"As a result, young people struggled to access food (and more importantly nutritiously diverse and healthy food), impacting their wellbeing and overall health (including mental health)."

Public/not-for-profit partnerships were complemented by food distribution secured through **ad hoc community support**, with school staff distributing food and learning materials, as in England. A ‘Take Home Rations’ (THRs) approach also emerged. In Congo, for example, a partnership between the government and the Unicef World Food Programme (WFP) generated the “School Feeding at Home” initiative, with distributed take-home food rations in more than 340 schools to 61,000 children (Hittmeyer, 2020). In Sierra Leone, Catholic Relief Services replicated this model with their ‘Food for Education Program’, with a similar approach used by

the Liberian government. In Mongolia a multisectoral partnership was forged with the government in distributing nutritional ingredients and hygiene supplies for 81 child learning centers (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022). In Brazil, food distribution initiatives emerged from school communities and thanks to the involvement of the civil society involving public and private actors and religious entities (Boullosa and Peres 2022, Domingos et al., 2022). The country was immersed in a great wave of mobilization and donation. These donations were mainly basic food baskets, but also involved organic foods, milk and breakfast food for children. Initiatives also included the distribution of vouchers to spend in supermarkets to provide families with more autonomy (Memoricidade, 2020).

When INGOs were absent, **governments acted solely or in partnership with the private sector**. China entered into a partnership with Tetra-Laval for milk distribution and deliveries. In Guam (US island territory) the Ministry of Education established Grab-N-Go programs offering free school meals to all children under 18 years old (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022). Other countries also focused on feeding the most vulnerable children and young people with decentralized approaches and alternatives to providing food. In Honduras, teachers prepared food rations and rode their bikes going door-to-door and distributing them to their students (World Food Programme, 2020). Similarly in Iraq, Scouts were sent to deliver food baskets to poor families (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022). In Uruguay, cash and food vouchers were alternative feeding programmes (Hebbar and Phelps, 2020 cited in Borkowski et al., 2021). In India, the government in some states deposited cash into families' bank accounts (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022).

Overall, food provision globally, particularly in periods of lockdowns, and beyond, relied on collaborations between various agents, including local and national governments, I/NGOs, private organisations and communities (including schools). Such approaches also characterised responses outside of periods of lockdowns and during holiday times, which have been highly diverse and localised, including national and regional/local programmes (use of food vouchers for examples) being used or I/NGOs (particularly food banks) stepping in. A wider issue to consider regarding food poverty – and the situation of the most financially poor children and young people – is the loss of household incomes due to pandemic restrictions. This affected not only parents with children at school but also young people who dropped out of school to find a job and

provide for their families. It also concerned those who had just left school and found themselves in increased financial precarity, relying typically on food banks and support from I/NGOs. Such socio-economic difficulties were exacerbated towards the end of the pandemic as several food programs were halted due to soaring international food prices, pushing some countries to rely on local food and farming (Bryant, 2022).



3. Access to Play and Leisure

Play, leisure, rest, and recreation are deemed universal child rights in Article 31 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). **During the pandemic play and leisure patterns were disturbed in many ways.** Play became confined to the home, as a *de facto choice*, with significant consequences for those living in more challenging family settings (e.g. overcrowding, no garden, working parents in jobs that could not shift online etc.). Overall, young people in monetary poor households saw their opportunities to play being significantly reduced due to the lack of access to their primary playing environments in periods of lockdowns and due to closures and social distancing.

Although varying according to specific places, the formal play sector and play/leisure opportunities are more diverse and structured in high-income countries (opportunities for informal play may be reduced though and there may be different understandings of what play is). Despite this, during the pandemic, in higher-income countries, **young people's access to play and recreation was virtually ignored**, with opportunities for playing being significantly restricted and regulated. As noted regarding the UK case, "little consideration appears to have been given to children's welfare outside of the impact on education. Play, as has often been the case, has been forgotten or side-lined" (Play Safety Forum (2020, p.8). These were linked to the closure of schools along with sport and leisure clubs.

Outdoor play was also made more difficult, controlled and monitored. In some countries, fines were introduced for play taking place outside the home and

outside strictly controlled times and spaces (e.g. in the UK within the hour of 'exercise' allowed to individuals per day). Around the world, playgrounds were shut or cordoned off. This had "destructive impact on children, their freedom to experience. The potential increase in poor mental and physical health from this mix, not to mention its likely developmental consequences is obvious. Children have been imprisoned in the home, often in the same space as tired and pressured parents. In Spain children were totally incarcerated for six weeks" (Play England, 2022, p2).

In more deprived settings, play continued to occur more organically, informally and spontaneously. This included, even in periods of lockdowns, playing on streets in slums and townships, as social distancing was not possible due to the absence of continuous monitoring and enforcements. In South Africa and Brazil, although some children turned to playing indoors, the crowded indoor spaces in most poor households forced children to defy the lockdown regulations and they often played in the streets or open spaces closer to their homes (Chirume and Sizani, 2020; Tebet et al., 2021).

Free play, walking, and play with family members were dominant features of play activities, particularly in early periods of lockdown or strict social distancing restrictions across the globe (Kourti et al, 2021). For example in the US at the beginning of the crisis, most children and adolescents channelled their playtime in unstructured activities such as walking and running. In Brazil, studies have shown that playing was a central activity to promote joy in children's lives and generate

social interaction in the period of greatest social distancing (Silva et al., 2022).

However, during the pandemic and particularly periods of lockdowns and/or strict social distancing rules, **overall physical activity decreased during the pandemic, particularly amongst older youth** (Do et al., 2022). Physical activity shifted from being structured (via schools, sport clubs) to unstructured (Rossi et al., 2021). **Indoor activities on the other hand increased with a high usage of electronic devices for video and e-gaming** (Kourti et al, 2021). Remote play spread significantly (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2020) however the digital divide affected dramatically children and young people's capacity to engage with online playing. Remote playing was not solely an organic response but was also used by schools and teachers as part of remote learning and also by play groups or sport organisations who attempted to keep their young people active and involved.

Young people themselves also expressed their frustration with COVID-19 regulations that affected their (outdoor) play and leisure. In Brazil, for instance, in the face of confinement, children manifested their desire to be in open and public spaces of gathering, such as parks and malls, while expressing signs of distress, irritation or boredom (Silva et al., 2022b). They highlighted the need for being able to move around, whether in the internal space of the house (such as backyard, terrace or balcony), or an external environment (such as court, building entrance, street and square).

The lack of opportunity for outdoor play and leisure had arguably **even more severe consequences in some contexts – including exposure to different kinds of violence and abuse.** In South Africa, for example, Chimbindi et al. (2022) pointed to higher levels of alcohol misuse and sexual abuse related to lockdown measures and the lack of recreation. There is also evidence of higher levels of physical violence against and amongst children (Mahlangu et al., 2022; Naicker & Richter, 2022). Naicker and Richter (2022) reported behavioural concerns, like children being unable to show affection.

INGOs, including UNESCO (UNESCO, 2020a) **led some play/sport online programmes.** For example, the *Sports Challenge Against COVID in Africa* was an initiative whereby young people were encouraged to make videos of themselves displaying innovative skills and creativity in participating in any sporting activity of their choice to strengthen their health (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2020). In countries like England, and related to the provision of food to the most vulnerable, play

packages and books were also distributed to monetary poor families, by charities and schools. In Brazil, NGOs and civil society organisations provided play kits with educational materials to be used by families, alongside the kinds of online spaces of interaction indicated above (Memoricidade, 2020). In England, adventure playgrounds played a key role with workers going beyond their current duties and doing more outreach work (King, 2020). Adventure playgrounds in deprived neighbourhoods became key hubs for support for young people during the pandemic (ibid.).

"Young people's access to play and recreation was virtually ignored, with opportunities for playing being significantly restricted and regulated."

Finally, and as with education and food, **more ad hoc, community-led adaptations** (sometimes involving playworkers and play organisations) were introduced. For instance, as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as interactive play spaces (Russell and Stenning, 2021). Even if these processes were not implemented on a larger scale or supported by local authorities (e.g. through play streets schemes, for example), creativity and adaptability emerged in various temporary small-scale adaptations of outdoor spaces and community streets. For example, using non-traditional playgrounds such as woods and temporary activities led by parents, volunteers or play workers, such as chalk hopscotches, play trails, colouring houses windows brought intergenerational play to the fore (Russell and Stenning, 2021).



Conclusion

Children and young people have been dramatically impacted by COVID-19 and are still suffering from the consequences of the pandemic. This commonality is shared globally as this age group has been disproportionately affected socially, forgotten by decision-makers in most countries and hit hard economically (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021; Andres et al., 2023b). Prioritising the immediate effects on the health of adults, and enabling national/local economies to recover, were the urgent priorities. Meanwhile, anticipating and mitigating longer-term detrimental consequences of COVID-19 on specific vulnerable groups have, problematically, not been prioritised when they should have been. Overall, **little consideration was given to inter-generational social justice – a situation compounded by consequent cost-of-living crises in many contexts.**

In most countries, and despite distinct socio-economic and political characteristics, **the impact of the pandemic on children and young people was amplified due to path-dependent and intersectional burdens that were already affecting youths' lives before the pandemic (such as political austerity measures and pre-existing inequalities).** COVID-19 revealed the dramatic extent of those inequalities, typically concerning accessing affordable and nutritious food and in-person education, but also related to the domestic sphere, where overcrowded and noisy home environments, limited or no access to outdoor spaces, and distance to green spaces and play facilities impacted particularly on the lives of monetary-poor children and young people. The pandemic also reinforced further households' vulnerabilities due to lost incomes for parents and

carers. Poverty hindered children and young people's abilities to cope and survive, and the voices of the most marginalised young people were hidden and their rights mostly denied. Here the unilateral lack of recognition of the importance of playing, having leisure and socially interacting is worth reiterating as a **fundamental failure in governments' pandemic responses towards the youth.**

The pandemic was an unprecedented event that led most countries to follow World Health Organization guidance, including lockdowns, limitations to movement and social distancing. This guidance translated into school disruptions, broken food chains, and significantly diminished opportunities for play and leisure outside the home. As such, while policies with regard to access to food/education/play-leisure differed from one country to another, with key differences between low, middle and higher income countries, responses and adaptations actually followed similar trends. This is true even in countries like Brazil, which were characterised by COVID-19 political denial, where federal states stepped in to counter national discourses and policies.

Looking across the food/education/play-leisure nexus, responses towards the provision for education were clearly at the forefront of governmental policy, internationally and in our three countries, with direct implications for access to food. Play and leisure on the other hand were deprioritised in comparison with the other two sectors. Policy, funding and related adaptations were by far the most diverse regarding alternative education provision, considering

accessibility issues, which were both geographical (urban/rural) and technological, linked to a difficult shift to full online learning with significant digital divides.

National, regional and local responses around education were financially substantial; however, in most contexts they have been insufficient in providing for the most vulnerable children and young people. **Transformative support was achieved thanks to local and communal responses led by schools, teachers, volunteers and I/NGOs who stepped in to support children, their knowledge, wellbeing and even their families.**

Schools, as life and care hubs within the community and as sites of support for children and young people's everyday life and wellbeing, played a crucial role during the pandemic globally. Their role went far beyond education and learning, to include food provision, play activities and mental health support. Indeed, while vulnerable children and young people's access to food was already channelled through schools before the pandemic, their role in tackling food poverty became even more apparent and critical during COVID-19. Schools, as hubs, were often where food was found, accessed, collected or distributed (with schools often partnering with non-for profit organisations or sites of self-organisation through their staff and teachers). A key issue though here was access to nutritious and healthy food. This, in the majority of countries, was not sufficiently addressed and the ethno-cultural background was also negated. Increasing obesity and unhealthy diets will have long-term effects, noting that most countries see increased food poverty with food banks and related I/NGOs facing rising demands and shrinking funding.

Overall, children and young people's coping, survival and resilience have been ensured thanks to the support of community groups, charities, individuals (including teachers) who stepped in during an unprecedented context of crisis. However, in line with the ongoing global cost of living crisis, pressures on youth and their families are not fading but on the contrary are increasing. This raises significant concerns in terms of the abilities of vulnerable children and young people to recover and thrive in the future, not solely in regards to their access to education, food and play/leisure but also in terms of their overall health, wellbeing and future opportunities for employment and positive family and social lives.

Based on the findings of this report, a range of preliminary cross-cutting recommendations can be sketched out as lessons from the pandemic towards

survival, resilience, wellbeing of children and young people and future pandemic preparedness. These can be found at the start of the report.

"Overall, children and young people's coping, survival and resilience have been ensured thanks to the support of community groups, charities, individuals (including teachers) who stepped in during an unprecedented context of crisis."



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