



COVID-19: Reversing Two Decades of Progress and Deepening Inequalities for Young People in Developing Countries

Overview

Over the last two decades, our evidence has shown significant improvements in the overall living standards of Young Lives families. Young people are substantially better off than their parents and have aspirations for social mobility, despite the impact of persistent inequalities undermining educational outcomes and the chances of getting a decent job.

New research from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam paints a worrying picture of how the economic and social impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and related restrictions could not only halt progress made over the last two generations, but could also reverse life chances and entrench existing inequalities for many young people, hitting those living in poor communities hardest.

Ensuring that government policies and responses, alongside related donor support, address the specific needs of young people should be a central part of COVID-19 recovery packages if we are to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ensure that no one is left behind.

This snapshot summarises key findings from the second call in our phone survey, highlighting how the pandemic is impacting the lives of young people in low- and middle-income countries, and presents emerging policy recommendations in response to these impacts.

A third call will be completed by the end of 2020, followed by further analysis to test and refine these emerging findings, including on education, work, mental health, and domestic violence. Young Lives will also continue to research the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 over forthcoming survey rounds in the next few years.

Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. The study is divided into two age groups: 4,000 young people born in 1994 (the Older Cohort) and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort).

The Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey consists of three phone calls with each of our respondents in all four study countries, to better understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives and help to inform COVID-19 recovery plans.

Headlines from call 2

Data from call 2, carried out between August and October 2020, show that rising food prices and falling incomes, interrupted education and shifting job patterns are typically impacting young people living in rural areas and in the poorest households most. In Vietnam, where rural areas have been much less affected by the pandemic, it is those from urban and wealthier households who have been hardest hit by reduced income. Families are turning to traditional gender roles in times of stress, with young women bearing the greatest burden of increased household duties and looking after children, and young men more likely to have left education early to find work, often returning to family farms. Decreased well-being and high levels of anxiety and depression among young people, triggered by the pandemic, are cause for real concern, especially given the low availability of support services. A significant proportion of young people in India and Peru had experienced increased domestic violence during the periods of lockdown (we did not ask about domestic violence in our recent calls in Ethiopia and Vietnam¹).

Longer-term impacts may have lasting generational effects

While the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on the lives of young people are already evident in our findings, the longer-term impacts may have lasting generational effects. A substantial proportion of vulnerable young people never returning to the classroom to complete their studies may reverse opportunities for finding decent work and escaping poverty, deepening entrenched inequalities. Widespread stresses on household finances and school and university closures may lead to higher incidence of early marriage, especially among the poorest communities; previous Young Lives evidence demonstrates that girls staying in school is one of the most important factors to reduce early marriage, with teachers and social clubs playing a crucial role. Reduced availability of nutritious meals may impact the healthy development of babies (including in utero) and young children, leading to increasing levels of growth stunting, which we know from our previous research is associated with cognitive development and other aspects of child development.

COVID-19 recovery packages should adopt a broad approach

COVID-19 recovery packages should adopt a broad approach to ensure targeted social protection programmes are effectively aligned with efforts to support young people to complete quality education and access decent jobs and skills development, provide vital support services, including sexual and reproductive health services, and prevent and address mental health issues and rising domestic violence.

Findings and emerging policy recommendations

Lower income and deepening inequalities

Our findings show a significant loss of income and increased expenses across households in all four Young Lives study countries since the start of the pandemic, putting families and their communities under huge economic strain. This has predominantly impacted poorest households most, but we are also seeing an increasing number of 'newly poor' households in urban households.

In Ethiopia, India and Peru it is young people from rural areas and the poorest households who have been hardest hit, deepening inequality and threatening hard-won development gains over the last two decades. For many households, higher food prices have compounded the impact of decreasing incomes, alongside an increase in the cost of farming supplies (in Ethiopia and India) and health expenses (in Peru).

By contrast, in Vietnam – where rural areas have been much less affected by the pandemic – it is those from urban and wealthier households who have been hardest hit by reduced income. Ensuring that COVID-19 response packages respond directly to specific country contexts, including potential 'newly poor' urban households, will be crucial.

In India, 8 out of 10 households reported reduced income and increased expenses, impacting rural and poorest households most, particularly those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

In Peru, the reduction of income, felt across 77 per cent of households, hit young women most and those from rural and the poorest households.

Identifying how existing social protection programmes (such as the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia, the *Juntos* Conditional Cash Transfer Programme in Peru, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India) can be adapted, and potentially expanded, to be more 'shock-responsive' is important. Governments need to act fast to identify those most in need, particularly in rural areas and among the poorest households, but without excluding newly poor households. Ensuring governments have effective and rapid data collection mechanisms in place (underpinned by national census data if available) to identify and differentiate vulnerable households across different contexts is therefore critical. Better use of new innovative tools such as digital technologies could enable more rapid responses. For example, expanding contactless cash transfers in areas where there is high mobile phone coverage is currently underway in Ethiopia,

¹ The call 2 phone survey collected information on domestic violence only in Young Lives study countries India and Peru, and not in Ethiopia and Vietnam; this was due to the extent and length of lockdowns in these countries and the need to prioritise when piloting a new innovative methodology.

Peru and Vietnam. Rapid response programmes which can effectively support vulnerable households are vital to reduce the risks of negative coping strategies such as selling assets or dropping out of education in times of economic stress.

Ensuring that response programmes are tailored to meet the specific needs of young people also requires an understanding of differentiated needs in times of stress. For example, teenage mothers are more likely to be adversely affected by nutritional deficits, which may be best addressed through targeted social protection interventions such as tailored household cash transfers or food provisions, rather than blanket approaches. The provision of targeted day care centres or childcare facilities is also very important for supporting young women back to work.

Lost education and a growing digital divide

The consequences of school and university closures following national lockdowns and related government restrictions have exposed entrenched inequalities across the lives of young people in our survey. Although a significant number of 18 to 19-year-old students intended to resume their studies, there is a worrying risk that many poorer students, particularly those from rural backgrounds and without internet access, will be left behind and may never return to education. In India and Ethiopia, it is young men rather than young women who are more likely to have not resumed their studies, reflecting more traditional gender norms for young men to leave education and find work to help support struggling households.

In Peru, 16 per cent of 19 year olds have dropped out of education for multiple reasons, including the cost of fees and lack of internet access.

Where classes have resumed, the vast majority of learning continues to be delivered online or through other distance learning such as radio, TV and printed materials. A clear digital divide has opened up in terms of those able to access distance learning, particularly for those without home internet access, which is likely to have a profound impact on future educational outcomes. Even where students who are unable to attend online classes are receiving some other form of distance learning, there is no guarantee of the quality of this learning, compared to face-to-face lessons. In addition, schools and universities are important for socialising and building the soft skills that are so important for capitalising on labour market opportunities, as well as providing a platform for wider interventions, including in health and nutrition.

Previous evidence from Young Lives has highlighted that addressing persistent inequalities and continuing to improve the *quality* of education and *experience* of schools and universities are key for successful transitions to the labour market and poverty reduction.

In India, 1 in 3 classes were still suspended, with practically all lessons that had resumed now online; 72 per cent of 18-year-old women were still engaged in education post-lockdown, compared with only 62 per cent of 18-year-old men.

In Ethiopia, where 21 per cent of 19 year olds had still not been able to enrol for the 2020/21 academic year, less than 5 per cent of students had been able to access online learning.

In Vietnam, only 32 per cent of students were attending classes in person, while 68 per cent reported attending virtual classes. Less than 2 per cent reported having no internet access at home.

Ensuring adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery programmes – including higher education – is paramount, particularly at a time where aid spending has been redirected from education to health priorities as countries grapple with the immediate impact of the pandemic.

Schools and universities need to be effectively supported to ensure that quality distance learning reaches all students, and to prepare for the safe reopening and resumption of classes, including a focus on teacher training and adequate pay during the disruption of classes.

Support to help students catch up on disrupted learning may include targeted additional tuition and better access to learning materials, particularly for students unable to access the internet, such as expanding radio learning and the provision of printed materials. Ensuring that there is more robust measurement of the quality of distance learning will also enable more effective approaches and highlight specific learning gaps.

Targeting policies to help address the widening digital divide by improving and extending internet/broadband connectivity in rural areas and access to technology in poorer households will help to enable more equitable provision of education, alongside a range of other economic and social benefits.

Promoting 'back to school/university' public campaigns may be an effective way to encourage more young people to resume their studies; these should be gender sensitive, targeting both young women and men, with a focus on reaching those in rural areas and the poorest households. This could include the provision of scholarships for returning to higher education and expanding schemes investing in digital devices, such as the provision of tablets to vulnerable households in Peru.

Job losses and shifting employment

Our first call in this survey demonstrated that job losses or suspension without pay were widespread throughout national lockdowns and related government restrictions, even in Vietnam, the country least-affected by the virus.

Remote working during this period has been the exception, with very low rates across our country samples, from 2 per cent in Ethiopia to 15 per cent in India.

As government restrictions have relaxed, most young people in our survey have returned to work, although employment recovery is not complete in Peru and Vietnam. In Ethiopia and India employment recovery included an increase in 18-19 year olds entering the labour market, compared with before lockdown.

Notably, there has been a marked shift towards self-employment and increasing numbers of young people working in agriculture over this period, particularly amongst young men, and those from rural areas and the poorest household.

The trend towards self-employment and agriculture, and increasing proportions of 18-19 year olds in work, could be being driven by the reduced education opportunities for these young people, and/or a return to family farms to help bring in desperately needed household income and food supplies. Factory closures and reduced business and demand in other sectors may also be driving an increase in self-employment and agriculture.

In Peru, employment among 26 year olds reduced significantly from 81 per cent to 39 per cent during lockdown. The subsequent recovery in employment has not yet reached pre-pandemic levels (it was 72 per cent in August – October), explained mainly by a slow recovery of jobs in urban areas.

In Vietnam, despite the lockdown causing remarkably high job losses, particularly among females and those in urban areas, the move back into employment has been almost as strong.

In India, the employment rate for 18-year-old men has increased from 4 out of 10 pre-lockdown to 7 out of 10 post-lockdown, compared with an increase from 2 out of 10 to only 3 out of 10 for 18-year-old women.

Increasing numbers of young people are working in agriculture (particularly young men, and those from rural and the poorest households): in Ethiopia, these increased from 35 per cent to 46 per cent; in India, from 38 per cent to 55 per cent; and in Peru, from 38 per cent to 42 per cent.

There has also been a marked shift towards self-employment (linked to the shift towards agriculture): in Ethiopia, from 57 per cent (which was already the highest rate among the four countries) to 63 per cent; in India, from 40 per cent to 53 per cent; in Peru, from 14 per cent to 19 per cent; and in Vietnam, from 22 per cent to 26 per cent.

Ensuring job recovery schemes build on clear evidence of what jobs young people have actually returned to will help to avoid potential underreporting of job losses and an increase in underemployment and informal working. Recovery schemes should include support for skills development in sectors that are least likely to be affected by COVID-19; for example, in Ethiopia this could include schemes to provide employment in non-farm activities to deal with underemployment.

Active labour market policies, using a combination of matching jobseekers with vacancies, upgrading and adapting skills, providing incentives to individuals or firms, and job creation, are most likely to support effective job recovery, depending on country context. This may include the creation of temporal public job programmes (e.g. infrastructure programmes), the creation or extension of job training programmes, providing access to credit for small businesses, and potential subsidies to firms. In addition, governments need to provide clear COVID-19 protocols to allow economic activities to return to normal. These must ensure that employees are safe to return to work, as well as being realistic to implement. Incentives that encourage firms to expand informal working should be avoided where possible.

Resorting to traditional gender roles in times of stress

Across all four study countries it is young women who are bearing the greatest burden of increased household duties and looking after children who are unable to go to school under lockdowns. By contrast, young men (particularly 18 and 19 year olds) are more likely to have left education to find work, often returning to family farms to support struggling households. While findings vary according to the specific circumstances of country lockdowns, our data show how households tend to resort to traditional gender roles at times of stress.

In Ethiopia, 70 per cent of young women spent more time on household duties during lockdown, compared with only 26 per cent of young men; while 46 per cent of young women undertook increased childcare, but only 19 per cent of young men.

In India, 67 per cent of young women spent increased time on childcare and household duties during lockdown, compared with only 37 per cent of young men.

Ensuring there are adequate measures in place to help address increasing levels of unpaid care and domestic work is critical to enabling a more equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and avoiding the rolling back of two decades of progress on gender equality. Improving and extending access to childcare support, including in the workplace, or the provision of cash benefits for families affected by school or childcare closures will help to alleviate this growing burden on young women. More flexible working arrangements, such as reduced hours, job sharing or

extended family leave provision could help to avoid binary choices between holding down a job and looking after the increasing demands of childcare and household work.

Approaches such as flexible timing of classes in schools and universities could support both young women and young men to continue their education at times of family crisis. Responding to the interrelated needs and experiences of both young women *and young men* is important for effective interventions. Focusing on young women, to the exclusion of young men, ignores the important ways that women and men relate to each other, both as individuals and as couples, and the impact this has on the household and communities as a whole.

Decreasing well-being and high levels of mental health issues

The evolving pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people in all four study countries, at a time when the provision of, and access to, often limited mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted. There has been a marked decrease in subjective well-being, particularly among 18-19 year olds in Ethiopia, India and Peru. Using our longitudinal data from earlier survey rounds, we can also see a significant decrease in subjective well-being in India and Ethiopia when comparing 18-19 year olds grappling with the current pandemic to when our Older Cohort was the same age, a reversal of previous positive trends.

Vietnam is a notable exception, where a continued trend of increasing well-being may be due to its success in containing COVID-19 and the early relaxation of related restrictions.

High levels of anxiety and depression are being reported by young people, with particularly high levels in Peru.

In Peru, 30 per cent of young people reported experiencing anxiety and 40 per cent experienced symptoms of depression; pre-pandemic average levels for 18-27 year olds were 18 per cent, as reported in the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey.

Subjective well-being for 18-19 year olds in India and Ethiopia showed a marked decrease when compared to the Older Cohort at the same age.

COVID-19 recovery plans should prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health services and psychosocial support for young people, tailored to the different needs of young women and young men and fully accessible, especially to the poorest and most vulnerable households. There is little doubt that previously underfunded service provision in this area will struggle to meet the growing needs of young people and their communities as the pandemic unfolds, including shortages of mental health professionals and community based services able to train health professionals in basic counselling.

The current lack of data on both the prevalence of mental health issues in low- and middle-income countries, as well as the effectiveness of related responses, is a serious barrier to understanding 'what works' both in providing adequate support services and addressing underlying causes, highlighting the urgent need for further research in this area.

The hidden increase in domestic violence

A significant proportion of young people in our sample in India and Peru had experienced increased domestic violence during the lockdown period. Using an innovative new methodology to limit the distress of study participants in reporting their experiences over the phone, known as 'double list randomisation', we found that 8 per cent of our sample in Peru and 12 per cent in India reported an increase in domestic violence. This increase was identified among both young women *and* young men. Increasing levels of domestic violence are being reported at a time when survivors may find it difficult to seek help and access appropriate support due to disruptions in the provision of services, coupled with restrictions on more informal support networks such as through schools and universities, faith groups and social engagements.

Eight per cent of our sample in Peru and 12 per cent in India reported an increase in domestic violence during the lockdown.

COVID-19 recovery plans should prioritise strengthened measures to address domestic violence, including outreach to vulnerable young people – both young women and young men – who may have reduced access to support services during the pandemic. Increased investment in preventative measures such as awareness-raising campaigns to raise the visibility of domestic violence and to challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination, is vital. Expanding community based services that are able to respond to specific community contexts is also critical; this may include increased provision of domestic violence shelters, helplines and local social workers able to identify those most vulnerable and least able to access support. Broader support in terms of addressing many of the interrelated stresses described above – reduced household incomes, lost education and increased care and household duties – may also contribute to reducing the risk of domestic violence.

Continuing to follow Young Lives

The third call in this COVID-19 phone survey is due to be completed by the end of 2020, with further data and analysis to be reported in 2021. This next set of data will enable us to further explore key findings, particularly on education, labour market developments, mental health and domestic violence. We will also use this data to further test and refine our emerging policy recommendations and to develop country specific and cross-cutting policy briefs to help inform COVID-19 recovery policies and programmes to improve the lives of young people and their families.

Emerging policy recommendations	
A broad approach addressing the specific needs of young people should be a central part of COVID 19 recovery packages.	
1. Income and inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify how existing social protection programmes can be adapted and expanded to be more shock-responsive and reach vulnerable young people, including using rapid data collection to identify and differentiate vulnerable households. Better use of new innovative tools such as digital technologies (e.g. contactless cash transfers) could enable more rapid responses to reduce the risk of negative coping strategies (e.g. selling assets or dropping out of education). Response programmes should be tailored to meet specific needs (e.g. meeting the nutritional needs of teenage mothers).
2. Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery programmes, including higher education. Support schools and universities to ensure quality distance learning reaches all students, and support the most-affected students to catch up on learning. More robust measurement of the quality of distance learning is required to enable more effective approaches and highlight learning gaps. Target policies to address the digital divide, including internet/broadband in rural areas and access to technology in poorer households. Promote gender-sensitive 'back to school/university' public campaigns targeting students in poorer households (including providing scholarships and investing in digital devices). Policies targeting young women to return to school and higher education (e.g. through conditional cash transfers) are likely to reduce the risk of early marriage.
3. Jobs and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure job recovery schemes build on clear evidence of what jobs young people have actually returned to, to avoid underreporting of job losses and underemployment. Active labour market policies should consider a combination of measures, including matching jobseekers with vacancies, upgrading and adapting skills, providing incentives to individuals or firms, and job creation. Recovery schemes should include support for skills development in sectors that are least likely to be affected by COVID-19.
4. Gender roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure measures are in place to address unpaid care and domestic work (e.g. creche facilities and childcare support or cash benefits for families affected by childcare closures). More flexible working arrangements (e.g. reduced hours, job sharing or extended family leave provision) could help to avoid binary choices between holding down a job and looking after domestic work. Approaches such as flexible timing of classes could support both young women and young men to continue their education at times of family crisis. Responding to the interrelated needs and experiences of both young women and young men, individually and as couples, is important for effective interventions.
5. Mental health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 response plans should prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health and psychosocial support for young people, including mental health professionals and community based services able to train health professionals in basic counselling. Mental health services need to be fully accessible and tailored to the different needs of young men and young women. Prioritise new research into mental health in low- and middle-income countries to help understand 'what works' in the provision of services and addressing underlying causes.
6. Domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 recovery plans should prioritise strengthened measures to address domestic violence, including outreach to both young women and young men. Expanding community based services may include increased provision of domestic violence shelters, helplines and local social workers able to identify and support those most vulnerable and least able to access support services.



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