

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

PANEX-Youth WP2 Full 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 and
National Overviews**

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Authors: Lauren Andres (University College London), Paul Moawad (University College London), Peter Kraftl (University of Birmingham), Stuart Denoon Stevens (Nottingham Trent University), Lochner Marais (University of the Free State), Abraham Matamanda (University of the Free State), Luciana Bizzotto (Universidade de São Paulo), Leandro Giatti Universidade de São Paulo).

To reference:

Andres, L., Moawad, P., Kraftl, P., Denoon-Stevens, S., Marais, L., Matamanda, A., Bizzotto, L., Giatti, L. (2023), The Impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food & Play-Leisure and Related Adaptations for Children and Young People: International and National Overviews. PANEX-Youth WP2 Full Report, London; <https://panexyouth.com/>

Contact: Professor Lauren Andres, Bartlett School of Planning, UCL: l.andres@ucl.ac.uk

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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 focuses on the global and national mapping exercise the team conducted through desk-based research. This 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 from national and local governments to provide for the needs of vulnerable young people during the pandemic. A shorter version of this report is available as a companion to this extensive document (Andres et al., 2023a). Do email us if you require a copy.

This report includes five key initial recommendations. These are preliminary recommendations, with a key focus on pandemic and preparedness for other cognate kinds of crises. These recommendations will be elaborated 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 at lower 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 to assess the wider impact of such processes of adaptations in South Africa, Brazil and the UK (England). It was jointly funded by the ESRC, the NRF and FAPESP, gathering researchers from 5 Universities: UCL and the University of Birmingham, in the UK; 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 have 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 research findings 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, focusing 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 sources were consulted at 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.



Section 1.

International overview of the impact of COVID-19 on education, food and play/leisure and related adaptations.

The impact of the pandemic across the world has been dramatic. We review in this section how countries across the globe have dealt with its impact, with regard to the education, food and play/leisure nexus. This allows us to position our three case study countries within the international landscape of responses and adaptations to COVID-19.

1.1 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 turn to online 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 through distribution of print materials. Distance learning in high income countries involved up to 85 per cent of young people, while dropped 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).

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 were using 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).

The shortfall in the ability of education providers to shift fully online can largely be 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).

School closures led to significant disruptions in the conduct of exams and more regular assessments. Globally, 28% of countries cancelled examinations in lower secondary versus 18% in upper secondary (UNESCO et al., 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). Remedial programmes were implemented in most countries (during holiday periods or after lockdown periods) with a focus on vulnerable young people and key skills, typically, reading and maths (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. Skills and training 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. Higher 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 the development and sharing of guidelines and good teaching practices (OECD, 2020). Such public-private partnership 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.

All types and levels of education were impacted. Importantly, vocational courses were the most at-risk given the difficulties in delivering such practical skills through distance learning. These impacts have resulted in longer-term consequences for the acquisition of 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 countries such as 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/medium income countries.

"All types and levels of education were impacted. These impacts have resulted in longer-term consequences for the acquisition of practical knowledge and increasing drop-out levels amongst students."

In most countries, national governments stepped in and progressively introduced 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 support for student loans exemptions, increasing loan amounts and/or grants. In some of the above countries, financial support was channelled towards recruitment of high school graduates in the job market and in the training of new teachers and staff. It also included addressing specific inequalities, for example the provision of connected devices and safety equipment through schools (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). 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 involved 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).

Keying global responses was the reactivity of the provision of support. In many cases, national governments responded slowly, leading to ad hoc initiatives that flourished across the world with schools, charities, communities and groups of teachers taking extra steps to address issues of access to (online) education and pedagogical tools. Communal mobilization 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 in some occasions access to play and leisure.

Overall, 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”. Remote learning didn’t allow them to continue learning and they effectively lost learning. Dropout rates increased as a result, particularly in lower and lower-middle-income countries. This is estimated to lead to a loss of future earnings around the world by US\$21 trillion (ibid).

1.2 Food

During the pandemic, the food supply chain was significantly disrupted, particularly for those in monetary poor conditions, for two main reasons. First, for vulnerable children and young people, school is the place where they can access food (breakfast, lunch and in some countries, like Brazil, supper) and this provision was deeply challenged during lockdowns in many countries. For those living in the poorest conditions, school meals are often the only meal(s) of the day. 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). This is primarily tied to food insecurity, disruption of food supply chains, conflict crises and dropping households incomes. The damages and disruptions of the pandemic on the global food systems are numerous and complex;

these can last for years, affecting food price inflation and increasing difficulties to access food, especially for the most vulnerable populations (Panghal, et al. 2022). According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (2021), 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 2020, the number of missed in-school meals globally reached 39 billion."

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 as a result. 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. Overall 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).

Most countries globally launched national programmes including either the provision of food vouchers/cash, food aid benefits sent to families or the distribution of pre-packaged meals, distributed 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, to assist families to find nearby locations, a 'Meals for Kids Site Finder' was implemented through a national-scale online interactive map. 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). These public/not-for-profit partnerships were complemented by food distribution secured through ad hoc community support, with school staff distributing food along with learning materials, as in England. A 'Take Home Rations' (THR) 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 replicated 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).

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, while 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 (ibid). 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 (WFP, 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 alternatives to 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). This also concerned responses outside of periods of lockdowns and during holiday times, which have been highly diverse and localised, including either 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 in terms of food poverty – and the situation of the most monetary poor children and young people – is the loss of household incomes as a result of 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).

1.3 Leisure and Play

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 couldn't 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 (although opportunities for informal play may be reduced 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 applied due to the absence of continuous monitoring and enforcements.

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, the majority of 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, Luz, Carvalho and Gouvêa, 2022). Overall, during the pandemic and particularly periods of lockdowns and/or strict social distancing rules, physical activity decreased particularly amongst older youth (Do et al., 2022). Physical activity shifted from being structured (via schools and 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 dramatically affected children and young people’s capacity to engage with online playing. Remote playing wasn’t 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. INGOS, typically Unesco (Unesco, 2020) 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 taking part in any sporting activity of their choice aiming to strengthen their health (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2020). In countries like England and Brazil, 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.

Overall, across the globe, children and young people saw their education, access to food, play and leisure being transformed, reduced, with significant medium and long-term impact on their life trajectories. Severe discrepancies of access reflected and emphasized further intersectional and path-dependent inequalities within communities, cities, regions and countries, with low- and middle income being even more impacted (Schady et al., 2023). Difficulties of accessing (nutritious) food, being able to practice enough physical activities, to socially interact but also being denied their right for education and play/leisure had and will have important impact going beyond the food/education/play-leisure nexus. This includes health impacts, including mental health but also obesity (Kourti et al., 2021), along with issues linked to critical vaccines being missed and more stress in their care environments (orphanhood, domestic violence, suboptimal nutrition) (Schady et al., 2023).

"Outdoor play was also made more difficult, controlled and monitored."

Such challenges also relate to wider employment prospects and human capital. Youth unemployment and inactivity have increased significantly as a result of the pandemic. Globally, youth unemployment trends have worsened during and after the pandemic with, in multiple countries, 25 percent of all young people not being neither in education, employment nor training in 2021 (ibid). This raises significant questions and will have broader consequences on communities, social relations, and other societal issues (for example increase of violence, crime and insecurity). Those observations apply to England, South Africa and Brazil to which we turn now.

Section 2.

National Overview – England

Introduction

As one of the four countries of the United Kingdom, England has different laws and policies governing education, play, and other aspects of children's lives. During COVID-19, each of the Governments of the UK's devolved nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) operated restrictions and lockdowns in different ways.

COVID-19 started to spread in the UK at the end of January 2020. The government was initially slow and reluctant to implement restrictions but shifted its approach completely at the end of March 2020 by enforcing a first stay-at-home order. In England, this first period of lockdown was followed by two further periods of national lockdown, combined with different COVID-19 alert levels in different localities. All restrictions ended in February 2022. By the end of July 2022, 180,000 had died from COVID-19 in England and Wales, representing about 1 in 8 of all deaths (Raleigh, 2022). Mortality rates were higher among men, people with pre-existing conditions, and amongst monetary poor and particular ethnic groups. COVID-19 mortality was the highest among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean groups (ibid.). Vaccination programmes spread quickly in the country and intake was high (ONS, 2023).

The pandemic has had multisectoral impacts in England, bringing an economic contraction, fluctuating changes in the labour market and a strain on poor households due to lockdown measures, higher cost of living and a disruption in supply chains. COVID-19 was a major factor causing a substantial drop in UK GDP, an inflation increase close to 2% between August 2020 and April 2021, reaching 7% in March 2022 and climbing to a staggering 11% in the last quarter of 2022 (combined with other factors, such as the Ukraine war). Food poverty and reliance on food banks increased

dramatically, with a rise in food prices of 16.8% from July 2021 till December 2022, a 45-year high expansion (Bank of England, 2022, 2023). Eight out of ten low-income families faced job losses, financial strains, and increased reliance on free school meals and food schemes (Child Poverty Action Group and the Church of England, 2020). This inequality and disparity were also present in the education sector expanding the digital divide and access to education between students coming from privileged backgrounds in comparison with students that couldn't have parental support and remained lagging behind (Schleicher, 2020).

2.1 Pre-COVID Situation

In England, there was no prior requirement for schools and colleges to engage in remote teaching and learning before the pandemic (Howard et al., 2021). This effectively means that many children, particularly those in low-income monetary households, did not have access to computers at home. More importantly, as detailed in the global overview, most schools neither had the physical spaces, nor the relevant digital platforms, to deal with physical restrictions within schools and remote learning (ibid.).

Since September 2014, state funded schools in England have been required by law to provide free lunches to pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2, who are not otherwise entitled to benefits-related free school meals. From Year 3 onwards, free food meals are only offered to the most vulnerable (particularly households on universal credit) (Department of Education, 2018). Access to food outside school has relied on the voluntary sector. These organisations are the main suppliers of emergency food welfare in Britain, including foodbanks. There is no explicit state support for people who experience acute food shortage (Barker et al. 2019). With austerity measures that characterised Britain since 2009, such groups and

organisations have seen their funding declining, while numbers of beneficiaries have increased.

Play and leisure are fairly well recognised as children's rights in England. In January 2009, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) published the Play and Leisure Policy Statement that set out how children and young people's right to rest, play and join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and leisure activities could be promoted. Play and leisure in England are provided in various formal and informal play places and through diverse organisations from parks and park trusts (for outdoor playgroups) to sport organisations and youth clubs but also adventures playgrounds (King, 2021).

2.2 Policy Responses to COVID-19 with regard to education/food/play-leisure for young people, particularly the most vulnerable

During the pandemic, the UK Government provided a range of emergency programmes that impacted directly or indirectly on young people and their households. These programmes included tax and spending measures to support households, which encompassed: (i) additional funding for the NHS, public services, and charities (£48.5 billion); (ii) measures to support businesses (£29 billion), including property tax holidays, direct grants for small firms and firms in the most-affected sectors, and compensation for sick leave; and (iii) increasing payments under the Universal Credit scheme and other benefits (Agarwal et al., 2022) to support vulnerable people (£8 billion). A furlough scheme was introduced allowing employers to furlough employees 80% of the hours they could not work (UK Parliament, 2021). Incentives and support were provided to encourage firms to hire and train 16-18 year-old apprentices (ibid). Critical workers' children and vulnerable children were allowed to attend schools but many missed out and remained at home (Roberts and Danechi, 2021).

The digital divide was rapidly identified as a key challenge to sustaining education. A scheme in the summer 2020 was set up in order to distribute 220,000 laptops to pupils in need and six-month internet passes for pupils without consistent access. It was followed by further 'waves' of equipment provision (a total of 1.313,449 million devices), in addition to over 76,000 wireless routers and more than 33,000 data plans (UNICEF and Carnegie UK Trust, 2021). Additionally, the UK Government initiated an online learning platform

free for all, the 'Skills Toolkit' with the aim to improve workplace skills, and £8 million funding support for digital skills referred to as digital 'boot camps' (Baker et al., 2020).

£1 billion 'catch-up' funding was initiated in June 2020 to support children's missed learning from early lockdowns; £650 million were also allocated for the National Tutoring Program (House of Commons, 2022). An additional £250 million was channelled into training 500,000 teachers, £400 million to help give early career practitioners and 500,000 school teachers extra support (DfE and Williamson, 2021). However, State schools' core budgets were not increased during the pandemic with priority given to educational recovery funds, allocating free school meals, cleaning fees, and further training school staff and teachers (Roberts and Danechi, 2022). Despite significant investment, according to the House of Commons Education Committee (2022), the catch-up funding programme remained fragmented and bureaucratic mechanisms hindered equality of access between schools.

"The digital divide was rapidly identified as a key challenge to sustaining education. A scheme in the summer 2020 was set up in order to distribute 220,000 laptops to pupils in need."

For reasons outlined in the global overview, food poverty increased in the UK. The UK government distributed food parcels and take-home free meals (Nicola et al, 2020). Additionally, £15/week was given to eligible students in the form of vouchers to spend at supermarkets during Easter vacation, spring half term and summer holidays (ibid.). It is key to note that there was no precedent before the pandemic for FSMs to be provided during school holidays, and that it was only due to the activism of public figures such as Marcus Rashford (English football player) that

the scheme was expanded to school holidays in the summer of 2020 (ibid.)

The FSM scheme did induce disparities within low-income families in terms of food accessibility and how to redeem the food vouchers. “For instance, since the voucher scheme was only valid for certain (higher-priced) supermarkets, it precluded families from shopping at budget supermarkets and local convenience stores” (House of Commons, 2020).

In terms of play and leisure policies, the government provided £1 billion split into three packages. The first sub-package was the Sports Survival Package (£600 million). It aimed to aid grassroots sports and protect the spectator type of sports in England. The second sub-package (£270 million) was directed towards supporting community sports centres and clubs by Sport England. The third sub-package (£100 million) was given to local authority leisure centres (DCMS, 2021) and aimed at supporting the reopening of public sector leisure facilities, preserving sustainable operations and adequate delivery of activities that were not provided for the public in private clubs (e.g. swimming), sustaining a healthy lifestyle across England and ensuring that facilities could fully or partially re-opened by end of March 2021 (Sport England, 2021). Funding towards play and leisure was largely limited to sport activities, with no funding and attention given to the play sector per se.

2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people and related adaptations

Education

The pandemic significantly impacted the education sector and particularly vulnerable young people. Several challenges emerged such as differential loss of learning spanning across primary, secondary, vocational skills and special needs schools (Howard, et al. 2021). The digital divide and attainment gaps were found to be prominent in remote learning experiences of most deprived communities and students living in monetary poor households (ibid.). In part, the resources and abilities of parents (and their ability to be present rather than in critical work) has been shown to have impacted students’ learning, thus widening the learning gap (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2022). Various schemes and policies introduced by the government (outlined above) did not have equal impacts (Wright et al., 2022), particularly during the first lockdown.

Digital exclusion, social exclusion, poverty and health inequality (Stone, 2021; Ofcom, 2021) impacted education and particularly digital engagement and access to Internet. The digital divide and digital exclusion increased further and became extremely visible during the pandemic. Whilst the figure fell as a result of the measures outlined in the previous section, 28% of school pupils remained without proper internet access during the pandemic, whilst relative levels parental engagement and home-tutoring confidence also affected the quality of home learning (Stone, 2021). Digital exclusion and digital confidence were thus highly linked to geographical location and significantly varied within ethnicity groups, for people in social housing or those struggling with English language and health inequalities (Coleman, 2021).

The nature of the ‘home setting’ also impacted learning (Di Pietro et al., 2020). It impacted particularly upon children living in crowded houses, with several siblings, where electronic devices were shared or where Internet access was (not) supporting many devices connected simultaneously. Moreover, contrary to parents with higher incomes they couldn’t of course afford either private remote home tutoring, which reinforced inequalities further (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

The education sector was at the forefront of adaptation techniques which were developed in the light of unequal and sometimes inadequate governmental responses. Remote learning was a critical route to ensure learning continuity (Di Pietro et al., 2020). The digital literacy divide was the most critical challenge to mitigate, with online training offered to schools staff, teachers, parents and students in the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). Hence in some schools, a community engagement approach was adopted with parents’ online help centres, specific training programs and guidebooks introduced to reinforce the school-teachers-parents-pupils nexus (Edge Foundation, 2020). Additionally in other instances, schools, teachers and students’ unions stepped up. This included delivering materials at home, providing project based learning (PBL), one-to-one and face-to-face supports, placing daily phone calls, with specific attention to the most vulnerable (ibid.). This is an evidence of a pastoral-like support with teachers joining forces to share intelligence, develop creative methods of teaching and develop targeted online materials. Arrangements also occurred within households and social networks, with families informally grouping for home schooling and in some situation developing

innovative home-made solutions to provide support to their children (Coleman, 2021).

Given the slow roll-out of digital devices from the government, other support mechanisms, driven by charities and communities but also schools developed quickly at local level, to provide vulnerable children with devices. When access to online learning was a challenge, labour intensive methods were used including printed resources (Julius and Sims, 2020), phone and video calls, home delivery, postal services rather than using school websites and online tools. Digital asynchronous learning such as pre-recorded lessons and recording voice messages became a norm to alleviate pressures on disadvantaged parents and their children sharing devices with siblings (Coleman, 2021).

Vocational courses (e.g. at Further Education Colleges) were significantly disrupted (Stone, 2021). This impacted young people's employment prospects. Here again, Covid exposed and exacerbated inequalities that already existed prior to the pandemic. It led to a tougher labour market and rise of unemployment amongst young people. The numbers of 16-24 years old seeking employment doubled from March 2020 to 450,000 in mid-2021 (Youth Employment Group, 2021). When 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).

Other curriculum areas, and especially the applied sciences and sports, were particularly negatively affected, with less than 70% coverage of the usual curriculum (Edge Foundation, 2021, Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Curriculums were adapted by subject and differed based on every school assessment methodology with the majority adopting the National Tutorial Programme (NTP) (Ofsted, 2022). Modifications in numeracy and literacy skills, followed narrow, blended, focused and continuous adaptations, with the last three achieving better results than the narrow model (Nelson, 2021). 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). In July 2020, a study covering 2,200 primary and secondary England schools engaging 3,000 headteachers, pointed that students were at least three months behind the usual curriculum and in

most deprived areas more than four months (Sharp et al., 2020).

With regard to adaptations in relation to assessment, new grading scales 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 levels 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 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).

It is worth noting the crucial roles of teachers in the pandemic overall. Teachers went beyond their traditional responsibility to liaise with authorities and social services in order to ensure learning, food distribution and mental support towards students. Over a third of them provided their own personal laptops and devices to sustain educational continuity (Sharp et al. 2020). Various mechanisms were used for teachers to ensure their welfare duty too, from having 1-to-1 online or phone calls with children, visiting vulnerable children at their homes, seeing the students at school, in line with the distribution of food parcels and handing meals vouchers at their expense (Moss et al. 2020, HRW 2020).

Food

Access to food was severely impacted for vulnerable young people during the pandemic and food insecurity increased amongst monetary poor households, along with rising difficulties accessing a balanced nutrition (Goudie and McIntyre, 2020). Food insecurity is directly linked to housing insecurity, and during the pandemic the inability to access nutritious meals affected young people's mental well-being (more with female students) resulting in a loss of trust in their education establishment (Defeyter et al. 2021). In addition to housing insecurities and financial strain and gender, ethnicity emerged as a factor, with BAME communities consistently encountering disproportionately higher levels of food insecurity compared with white communities (ibid., Goudie and McIntyre, 2020).

Young people relying on accessing food at school suffered greatly as reliance on school meals was significantly disrupted during lockdowns periods (Schleicher, 2020). Due to lockdown restrictions, 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). They relied on local food providers and small-scale grocery markets often selling food at higher prices and not accepting the food voucher scheme (House of Commons, 2020).

In light of the above challenges, the role of the charitable sector, religious and faith groups increased, along with the reliance on food banks (Caplan, 2020, Bayes et al., 2021). Together, they were able to transform their operations quickly and at local scales. Through solidarity, dedication and an increasing number of volunteers coming forward, they were able to set up collection points, provide door-to-door delivery, and keep food pantries open for the community while applying the rules of safe distancing (Oncini, 2021). Free food parcels were delivered through very diverse, and locally based arrangements involving community groups, charities, but also via schools and teachers, in some cases, using personal budget and own funds in providing food meals (Moss et al., 2020, Sharp et al. 2020, HRW 2020). New community groups also emerged (e.g. associations of volunteers within local communities) and mutual aid groups (family/friends) through social networks. These fostered informal support such as helping a neighbour to access food or shopping (Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland, 2021).

Provision of food to children and young people in need during school holidays was a major challenge. The DfE Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme that started back in 2018 with £2 million to operate and pilot the programme fell short in 2022 by £1.3 million and the need for non-funded DfE holiday programmes and clubs became essential to filling the gap during the pandemic and to sustaining the health and wellbeing of the most disadvantaged children (Bayes et al., 2021). Criticisms were raised in terms of the value and nutritious content of some of the food packages that were distributed and a lack of sensitivity to food allergies and intolerances (House of Commons 2020, Defeyter et al. 2021). The vouchers systems provided on the other hand more flexibility for young people to access more diverse food. It however remained with barriers for example due to their format in not being cash or executed via credit cards, hence stigmatizing families (Connors et al., 2020).

Awareness in terms of accessing healthy food had other challenges not only due to food insecurity, access to cheaper food providers but also due to two factors: the first was the ease of access to junk food via online food

delivery services (OFDS) such as UberEats/DoorDash/Menulog/Deliveroo; the second was how these top OFDS explicitly targeted UK children on social media into consuming unhealthy items, particularly during lockdowns (Jia et al., 2021). Children's eating habits were impacted, in part leading to an increase in obesity (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021, 2022).

"Free food parcels were delivered through very diverse, and locally based arrangements involving community groups, charities, but also via schools and teachers, in some cases, using personal budget and own funds in providing food meals."

At household levels, the combination of lockdown and restricted mobilities meant that individual self-sufficiency towards food increased. This was combined with a change of eating habits driven by financial rationales, typically stricter budgeting, less impulse buying, preferences given for non-perishable and inexpensive food, and a reduction of meat and dairy consumption (Hassen, Kapetanaki and Spotswood, 2022, Oncini, 2021). In some cases, it also transformed the families' attitudes and practices towards food, with an increase interest in cooking, experimenting with new recipes and consuming non-perishable food products such as pasta and rice (Hassen, Kapetanaki and Spotswood, 2022). The change in habits did extend to the young population with an increasing interest to grow food hence generating a self-sufficient adaptation (Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland, 2021). Here the use of vouchers did indirectly contribute in empowering young people to buy their own products, cook and feel more independent. Online videos posted on Facebook promoted cooking activities to engage communities'

solidarity and in some instances created a “play book and food book” targeting the young population with home-cooked food ideas (Bayes et al., 2021).

Overall, a range of measures and forms of collaboration ensured the distribution of food through schools, food banks and (inter-)household sharing (AAPG, 2022), gradually addressing the government’s fragmented responses (Barker and Russell, 2020). It was only in the later phases of the pandemic that the government response become more efficient with increased food supplies along with food donations coming from supermarkets (Pautz and Dempsey, 2021).

Play/leisure

Access to play and leisure for young people was highly problematic during the pandemic. Children’s right to play was noted by authorities but in practice was not implemented or addressed (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). Lockdowns halted children and young people’s physical activities with gyms, leisure clubs, pitches, playgrounds and sports’ courts, all shut down (Sport England, 2020). Daily sports routines and exercises were altered and needed to be adapted to confined spaces (ibid.). Collective and group activities either disappeared or shrank due to social distancing (Spacey, Hatton and Crawshaw, 2021). This did increase isolation and the importance of the bedroom as a play space thus heightening the significance of e-gaming (Casey and McKendrick, 2022).

Regulations in terms of the number of household members that could mix was highly restrictive for families with several children. This restrained families with more than one child to mix, all together. As such, for most of the pandemic, play was segregated in schools by age groups, which was detrimental to many children. Thus, for many young people, play and social interactions shifted online with 92% of 16 to 24 years old reported engaging in online gaming (Ofcom, 2021). Overall, as a result of the above factors, young people’s physical activity reduced by 68% (Spacey, Hatton and Crawshaw, 2021). In general, vulnerable children with less supervision and care provided by adults tend to play outside the home and have dedicated times and spaces (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). This ability was impacted due to mobility restrictions and their amount of play was reduced during lockdowns (ibid.)

Moreover, due to the issue of the digital divide, young people experiencing intersectional disadvantages appeared to be more vulnerable to digital-leisure exclusions (Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Owing to the closure of community and leisure centres, many young

people (teenagers and above) used public and semi-public spaces to meet, often facing the risk of fines. Such inequalities particularly affected young people in black communities. Indeed, amongst vulnerable young people, BAME children were further disadvantaged as they often tend to rely more on schools’ sports provisions (BBC, 2020).

Overall, the play and leisure of children and young people living in monetary poor households were impacted further due to the combination of three key factors: limited access and poor quality of green and public spaces around their homes; limited opportunities to play at home (due to overcrowding, no garden or difficult family conditions); the digital divide restricting a shift to online playing/socialising and hence enhancing digital-leisure exclusions. The reduction of play, leisure and social interactions opportunities led to a range of adaptations based on versatility, and improvisations (which included in some instances bypassing authorities’ set of regulations). Illicit and liminal leisure practices also increased with the vulnerable young population meeting and socialising despite restrictions (Woodrow and Moore, 2021).

Despite the above trends, as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as spaces of interactive play (Russell and Stenning, 2021). Even if these processes were not implemented on a larger scale nor 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, the use of non-traditional playgrounds such as woods and temporary activities led by parents, volunteers or by play workers, such as chalk hopscotches, play trails, colouring i.e. houses’ windows brought intergenerational play to the fore.

Playworkers and play organisations developed innovative ways of gathering children to play online but also, through various supports, arranged the delivery of play parcels to those in need. Here 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 therefore became key hubs for support for young people during the pandemic (ibid., 2020).

Conclusion

Overall, in England, children and young people, particularly those living in monetary poor households have been dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic while not being considered as a priority group by the national government. Access to education and food was significantly impacted and the range of support schemes took too long to be equally implemented to address the immediate challenges faced by schools and tackle the dramatic rise of food poverty. Play, however, was by far the most ignored aspect.

The impact of the pandemic will have detrimental consequences for children and young people in the short and long-term, with many not yet visible. It will have continuing consequences for their future in terms of professional life trajectories, healthy lifestyles, mental wellbeing, educational opportunities, self-confidence and more besides. Such consequences are exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living and inflation crisis with noticeable inequalities amongst regions in England (North/South and North East/North West divides), whilst increasing the socio-economic strain on ethnic groups and widening divides within cities (typically in London).

A significant amount of public funding was allocated to emergency funding during the pandemic. It was nevertheless insufficient and poorly targeted in some cases. Some (vulnerable) children and young people will struggle to catch up and have had their lives changed during the pandemic. The daily survival of children and young people and their families was effectively ensured due to the involvement and commitment of individuals, communities, charities, schools and teachers but also faith groups, who all unprecedentedly stepped-in as part of the 'pandemic' solidarity effort.

What is apparent is that the voices of children and young people in England were mostly ignored during the pandemic as this age group was not considered as a priority nor 'at-risk' from a public health perspective. In a context where the response to COVID-19 has been driven by science but also politics, strategies and policies in the future need to adequately consider, and include, children and young people's priorities. Children, young people and the most vulnerable of this group need to be engaged more thoroughly to tackle resilience and social justice.

Section 3.

National Overview – South Africa

Introduction

South Africa is a middle-income country that became a democracy in 1994 after centuries of colonial (and apartheid) rule. South Africa has a population of approximately 60 million people. Nearly 38 million people are younger than 35, and 17 million are younger than 14 (Stats SA, 2021). The democratic government prioritised addressing historical inequalities. Although much progress has been made, the country still struggles with racial divisions, inequalities and poverty (Francis & Webster, 2019; Todes & Turok, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected South Africa in five waves from March 2020 to June 2022. Vaccines became available during Wave 3 though vaccine uptake was slow. Vaccines and herd immunity slowed deaths despite the cases per million population being very high during Waves 3 and 4. The 103,000 deaths resulting from the pandemic are approximately 0.17 per million South African population, though official statistics are an undercount, with excess mortality potentially been as high as 334,704 (3 May 2020-10 Dec 2022) (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Research shows that the deaths in South Africa are related to limited knowledge and understanding of the virus, complacency and vaccination hesitancy (Cooper et al., 2021; Al Hasan et al., 2022).

COVID-19 morbidity figures are lower for children (19 years and younger). For example, this group represents nearly 15% of the South African population, but only 12.5% of the positive tests were in this age group (by Dec 2022). Despite the lower death rates, COVID-19 had several other implications for children and young people (Van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). These impacts and related adaptations are discussed in the rest of this section.

3.1 Pre-COVID 19 situation

South Africa has some of the highest inequalities in the world. Many of these inequalities are visible in existing health, education, poverty and employment patterns. This strongly connects to the food/education/play-leisure nexus. Although online learning has been available in home-schooling programmes and some private schools, it was largely absent in public schools. Generally, schools have limited data access and teachers are generally not well-trained to use digital forms of teaching. The National School Nutrition Programme provides daily food to about 9 million learners at 20 000 schools (Tomlinson et al., 2021), as 30% of children live below the food poverty line (May et al., 2020). Schools are also often the sources of organised school sports. Typically, children will compete in organised sports for their school. However, in deprived areas, sports clubs for young people often function where organised school sport is not available

South Africa has a highly differentiated education system. School education is distributed over 12 years (from Grades 1 to 12 - grade 0 is not a legal requirement and is often absent in deprived areas). There are about 13 million pupils in schools with 440 000 teachers. A further 30 000 Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres operate nationwide. The post-school education system does not follow the educational pyramid. There are 1.1 million young people at public universities and about 0.5 million at technical and vocational training institutions. School attendance has steadily increased from 92 to 95% between 2002 and 2018, with a substantial increase in children attending school a year before Grade 1 (May et al., 2020). Schools from deprived areas fair generally worse on Grade 12 results and other educational outcomes.

According to a report released by Stats SA (2021), more than 6 out of 10 (62,1%) children aged 0–17

were multidimensionally poor. Approximately 68.3% of black children have multidimensional forms of poverty, compared to 11.5% of white children. About 26.5% of children in South Africa are not provided with their daily nutrition needs and are deprived in more than three other areas (Stats SA, 2021). In 2015, more than a quarter of South Africans lived below the food poverty line (World Health Organization, 2018). Stunting levels for children under five are estimated at 27% (May et al., 2020). However, large geographic differences exist, with the highest stunting levels in rural areas and urban informal settlements (Marais et al., 2023). Research shows that child hunger decreased between 2002 and 2018 (May et al., 2020) and levels of stunting are lower than 30 years ago. Access to social grants is one way of addressing these concerns and there is evidence that grant access reduces hunger (Chakona & Shackleton, 2019). Yet, COVID regulations have disrupted these trends.

3.2 Policy Responses to COVID-19 in regards to the provision of education/ food/play-leisure to young people, particularly the most vulnerable ones

By declaring South Africa to be in a state of disaster, the national government imposed measures to curb the spread of the virus (Du Plessis et al., 2022). Limiting the spread of the virus allowed the government to prepare the health system. In addition to measures observed globally and aligned with WHO guidance, hard lockdown regulations (27 March 2020 to 1 May 2020) included deploying the South African army to enforce lockdown measures (leading to riots in major cities) and initially prohibit Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) from providing food. Schools and universities were closed with a request to shift somehow online. Lockdown regulations did affect livelihoods, especially in the townships where violence against citizens defying the regulations was rife (Langa & Leopeng, 2020). These regulations inhibited economic activity and increased the unemployment rate from 29.2% during the 2019 fourth quarter to 33.9% in June 2022. People in the informal economy suffered the most as they could not operate (van der Berg et al., 2022). Informal food value chains were significantly affected, impacting all those living in monetary poor households.

Overall, the South African government provided social support to the value of R500 billion (US\$ 2 879 935

450) (Mazenda et al., 2022). These grants included a COVID-19 relief grant that provided a very small financial support for people who lost their jobs. For example, the Department of Social Development initiated the social relief of distress (SRD) grant². This consisted of providing food parcels as a temporary measure to assist those in need who could not meet their basic needs. The child support grant was temporarily increased, and the government provided food parcels. The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) provides food to children at schools. The nutrition programme aims to “ensure that children have access to basic nutrition” so that they can learn. Although it was temporarily stopped in March 2020, it became available again when schools opened in July 2020 (Seekings, 2020). No support was provided regarding unequal access to digital devices and the internet (particularly children who were supposed to learn ‘online’).

"Lockdown regulations did affect livelihoods, especially in the townships where violence against citizens defying the regulations was rife."

During 2020 and 2021, different options were available to school governing bodies as periods of hard lockdown involving full closures (hence full ‘online education’) remained limited to short periods. 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). The bi-weekly rotations were a common choice where 50% of the learners attended school 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). For learners in deprived areas, this often meant they had one week of school and did not do any work

² Directions Issued in Terms Of Regulation 4(5) And (10) Of The Regulations Made Under Section 27(2) Of The Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 Of 2002): Measures To Prevent And Combat The Spread Of COVID-19

in the second week. In addition to days of schooling lost, several other regulations affected children. These included teachers wearing masks (making learning more difficult), not being able to play at school (because of social distancing guidelines) or doing school sports (it was banned from Wave 1 to 27 March 2021) (Maree, 2022). School closures also meant that the school feeding scheme did not operate (Broughton, 2020). The rotations approach school further inhibited access to the school feeding scheme.

3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people and related adaptations

Education

South Africa emulated the global trend of closing schools, with schools fully closed for 107 days, and partially closed for 335 days between 16/02/2020 to 30/04/2022 (UNESCO 2022). There is also evidence of a rapid decline in the number of children attending ECD centres, dropping from more than 90% in 2018 to only 33% in 2020 (Tomlinson et al., 2022). During partial closure days, the shift to full or partial use of online learning had limited reach, with only 11.7% of the schools in 2020 offering an e-learning plan. Approximately 24.7% of learners in urban schools attended online, with the comparative figure for rural schools being 7.6% (Nkomo et al., 2023).

This was just one example of the digital divide (Jantjies, 2020) as there were also a stark divides on the basis of both race and class, demonstrating stark intersectional issues. For example, 18.3% of white learners accessed online learning compared to 5.3% of black learners (Stats SA, 2021). The need to move online also placed pressure on household resources and dynamics. Research pointed to peer pressure amongst children which was transferred to their parents to access the required device for online learning as schools required these to go digital (Law et al., 2022).

The loss of school days logically contributed to poorer educational outcomes, noting that limited evidence is available yet on this. One study that is currently available looked at schools in the Western Cape. Regarding performance declines in Systemic Tests from 2019 to 2021 for Grades 3, 6 and 9 students, for languages, the decline was between 15-27%, and for mathematics, the decline was between 32-39% (van der Berg et al 2022).

There is evidence that the pandemic also increased school dropouts. The increase is despite the existing

large number of dropouts before 2020. Out-of-school children aged 5-18 increased from 260 000 in 2019 to nearly 880 000 in 2020 (Stats SA, 2021). A study among African adolescents (including South Africa) shows that 72% of these respondents said they stopped attending school because of COVID-19 (Wang et al., 2021). Shepard and Mohohlwane (2022, p. 762) estimate that these dropouts and the learning loss have “worn away at two decades of progress made in basic education”. Dropouts seem also higher amongst disabled learners (Makuyana, 2022).

Indeed, the closure of schools transferred the responsibility for learning to parents. Although home environments are natural places of learning, most parents do not have the skills to provide learning and playing environments or understand their importance in children’s development and well-being (Nkomo et al., 2023). The pressure to provide food and income has also affected parents’ ability to attend to their children’s playing and learning needs (ibid). Research also reported the lack of general child care, with working parents not having safe places to take their children when ECDs were closed (Naicker & Richter, 2022). Children were also affected by increased violence at home that resulted from lockdown and economic hardship (Mahlangu et al., 2022; Naicker & Richter, 2022).

Food

Noting the existing challenges to food insecurity, with at least a quarter of South African households running out of money for food in 2018, COVID dramatically exacerbated this already substantial problem. In April 2020, as many as 48% of households in South Africa ran out of money for food in the past month, with this improving by March 2021 to 35%, but still remaining higher than pre-pandemic levels (van der Berg et al 2022). Specifically in terms of child hunger, levels were lower but still concerning. In April 2020, 19% of adults reported a child in their household going hungry, by March 2021, this had only dropped to 15.% (Alaba et al 2022). It is too early to know the exact impacts of this, however as mentioned earlier in this report, pre-pandemic, 27.4% of South African children under five were stunted (May et al 2020) which is a key indicator of malnutrition with links to poor cognitive performance, lower future productivity and diminished future health prospects). It is likely that this figure has worsened, reversing decades of progress.

There were two main ways in which children’s access to food was impacted, the first of which was 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. Secondly, the pandemic severely impacted the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which was arguably the largest direct food support initiative in South Africa, providing approximately 9 million learners with meals during the school week. With the closure of schools, this program was temporarily closed, and despite a court order in July 2020, it took more than a year for this program to be fully restarted. Despite the resumption of this program with the reopening of schools, due to school dropouts resulting from COVID-19, feeding schemes have also not recovered the number of children reached before the outbreak (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2022).

In adapting to this reality, young people and children typically skipped a meal. This was a strategy that was adopted by most households in poor neighbourhoods to cope with food insecurity (Matamanda et al., 2022). Some households resorted to less nutritious foods such as canned foods as they could not buy perishables in bulk due to lack of electricity to store the food or lack of access to markets and informal food vending, in periods of lockdowns, where they could get fresh fruits and vegetables (Thomas, 2021).

Play/Leisure

School closure, rotational schooling and the lockdown inhibited the recreational and leisure opportunities and, ultimately, the social interaction of young people. Lockdown inhibited play and despite the potential of the home environment for play, many parents are unaware of the value of play for physical development and learning (Nkomo et al., 2023; Bipath et al., 2022). Physical outdoor activities (sports or play) are important for children to learn social skills, gross motor skills (Hazlehurst et al., 2022), their physical development and learning. In this respect, Nkomo et al. (2023) pointed out that COVID-19 restrictions led to not having age-appropriate fun and resources to play with. This was exacerbated under the adjusted alert levels 5 and 4 when nobody could access parks, beaches and dams (Nkomo et al., 2023).

Severe restrictions towards play, leisure and socialising had very severe consequences. 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). Naiker and Richter (2022) reported behavioural concerns, like children being unable to show affection.

The shift to online playing was difficult for the most vulnerable children and young people. 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 & Sizani, 2020).

"COVID-19 restrictions led to not having age-appropriate fun and resources to play with. This was exacerbated under the adjusted alert levels 5 and 4 when nobody could access parks, beaches and dams."

One important figure to note is that due to high school dropout rates and unemployment in South Africa, around 34.3% of young people aged 15-24 years are not in education, employment or training (NEET), roughly around 3.5 million individuals, with COVID leading to an increase in these figures (Department for Higher Education and Training, 2023). While leisure is important to all individuals, for those who are NEET, it is an absolute priority for them given the lack of any other activity to fill their time.

Conclusion

The South African response to COVID-19 was a health response primarily focused on safeguarding adults. Initially, the government wanted to reduce infection rates and prepare hospitals. Saving adults resulted in a long-term cost for children and young people. Schools were closed and later opened rotationally. When schools reopened, the focus was on learning. For example, school reopening meant social distance had to be kept

(inhibiting play) and school sports were impossible. In the initial lockdown, closures meant children could not access school feeding schemes. Although this improved, many children remained deprived of daily meals because they did not attend school daily. Parents who lost their jobs could not provide household meals. In turn, the lack of food affected the ability of children and young people to learn (and play). The policy responses were often one-directional towards adult health and, when that was addressed, largely focused on learning. Admittedly, social relief was instrumental during lockdown periods, and policies should do more to account for the complexities associated with children and young people.

COVID-19 also revealed the gross inequalities and the plight of poor households. Often this is along racial lines. Although far less likely to die because of COVID-19, young people were disproportionately affected, particularly those who were non-white. Their learning and play were disrupted, while access to food also prevented learning and play. Future policies and regulations could do more to integrate the complexities associated with learning, play and food. Although our work focuses on learning, play and food, a related consequence of the pandemic in South Africa, as in other countries, has been its impact on health and mental health. Normal child vaccinations have fallen behind because of prioritising COVID (Yousif et al., 2023). A decline in clinic and hospital attendance of children was noted (Jensen and McKerrow, 2021). This will have significant impact on children and young people lives in the future.

Section 4.

National Overview – Brazil

Introduction

Brazil is the seventh most unequal country in the world and its inequalities are deeply entrenched in class and race. In 2019, 51.9 million Brazilians were living in poverty and 13.9 million in extreme poverty with black women (33%) two times more affected than white women and men (15% each) (Nassif-Pires et al. 2021). Vulnerable young people are one of the most affected groups. In 2020, 40% of Brazilian children and adolescents were living in monetary poverty, compared to 20% of the adult population (UNICEF 2022). The health, social, economic, and political crisis of the last years devastated the Brazilian population, particularly the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated children and young people's vulnerabilities.

Brazil lived through the pandemic under a far-right government who adopted a negationist policy of death rejecting science (Giatti et al 2021). It resulted in the vaccination process being postponed, the use of masks and social isolation being neglected, and disinformation spreading through social networks. Despite the efforts made by some authorities at municipal and state level, thousands of preventable deaths occurred. As a result, vulnerable communities often constructed their own preventive measures to try to protect themselves (Boullosa and Peres 2022, Domingos, Mitkiewicz and Saldiva 2022).

As in many other countries, Brazilian children and young people, particularly those living in monetary poor conditions, were the least considered social groups in health crisis mitigation strategies. Schools' prolonged closure and the challenges in implementing distance/online learning models, considering teachers and students' lack of access to resources, such as technology and training, along with housing conditions for home-schooling, led to learning opportunities

losses. Food insecurity increased along with their abilities to play and socially interact.

4.1 Pre-Covid Situation

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges for education in Brazil were already countless, including key challenges in studies' completion and dropouts rates, with the latest affecting children and young people living in low income households eight times more than those in higher incomes families (OECD 2021). That said, since 2000, enrolment and educational attainment rates had increased particularly in Early Childhood and Higher Education (OECD 2021), as well as in the proportion of young people completing primary and secondary school (Senkevics and Carvalho 2020). After the impeachment of President Rousseff, in 2016, democratic spaces for building, evaluating, and monitoring educational policies were weakened. The Spending Cap introduced in that same year, under the pretext of controlling the public deficit, compromised the development of social investments in health, education and infrastructure and prioritised neo-liberal and business driven policies. This was intensified under Jair Bolsonaro's government (2019-2022) with the education sector being an under-prioritised, under-resourced and as a result very fragile sector. In 2019, 80.9% of Brazilian students were enrolled in State public schools functioning with little financial means. Most Brazilian students had no previous experience with remote learning prior to the pandemic (CETIC.BR 2021).

Although Brazil left the UN Hunger Map in 2014, the 2016 onwards political shift led to an increase of food insecurity and poorer living conditions. Brazil is currently characterised by a nutritional transitional process during which undernutrition is declining but obesity increasing (Martins et al., 2021). This particularly affects the Brazilian adolescent population and most notably the most vulnerable, while reflecting wider

global trends where poverty, inappropriate nutritional behaviours and social vulnerability lead to obesity. This shift is also linked to environmental challenges (including access to water and sanitation). Together, these factors foster an increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods at the expense of fresh and healthy foods (Swinburn et al., 2019).

Between 2004 and 2013, food security in the country improved (Cotta and Machado, 2013). This was linked to the Zero Hunger scheme and the Bolsa Família Program (PBF) which provided cash transfer directly to families in poverty and extreme poverty, aiming at combating hunger and promoting food and nutritional security. By 2009, the number of beneficiaries reached 12.4 million (Cotta and Machado, 2013). Another important measure was the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE). Established in 2009, it provided access to nutritious food for over 41 million school children (Pereira et al., 2020). However, in the past decade, with the change of governments and economic situation, the country faced a reversed pathway: between 2013 and 2018 severe food insecurity increased 8.0% per year and from 2018 to 2020 hunger increased by 27.6% (Rede PENSSAN, 2021). The number of people facing severe food insecurity reached 19.1 million, affecting more than 60% of the households in the North and 70% in the Northeast, compared to the national prevalence of 55.2%.

In the Brazilian Constitution, play is recognized as a right. This was established in 1990, when the grassroots pressure intensified after the UNCRC convention led to the enactment of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA). However, access to play is unequal in the country. There is an overall lack of access to leisure spaces in lower income neighbourhoods as investment in playing/leisure facilities focuses on higher income and central touristic areas (Andrade et al., 2022). Access to these facilities for those living in conditions of urban vulnerability is challenging due to mobility issues including high public transportation fares, frequency and travelling times (Pellanda and Frossard, 2022). In deprived and low income neighbourhoods play time mostly happens in school and daycare centres (typically in playgrounds), as those neighborhoods lack places designed for children to play .

The guarantee of access to play, in open, green and safe spaces, is thus strongly connected to schools and education. Some past public initiatives, such as the Integral Education policy and More Education Program (2007-2016) proposed the extension of students' school day by carrying out activities in school and in surrounding spaces; these were recognized as learning

territories (Lecler and Moll, 2012). This programme was relying on significant investments including restructuring school's places, but it was interrupted in 2016. Recent data shows that in 2023, around 80% of the 40 million Brazilian students spend only 4 hours in school (Instituto Natura 2023) hence have very limited opportunities for safe play. Since 2016, there have been very few initiatives to promote and encourage play and leisure and this included very limited investment in schools' playing equipment. Only 40% of preschool buildings have playgrounds, 33% have open playgrounds, and 24% have green areas (Instituto Alana 2020). Among schools that underwent recent renovations, 73.4% invested in renovating classrooms, whereas 26.6% focused on sports courts (Education Ministry 2022). This confirms that play/leisure is not a priority of current public policy affecting even further children and young people living in deprived settings.

"Despite schools' key role in providing education, food and play, in-person lessons were paralysed for most of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021."

4.2 Policy Responses to COVID-19 in regard to the provision of education/ food/play-leisure to young people, particularly the most vulnerable ones

The negationist Brazilian national approach with respect to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic was displayed in governmental discourses and positions that confronted science and renowned public research institutions. The Ministry of Health was led by a military general with no public health qualification from September 2020 until the end of Bolsonaro's term. Even after Brazil reached 150,000 deaths in October 2020, the government continued to downplay the pandemic, prioritising economic activities and advocating for chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine's use in patients with COVID-19 (Giatti et al., 2021). The

vaccination programme was postponed, the use of masks and social isolation neglected, and the most vulnerable communities were forced to work with no social distancing in place. Although Brazil had a strong and decentralized system that allowed the control and prevention of infectious diseases, at regional and local levels, this was not enough to tackle the impact of the pandemic which hit the most vulnerable population the hardest (Tebet et al., 2022).

Some socio-economic support programmes were adopted during the pandemic typically the Emergency Aid policy which aimed at mitigating poverty and extreme poverty. After its implementation, in the 2020 third trimester, children living in monetary poverty dropped from 40% to 35%, and in the following months after the reduction of the benefit, it rose again to 39% (Nassif-Pires et al., 2021). This program reached about 80% of young people who were not studying or were not working at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (Silva and Vaz, 2020). Hunger was still present in 21.5% of the households receiving the Emergency Aid, hence that aid was insufficient (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). Many low-income households were excluded from the scheme and experienced a significant increase of food and nutrition security which is since then steadily increasing. Overall, little effort was made by the federal government to prevent hunger and the rise in food prices. In April 2022, the inflation of food consumed at home hit 16.12% (Campos et al., 2022). Healthier foods with higher nutritional quality are those that have seen the greatest increase while foods of low nutritional quality and ultra-processed foods have varied below average inflation.

Despite schools' key role in providing education, food and play, in-person lessons were paralysed for most of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, with closures/openings being defined by local governments (regional and municipal). Estimates reveal that schools were closed for more than 40 weeks in Brazil (UNESCO, 2021). In this scenario, school feeding was also compromised, worsening food insecurity amongst vulnerable children and young people. A national emergency law authorized the reallocation of the national school feeding programme resources to support monetary poor families with children enrolled in the scheme. However, by leaving it up to the local government to decide whether or not to distribute food, and how, many children and young people were left out (Pereira et al., 2020).

With regard to access to education, the Ministry of Education decreed the suspension of in-person classes

and their replacement by remote activities. However, this was preceded by a series of diffuse and unclear proposals that reflected a lack of leadership and vision. This left decision-making in the hands of states and municipalities who developed different contingency plans to replace face to face lessons and use alternative technological tools. This was highly problematic as most Brazilian teachers had never used such resources (Vieira and Silva, 2020). In order to address a severe digital divide, national and regional initiatives led to establishing agreements with mobile Internet operators to offer subsidized access to students, with the distribution of chips with access to the network. In São Paulo, for example, 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).

As a consequence of the schools' building closure, play and leisure was significantly impacted during the pandemic. During the so-called red phase, the period with the highest levels of COVID-19 transmissions, many Brazilian cities closed public spaces, such as parks, in order to contain the agglomeration of people. Squares were fenced and walled off. Some States and municipalities also adopted curfews as a measure to contain people's circulation (Bertoni 2021). The need for social isolation as a defence practice against the virus drastically affected the daily lives of many children and young people (Silva et al 2022a). However, issues of over crowding, no back-gardens and the absence of individual spaces within homes in peripheral deprived communities (Tebet et al., 2021), led to the constant presence of children and young people in streets and public spaces.

4.3 Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people and related adaptations

Education

The omission of the federal government and the absence of a coordinated policy at regional and municipal levels led to education insecurity making the country move away from completing the goals established by its own National Education Plan (PNE). In the city of São Paulo, for example, education professionals and families reported a lack of information from municipal authorities regarding emergency remote teaching or the return of classroom activities, which reflected concerns and generated low

expectations around the support of public authorities to ensure a safe reopening of schools (Apé_estudos em mobilidade , 2021). Among children and teenagers between 6 and 15 years old, the main resources used to follow remote activities were school websites, social networks or video conferencing platforms. Three quarters of Internet users aged 16-older from lower-class accessed the internet exclusively through their cell phone. While 70% of Internet users aged 16 and older from upper-class attending school or university used a portable computer such as a notebook and 46% used a desktop computer, the proportions fell to 32% and 19%, respectively, among middle-class users, and to 12% for both devices among those in lower-class. Most young people aged 15 to 17 years (92%) have their own smartphone, which means a small part of users share a cell phone with others in the household (CETIC. BR, 2020).

As a result, Brazilian students faced a number of 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). In addition, lower-class students 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). These severely impacted their education.

To address increasing challenges related to online learning related to inequalities and the digital divide, adaptations, many of them led by schools, included using television and radio broadcasts, delivering printed materials, and using digital media such as apps and virtual platforms. Social media became the most adopted technology used by 91% of Brazilian schools to maintain contact with students or their guardians, which made sense since among Brazilian children aged 10 to 17 years, 86% had a profile on WhatsApp and 61% on Facebook (CETIC.BR, 2020). Overall, though, no programme nor adaptations adequately reduced the digital access gap in Brazil and hence tackled educational needs during the pandemic.

Food

Food insecurity dramatically increased during the pandemic (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). By 2022, only 41.3% of households were in a situation of food security, while 28.0% were uncertain about access to food. 30.1% of the households lived with quantitative food restriction,

and 15.5% of them were in a situation of hunger. Effectively, 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). More than 6 out of 10 households in some level of food insecurity were female-headed, identifying themselves as black or brown (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). 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).

"The pandemic dramatically affected children and young people living in urban vulnerable conditions in Brazil."

Owing to the failure of state representatives to provide for everyone's needs, 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 solidarity mobilization and donations increased. 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). Alongside NGOs, individuals, public institutions, private companies (for example banks), religious and community-led organisations got together. Two exemplary urban favelas in São Paulo city – Paraisópolis and Heliópolis – have witnessed and welcomed wide-range community-led initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of the pandemic, tackle wider social needs (including food, health and care for the most vulnerable) (Boullosa and Peres, 2022; Domingos et al., 2022).

Play/Leisure

Social interaction restrictions affected children and young people and the internet became the main vehicle of communication and sociability, with its use also increasing for leisure activities (da Silva et al., 2020b). Social isolation also culminated in a greater consumption of apps and games among children and teenagers (Bússola, 2021). 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).

Social isolation was not experienced in the same way for all children and young people. In low income urban settlements, boundaries between public space (i.e. the street) and private space (i.e. the house) do not manifest in the same way as in middle and high-income neighbourhoods where public outdoor spaces can act as sociable spaces. In some cases, the use of public space for playing activities in Brazilian favelas was replaced by the space inside the house or in the backyard (Locomotiva and Data Favela, 2021), noting the very small size of the latter. Also, because of their small size - which means it might get more crowded - many young people from these communities could not practice social isolation the same way as upper and middle-classes and found leisure by playing outdoors in the street and other public spaces (Tebet et al., 2021).

NGOs and other civil society organizations responsible for carrying out after-school activities before the pandemic adapted in developing activities in the hybrid model, in order to maintain children's socialisation. In that sense, they carried out actions such as the distribution of play kits with educational materials to be handled by families and created online spaces of interaction (Memoricidade, 2020). However, such practices were less dedicated to young people within a higher age-group.

Conclusion

The pandemic dramatically affected children and young people living in urban vulnerable conditions in Brazil and reinforced how young people in the country are not listened to or even considered in policies (Silva et al., 2022b, Tebet et al., 2021). Children and young people suffered from their rights being denied further.

This was due to several factors: the closing of schools, the aggravated situation of unemployment especially for those who are working in the informal sector, the reduction of families income and the increase in food prices, leading to a situation of hunger and food insecurity for thousands of families but also the curtailment of the use of public spaces for leisure activities. The impact on their health, particularly their mental health but also with regard to access to nutritious food is significant and will have long lasting impacts.

Brazil lived through the pandemic under a federal government that was in denial about COVID-19 severe sanitarian, health, and social consequences. Despite the efforts made by some authorities at the municipal and state level, thousands of preventable deaths have occurred, including of young people (Giatti et al., 2021). In this context, young people living in urban vulnerability survived and coped thanks to community-led actions and initiatives led within their deprived settlements (Boullosa and Peres 2022; Domingos et al., 2022). Some of these community practices have increased in scale over time, while others have not been sustained due a lack of volunteers and funding.

A wider range of lessons can be reported. The pandemic has reinforced the importance of public schools to provide vulnerable young people's access to education, play, leisure but also promote their socialization (Silva et al 2022a). In the future, attention needs to be given to increasing the quality of education; this includes investments in initial and continuing teacher education, better working conditions and decision-making power, and institutional support. This also includes major investments in the strengthening and expansion of the schools' infrastructure for learning but also playing, crucial for tackling the increasing challenge of mental health and obesity.

Finally, considering the severe situation of food insecurity in which young people and their families live, a Programa Bolsa Família (BPF) type of policy is to be sought, conjointly targeting health and education. This is crucial considering that solidarity practices, although essential at the most critical moment of the pandemic, cannot be sustained over time. The autonomy of families in acquiring food must be accompanied by greater investment in policies to promote nutritional health, establishing food price control and regulating the sale and distribution of foods of low nutritional value.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Children and young people, and specifically those living in monetary poor households in England, South Africa and Brazil, 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 the hardest 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 all three case study countries, and despite their 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 prior to the pandemic (such as political austerity measures and pre-existing inequalities). COVID-19 revealed the dramatic extent of those inequalities, typically with regard to accessing affordable and nutritious food and in-person education, but in terms of the domestic sphere, where over-crowded 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 households' vulnerabilities due to the loss of incomes for parents and carers. Poverty hindered children and young people's abilities to cope and survive. 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 which led most countries, globally, to follow World Health Organization guidance, including lockdowns, limitations to movement and social distancing. This guidance translated into disruptions to schooling, food chains being broken, 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 provincial state governments 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 in regards to alternative education provision, taking into consideration 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 prior to the pandemic, their role in tackling food poverty became even more apparent and critical during COVID-19. Schools, as hubs, were often the place where food was either found, accessed, collected or distributed (with schools often partnering with non-for profit organisations or sites of self-organisation through their own staff and teachers). A key issue though here was access to nutritious and healthy food. This, in the majority of countries, wasn't 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 an increase in 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, well being and future opportunities for employment and positive family and social lives.

On the basis of 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 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. These are in addition to the country-specific recommendations outlined in the previous sections.

Recommendation 1: Not at risk is a risk.

Children and young people have been ignored in mainstream policy streams as they were at lower risk from 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 intersectional 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.

"Pressures on youth and their families are not fading but on the contrary are increasing."

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: Caring with multisectoral 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.



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