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Two Years of COVID-19 is Threatening Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Emerging Policy Recommendations to Support Young People in Developing Countries

Overview

New research from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam shows that widening inequalities and the ongoing economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are continuing to derail prospects for a generation of young people, hitting those from poor households, rural areas and marginalised groups hardest.

Our findings provide evidence of how the pandemic and other crises are threatening the achievement of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, which are critical for young people trying to build a more prosperous future.

After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, our four study countries are each facing significant economic and social challenges, and rapidly changing circumstances.

But COVID-19 is not the only global crisis; our evidence from Ethiopia reflects unprecedented times, as vulnerable families grapple with the compounding effects of civil conflict and climate change.

This policy brief summarises key findings from the fifth call in the Young Lives phone survey,¹ conducted between October and December 2021, and is informed by the previous COVID-19 calls, as well as longitudinal data collected since 2001 through regular in-person surveys. The brief builds on previous policy recommendations from our phone survey (Ford et al. 2021), highlights how the pandemic, alongside climate change and conflict, is continuing to have an adverse impact on the lives of young people in low- and middle-income countries, and presents **emerging policy recommendations** in response to this impact.

Our analysis demonstrates that urgent action is required if we are to get progress towards the SDGs back on track.

1 For more details on the phone survey, see <https://www.younglives.org.uk/research-project/young-lives-work>

Headlines from Call 5

New evidence from Call 5 of our phone survey shows that the ongoing economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the compounding crises of conflict and climate change (particularly in Ethiopia), are threatening progress towards the **SDGs**.

All Young Lives study countries have seen a significant increase in perceived levels of poverty, particularly among the poorest households and marginalised groups (**SDG 1: No Poverty**), with a growing number of families worried about running out of food, including among better-off households in Peru and urban families in Ethiopia (**SDG 2: Zero Hunger**). Although, on average, we have seen fewer families actually running out of food (compared to 2020), there are a concerning number of marginalised groups who have experienced severe food insecurity, notably in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) in Ethiopia.

Following the extended closure of schools and universities, Young Lives students (now aged 19–20 years) reported a significant reduction in the quality of education, with a clear digital divide opening up in terms of those able to access distance learning, particularly in rural areas, which is likely to have a profound impact on future educational outcomes (**SDG 4: Quality Education**).

We have also seen continuing differences in how the pandemic has had an impact on young women and young men as they transition to adulthood. While findings vary according to specific country circumstances, our data show that households tend to resort to traditional gender roles at times of stress. Earlier evidence from our phone survey (Favara et al. 2022) showed that young women have been particularly affected by increasing levels of domestic work and childcare, with those dropping out of education at increased risk of mental health issues and potential early marriage. Notably, increasing levels of physical domestic violence were reported by both young women *and* young men during the 2020 lockdown period (**SDG 5: Gender Equality**) (Scott 2021).

Our new evidence shows there has been a significant increase in the gender employment gap in 2021, especially in India and Peru, despite the fact that overall employment has largely recovered (**SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth**). At the same time, young men have also been disadvantaged, particularly in relation to pressures to leave education to find work.

High levels of anxiety and depression are still being experienced by both young women and young men across our four study countries, with particularly high levels in Peru (**SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being**). Worryingly, Vietnam has seen a significant increase in mental health issues for the first time in our phone survey, a serious cause

for concern given the current low availability of mental health support services in the country.

While national COVID-19 vaccination programmes accelerated over the second half of 2021 in India, Peru and Vietnam, uptake in Ethiopia was exceptionally low, alongside limited access to testing and evidence of vaccine hesitancy in the country (**SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being**). As well as vaccine inequality *between* countries, we have also seen vaccine inequality *within* countries, with an uneven rollout resulting in those from poorer households, (particularly remote) rural areas and marginalised groups less likely to have received a first dose.

Overall, there has been a further widening of intersecting inequalities across many areas of young people's lives in 2021, putting at risk the goal of ensuring no one is left behind (**SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities**).²

Targeted support is urgently required to help young people get back on track

After two years of COVID-19, and with the compounding impacts of climate change and conflict in Ethiopia, the scale of the challenges currently facing vulnerable young people in low- and middle-income countries requires urgent action if we are to get progress towards the SDGs back on track.

This brief sets out key policy recommendations to address a range of issues exacerbated by widening inequalities. Our Call 5 findings provides specific new evidence on five SDGs, which are critical for young people trying to build a more prosperous future in uncertain times.

In delivering these recommendations, governments and development partners should adopt a broad approach to ensure effective coordination across ministries, agencies and organisations. Policy responses should be tailored to country circumstances, and targeted to meet the specific needs of young people and their families, particularly those from poorer households, rural areas and marginalised groups.

For example, adapting and expanding social protection programmes to better reach vulnerable families in times of crisis should be aligned with efforts to create the conditions and incentives to help young people (particularly young women) get back to work; this might include providing affordable and accessible housing and childcare facilities to alleviate unpaid care demands. Addressing learning losses through targeted education programmes should prioritise enabling 12 years of *quality* education and aim to reduce educational inequalities, alongside long-term policies to address the digital divide by improving internet access in rural areas and access to technology in poorer households. New investment in mental health services should consider integrating into existing services, such as primary health care, social services, and community-based services, to deliver vital new support in resource-constrained settings.

² In each of our four countries, the Young Lives children were originally selected using a pro-poor bias to better understand the causes and consequences of childhood poverty on long-term outcomes. As such, our sample is not fully nationally representative (under-representing those from wealthy backgrounds), but has been shown to reflect diversity across the entire wealth spectrum. However, the oversampling of poor areas means that our findings of widening inequalities are likely to underestimate the true extent of this global issue.

Emerging policy recommendations

<p>No Poverty (SDG 1)</p> <p>Zero Hunger (SDG 2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adapt existing social protection programmes to be more 'shock-responsive', including using rapid data collection and digital technologies (e.g. contactless cash transfers) to ensure support is targeted to those who need it most, including 'newly poor' households. ■ Protect households against adverse weather events through establishing climate risk monitoring and early warning systems, and implementing protection schemes such as climate risk insurance or anticipatory cash transfers. ■ Provide long-term support to vulnerable households by strengthening existing social insurance or social protection programmes, or extending ambitions towards universal basic income policies or universal job guarantees.
<p>Quality Education (SDG 4)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reopen all education institutions in a safe manner, and encourage young people to resume their studies through 'back to school/university' campaigns targeting students in poorer households (e.g. cash transfer schemes and scholarships). ■ Support schools and universities to measure learning losses effectively, with adequate funding and resources for targeted ongoing catch-up programmes tailored to young people's actual learning needs and prioritising improved quality of teaching. ■ Support both young women and young men to continue their education at times of family crisis, including through approaches such as flexible class times. ■ Target policies to address the digital divide, including internet/broadband in rural areas and access to technology in poorer households. ■ Ensure adequate funding is allocated to education, including higher education.
<p>Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure active labour market policies consider a combination of measures, including matching jobseekers with vacancies and upgrading and adapting skills, alongside long-term job creation, notably by the private sector. ■ Prioritise the reintegration of women into the labour force, through expanding policies in sectors that employ a high proportion of women and strengthening labour market programmes that explicitly target vulnerable women. ■ Enable more flexible working arrangements, better access to paid family leave, and the provision of affordable and accessible childcare facilities to help young women avoid binary choices between paid employment and unpaid caring responsibilities.
<p>Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Significantly increase vaccine and testing supplies to low-income countries through multilateral efforts like COVAX,³ releasing surpluses from high-income countries, and improving underlying health infrastructures to enable the successful distribution of vaccines and related testing facilities. ■ Prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health and psychosocial support for young people, fully accessible in both urban and rural areas, including investment in mental health professionals and social workers. Using new technologies can be a cost-effective way to expand access to mental health services where mobile phone penetration is high. ■ Integrate mental health into existing services (e.g. primary health care and community-based services) and social protection programmes, and embed mental health support into schools and universities, with regular training for teachers and other personnel to help identify at-risk students. ■ Increase investment in awareness-raising campaigns and data collection to raise the visibility of mental health issues among young people and identify what works in the provision of services and addressing underlying causes.

³ For more details, see <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>

Findings and emerging policy recommendations

No Poverty (SDG 1): Increasing levels of poverty are hitting marginalised groups hardest

Our new findings show a significant increase in overall levels of perceived poverty since the beginning of the pandemic, reflecting the ongoing economic strain faced by vulnerable households, and threatening hard-won gains over the last two decades. Poorer households and marginalised groups have been hit the hardest, particularly among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India, those whose mother tongue is not Spanish in Peru, and minority ethnic groups in Vietnam, with evidence of disadvantaged households stuck in deep pockets of poverty not bouncing back as economic restrictions have been relaxed.

Box 1. Increasing poverty levels

In Ethiopia, the number of Young Lives households perceived as at least struggling (including poor or destitute), almost doubled from 34 per cent before the pandemic, to a staggering 63 per cent by October–December 2021. In India, there was a similar increase from 36 per cent before the pandemic, to 52 per cent in August–October 2020, with only a small reduction (to 46 per cent) by October–December 2021.

Of particular concern in India, those belonging to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes reporting that their households were poor or destitute increased from 12 per cent before the pandemic to 19 per cent by October–December 2021 (compared to 7 per cent across all other groups).

In Peru, increasing pockets of extreme poverty were reported among those whose mother tongue is not Spanish, with poor or destitute households increasing from 12 per cent before the pandemic to 20 per cent by October–December 2021 (compared to only 4 per cent for those whose first language is Spanish).

In Vietnam, those from minority ethnic groups were three times more likely to consider themselves living in households that were at least struggling (24 per cent), compared to those from the majority ethnic group (7 per cent), by October–December 2021.⁴

We have also identified an increasing number of ‘newly poor’ Young Lives households over the course of the pandemic. In Ethiopia, there has been a sharp rise in households considering themselves to be poor or destitute

among urban areas, particularly in the capital Addis Ababa, as well as among households in the drought-affected SNNP region. Similarly, we have seen a modest increase in newly poor urban households in Vietnam, where economic restrictions are likely to have the greatest impact, particularly for informal urban workers who are especially vulnerable to transient income poverty.

Our evidence suggests that young people from poorer households and marginalised groups have been hardest hit, despite government initiatives and emergency schemes to alleviate financial hardships during the pandemic across all four study countries, and that many newly poor households may not have (yet) benefited from existing social protection programmes. Further analysis of our preliminary findings is required to determine the effectiveness of both existing and new social protection schemes and government initiatives to support struggling young people and their households.

Box 2. Evidence of newly poor households

Newly poor households were notable in urban areas of Ethiopia, with those considering themselves poor or destitute increasing from 10 per cent before the pandemic to 24 per cent by October–December 2021, with a similar increase among households in the drought-affected SNNP region, from 4 per cent to 23 per cent over the same period.

In Ethiopia, only 1 per cent of Young Lives households receiving support through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) were **new** beneficiaries during the pandemic period, despite the sharp rise in struggling households.

Likewise, in India, only 2 per cent of rural households in Telangana and 1 per cent in Andhra Pradesh were **new** beneficiaries of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA).⁵

Emerging policy recommendations

- **Adapting and expanding existing social protection programmes to be more ‘shock-responsive’** to changing circumstances among vulnerable households is critical if countries are to reverse increasing levels of hardship. For example, increasing the flexibility of the PSNP in Ethiopia in response to the fast-changing combination of shocks caused by COVID-19, climate change and conflict, is imperative to reduce the risks of negative coping strategies such as selling assets, or young men dropping out of education early to find work. Better use of new innovative tools such as digital technologies could enable more rapid responses, such as expanding contactless cash transfers in areas where there is high mobile phone coverage.

4 It should be noted that Young Lives sampling is not nationally representative in Vietnam, and our results may under-represent newly poor households in previously more well-off urban areas, where the majority ethnic group are more likely to reside.

5 Although wider analysis of the MGNREGA during the pandemic suggests an upsurge in the overall provision of work in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, with an increasing allocation of resources; for example, see Varma (2021) and Shukla (2021).

■ **Ensuring that emergency schemes in times of crisis are targeted to those who need it most** requires simple and effective data collection mechanisms (underpinned by national census data if available) to identify vulnerable communities, particularly in rural areas, but without excluding newly poor households, including in urban areas. Depending on the country context, this may include targeting specific areas (e.g. remote rural areas or urban areas subject to strict COVID-19 restrictions) or specific sectors (e.g. informal workers or contact-intensive sectors such as hospitality and tourism). Where possible, this should also include appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure support is actually being received by those who need it most. Recent analysis using Young Lives data in Peru suggests that the effectiveness of some emergency cash transfers has been limited to date (Curi-Quinto et al. 2021).

Countries face difficult choices in how to move beyond temporary cash transfers and income support programmes, while still providing adequate support to those who are feeling the long-term effects of the pandemic and other crises. Policy choices will include whether to strengthen existing social insurance or social protection programmes, or to move towards universal basic income policies or universal job guarantees (although this may prove ambitious for countries with high levels of informality and low levels of domestic tax).

Zero Hunger (SDG 2): More families are worried about going hungry, with severe food insecurity in drought-prone regions

Overall, our evidence shows there has been a substantial increase in Young Lives households worrying about running out of food (mild food insecurity) during 2021, with those from poorer households and marginalised groups most affected. However, we have also seen increasing worries about adequate food supplies among better-off households in Peru, and urban areas in Ethiopia.

Although fewer families have actually run out of food (severe food insecurity) compared to 2020, a worrying number of marginalised groups have experienced increasing severe food insecurity in 2021, notably in the SNNP region in Ethiopia and among minority ethnic groups in Vietnam.

The alarming levels of severe food insecurity in the south-western region of Ethiopia have been caused by severe drought following three consecutive failed rainy seasons, exacerbated by high inflation and locust swarms. Efforts to support those in need have been under tremendous strain, compounded by the ongoing conflict in Tigray, with services disrupted, insufficient social protection and an overwhelmed humanitarian system.

While it is critical to address the immediate risk of food insecurity, we are also very concerned about the potential negative long-term impact of severe malnutrition on children's growing bodies and minds. Young Lives unique longitudinal research shows that early childhood stunting due to undernutrition has a significant negative impact

on the development of important cognitive skills, such as vocabulary and basic mathematics, and non-cognitive skills, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and agency, even into adolescence (Porter and Ford 2022). We have shown that this impact may even occur during pregnancy or as a result of malnutrition experienced by adolescent girls even *before* they became pregnant, underlining the critical importance of targeting support to young girls and women in times of food security stress.

Box 3. Evidence of food insecurity

More than 40 per cent of families in the drought-affected SNNP region in Ethiopia ran out of food in 2021, and 75 per cent of families were worried about running out of food – a near 100 per cent increase on 2020 figures.

In India, 44 per cent of respondents had worried about running out of food at least once in the past year (including 52 per cent among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), compared to 13 per cent reported in 2020; conversely, the number of households actually running out of food had decreased from 5 per cent in 2020, to only 1 per cent in 2021.

In Vietnam, 29 per cent of young people had been worried about running out of food in 2021, compared to only 14 per cent in 2020, with increases reported even among wealthier households. Worryingly, there has been a significant increase in households running out of food (severe food insecurity) among minority ethnic groups (19 per cent ran out of food at least once in 2021, compared to 8 per cent in 2020).

Encouragingly, our evidence showed that 93 per cent of Young Lives households in India had benefited from a government scheme to provide 5kg of rice per person in each household, alongside targeted nutritional supplements, which may help to explain why fewer families in India reported actually running out of food during 2021, despite widespread and growing worries.

Emerging policy recommendations

- **UNICEF has estimated that more than 6.8 million people in drought-affected areas of Ethiopia will need urgent humanitarian assistance by mid-2022.** Renewed action is also required to address related child malnutrition and stunted growth, including early detection mechanisms among vulnerable communities.
- **Ensuring governments are able to respond quickly to extreme weather events is critical** to minimising food insecurity in the future. Establishing climate risk monitoring and early warning systems to better prepare for climate shocks will become increasingly important as extreme weather events become more common. Protecting households in disaster-prone regions against adverse weather events, including through climate risk insurance or anticipatory cash transfers, can also be an effective way to minimise the negative impacts of climate change.

■ As discussed under SDG 1, targeted social protection programmes, including emergency cash transfers, direct food provisions, and providing seeds and fertilisers to vulnerable farmers, can be effective ways to boost food security in times of significant stress, provided that interventions are targeted towards those who need them most. Emergency support to ensure consistent access to clean water, quality health services and sanitation, is also critical. Effective use of technology can also help in times of crisis, for example, using high-resolution satellite imagery to help locate isolated households and communities following environmental disasters.

Quality Education (SDG 4): School and university closures, alongside a clear digital divide, are reducing the quality of education and widening educational inequalities

The pandemic continues to have a significant and unequal impact on education, particularly for students from poorer households and marginalised communities, putting the goal of achieving 12 years of quality education for all under threat.

Our previous findings highlighted that, although a significant number of Young Lives students intended to resume their studies, there was a worrying risk that many poorer students, particularly those from rural backgrounds and without internet access, would be left behind and may never return to education (Favara et al. 2022). While interrupted education has affected both young women and young men in our study, increased domestic work and traditional gender roles put poor and vulnerable girls and young women at greater risk of dropping out of education, with evidence of worsening mental health, and potentially increasing the risk of early marriage and parenthood.

Our new evidence shows that interrupted education and the related economic and social impact of the pandemic have contributed to many young people (now aged 19–20 years) dropping out of school and university during 2021 for reasons other than completing their chosen course. Reasons for dropping out include an inability to pay tuition fees (particularly in Peru), the need to look for work in times of financial hardship, or falling behind due to being unable to access distance learning.

Of particular concern, a clear digital divide is limiting young people's chances of successful education and leading to widening inequalities, which are likely to have a profound impact on future educational outcomes. Our findings show that students without internet access at home are much more likely to have dropped out of education in India, Peru and Vietnam, than those with access.

Previous Young Lives evidence has shown that digital disadvantages begin very early in life; the development of digital skills can be predicted as early as one year of age, primarily depending on family wealth and maternal education (Cueto, Felipe, and J. León 2018).

Even among those who have managed to stay in school, students have reported a significant decline in the quality of education. Low effectiveness of remote learning has exacerbated the learning crisis across many low- and middle-income countries, particularly for those from poorer households and marginalised groups.

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.

Box 4. Evidence of the impact on school dropout rates and quality of education

In Peru, almost one in five (19 per cent) of 19–20-year-old students had dropped out of education for reasons other than completing their course; in Ethiopia, this was 10 per cent.

In Vietnam, 22 per cent of 19–20-year-old students with no internet access had dropped out of education, compared to only 3 per cent among those with access; there were similar results in India (22 per cent of those without internet access, compared to only 7 per cent with access)

Just under half of all 19–20-year-old students who managed to stay enrolled in education during the pandemic, reported that the quality of their learning had declined compared to before the pandemic; 55 per cent in Vietnam, 51 per cent in Peru, 47 per cent in India and 30 per cent in Ethiopia.

Emerging policy recommendations

- **The reopening of all preschools, schools and higher education institutions in a safe manner is the number one priority** to address the deepening learning crisis and widening educational inequalities in low- and middle-income countries (as is the case around the world) (see World Bank 2022). Education programmes need to address widening inequalities in education, particularly in relation to getting disadvantaged girls and boys back to school and university, to avoid the longer-term impacts of lost learning.
- **Investing in policies and practices that prioritise the quality of teaching are critical for achieving 12 years of quality education**, including through improved pedagogical resources (including IT resources), continuous teacher professional development and improved physical infrastructure.
- **Ensuring more robust measurement of the quality of distance learning** will also enable more effective approaches and highlight specific learning gaps. Schools and universities need to be supported to ensure that learning losses can be effectively assessed with catch-up programmes tailored to children's actual learning levels. Support should not be a one-off exercise and should include adequate funding and resources to enable additional tuition and learning

materials, particularly for students unable to access the internet, underpinned by appropriate teacher training and adequate pay.

- **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 information campaigns targeting parents, cash transfer schemes to reward disadvantaged students who successfully complete secondary and tertiary education, providing scholarships⁶ for students from the poorest households returning to higher education, and expanding schemes investing in digital devices.
- **Flexible approaches to schooling** can support disadvantaged young people to continue their education at times of family crisis, particularly for girls and young women who may have additional household work and childcare responsibilities. Approaches such as ‘shift schooling’ or evening or weekend classes, flexible homework schedules, could better support young women continue their studies.
- **Long-term policies to help address the widening digital divide** by improving and extending internet and 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. This is also important to help make vulnerable households more resilient to future interruptions in education, including disruption caused by climate change or conflict.
- **Ensuring adequate funding is allocated to education** – including higher education – is paramount, particularly at a time when government spending has understandably been redirected from education to health priorities as countries grapple with the ongoing pandemic.

Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8): An increasing gender employment gap is undermining overall recovery in employment rates, with evidence suggesting the quality of jobs may also be deteriorating

The loss of work during national lockdowns and related restrictions in 2020 was widespread across all our study countries. Previous Young Lives findings showed that as government restrictions relaxed, most young people in our survey had returned to work by the end of 2020, although employment recovery remained partial in Peru and Vietnam. Notably, young women in our Older Cohort (now aged 26–27 years) remained significantly behind pre-pandemic employment levels throughout 2020, with the unequal burden of caring responsibilities for young women directly contributing to gender disparities in employment recovery (Scott et al. 2021).

Our new evidence shows that employment recovery continued in 2021, though there has been some reversal in Ethiopia, most likely due to the impact of the ongoing conflict, and a significant reversal in Vietnam, following the fourth wave of COVID-19 that started in April 2021.

Of particular concern, there has been a dramatic increase in the gender employment gap in Peru and India, particularly for young women who are now 26–27 years old. While young men have made a full employment recovery in both countries, exceeding pre-pandemic levels, the employment level for young women still remains below pre-pandemic levels. Vietnam has also seen a modest increase in the gender employment gap.

We have also seen a continuing shift towards more self-employment and agricultural work, suggesting that the quality of jobs may have deteriorated in some areas. In India and Ethiopia, agricultural activity is still higher than before the pandemic, particularly among those from rural areas and the poorest households, while self-employment levels remain higher than before the pandemic in Peru and Vietnam.

Box 5. Increased gender employment gap, numbers working in agriculture, and in self-employment

In Peru, the gender employment gap among 26–27 year olds increased from 11 percentage points before the pandemic to 24 percentage points by October–December 2021; in India, this gap had increased from 39 percentage points to 49 percentage points over the same period.

Increasing numbers of young people (26–27 year olds) are working in agriculture: in Ethiopia, these increased from 49 per cent before the pandemic to 53 per cent by October–December 2021; and in India, from 42 per cent to 47 per cent.

There has also been a continuing shift towards self-employment: in Peru, from 12 per cent before the pandemic to 14 per cent by October–December 2021; and in Vietnam, from 22 per cent to 25 per cent.

Emerging policy recommendations

- **Active labour market policies**, using a combination of matching jobseekers with vacancies, upgrading and adapting skills and providing incentives to individuals or firms, are most likely to support effective job recovery, alongside longer-term job creation, driven notably by the private sector (depending on country context).
- **Labour market policies should prioritise the reintegration of women into the labour force**, including through expanding measures in sectors that typically employ a high proportion of women, targeted training programmes, and new skills development. Expansion of existing labour market programmes that

⁶ For example, *Beca Continuidad de Estudios* in Peru. For more details, see <https://www.pronabec.gob.pe/beca-continuidad-de-estudios>

explicitly target women (such as MGNREGA in India, which mandates that at least one-third of the workers be women) may also help women re-enter the labour force.

- **Specific focus should also be given to creating the conditions and incentives to support young women getting back to work.** Ensuring that programmes are tailored to meet the specific needs of young women will require an understanding of differentiated needs in times of stress; for example, the provision of affordable and accessible day care centres or childcare facilities may be very important in alleviating unpaid care demands for young women. Flexible work arrangements and access to paid family leave can also help working women to better balance unpaid care responsibilities with paid employment.
- **Social protection programmes and related safety net initiatives should explicitly target vulnerable girls and women as a tool for economic recovery.** Although the scale of fiscal responses to the pandemic-induced economic downturn has been large around the world, only a fraction have specifically targeted gender inequalities. For example, the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, developed by UN Women and UNDP, estimates that only 13 per cent of the social protection and labour market measures adopted in response to the pandemic dealt with women's economic security (UN Women 2021).
- While targeting vulnerable young women is important for mitigating household shocks and continuing investment in children, ensuring women's access to social programmes is not just tied to their role as a mother is important to avoid excluding many young women. Timely and accurate gender-disaggregated data are therefore paramount to inform the design and implementation of social protection responses.

Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3): Unequal vaccination rates are putting those in poorer, rural households and vulnerable groups at greater risk of COVID-19

While national COVID-19 vaccination programmes accelerated over the second half of 2021 in India, Peru and Vietnam, with a majority of Young Lives respondents receiving at least one dose by October–December 2021, the vaccination rate in Ethiopia was exceptionally low (although rates are beginning to increase).⁷ Our findings reflect urgent global debates on addressing the profound vaccine inequality between low-income countries and the rest of the world.

In addition to vaccine inequality *between* our study countries, our new evidence highlights significant vaccine

inequality *within* countries, with uneven rollouts resulting in those from poorer households, (remote) rural areas, and marginalised groups being less likely to have received a first dose, particularly among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India, and those whose mother tongue is not Spanish in Peru. In Ethiopia, there was a significant difference in vaccine uptake between rural and urban areas, and none of our respondents who had moved location to avoid conflict had received a vaccination in the last few months of 2021.

Access to COVID-19 testing was generally very high in India, Peru and Vietnam. By contrast, almost a quarter of young people in Ethiopia reported they could not get a COVID-19 test if needed, with those living in rural areas particularly disadvantaged, due primarily to a lack of knowledge of where to get tested.

Overall, our results showed little evidence of vaccine hesitancy in India, Peru and Vietnam. However, vaccine hesitancy was worryingly high in Ethiopia, with reported concerns over the safety of the vaccine and a general distrust in vaccines.

Box 6. Differences in vaccination rates

National vaccination programmes have accelerated in India, Peru and Vietnam, with 65 per cent, 57 per cent and 62 per cent of respondents having received at least one dose by October–December 2021, respectively.

In Ethiopia, vaccination rates remain very low, with only 3 per cent receiving their first dose by October–December 2021. Worryingly, our results indicate high rates of vaccine hesitancy, with 29 per cent of young people saying they would not get a vaccine if available.

In Peru, only 41 per cent of those whose mother tongue is not Spanish had received their first dose, compared to 67 per cent for those whose first language is Spanish.

In India, only 59 per cent of those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had received their first dose, compared to 68 per cent among other groups.

Emerging policy recommendations

- Young Lives supports a global call to action⁸ to address acute vaccine inequality among low-income countries. This includes significantly increasing vaccine and testing supplies through multilateral efforts like COVAX and the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator,⁹ releasing surpluses from high-income countries to low-income countries, and improving underlying health infrastructures to enable the successful delivery and

⁷ Although vaccination rates in Ethiopia have begun to accelerate in early 2022, the proportion of the total population having received their first dose remains well below other Young Lives countries (17 per cent as of 1 March 2022; Our World in Data (n.d.)).

⁸ A global call to action to address acute vaccine inequality has been supported by the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, World Health Organisation, and UNICEF, among others.

⁹ For more details, see <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator>

distribution of vaccines and related testing facilities. Without such measures, we are deeply concerned that countries like Ethiopia will remain very vulnerable to future coronavirus variants. Vaccinating all countries also reduces the risk of new variants taking hold and spreading to other parts of the world.

- **It is also vital that national vaccination programmes are fully inclusive and easily accessible**, prioritising frontline workers and vulnerable individuals, and targeting those from the poorest households, in rural areas and from marginalised groups, including refugees, migrants and internally displaced people.
- **Accessible public information campaigns** to accurately inform individuals about the benefits of vaccination and how to access related COVID-19 testing are important to address vaccine hesitancy and help prepare countries as vaccine supplies are stepped up.

Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3): High levels of mental health issues among young people have generally worsened as the pandemic has progressed

The pandemic has continued to have a negative impact on young people's mental health, at a time when access to often limited mental health services has been significantly disrupted, and when they are transitioning to adulthood and particularly vulnerable to the development of chronic mental health conditions. Previous Young Lives findings showed that young women were disproportionately affected by mental health issues in India, Peru and Vietnam (Porter et al. 2022). Our evidence also showed a marked decrease in subjective well-being in 2020, particularly among 18–19 year olds in Ethiopia, India and Peru, reversing positive trends over recent years (Favara, Freund et al. 2022).

Our new evidence shows there has been a continuing decline in young people's mental health during 2021. Concerningly high rates of reported anxiety and depression in Peru remain significant, potentially signalling the pandemic's lasting impact on mental health.

Vietnam has seen a dramatic increase in young people's experience of both anxiety and depression, corresponding to the dramatic fourth wave of COVID-19 in 2021, following relatively low levels reported in 2020. India has also seen a moderate increase in levels of anxiety and depression in 2021.

Surprisingly, reported levels of anxiety and depression among young people in Ethiopia, though still worryingly high, showed a moderate decline in October–December 2021, despite worsening levels of insecurity and conflict (although our sample excludes respondents from the Tigray region and the two conflict-affected sites in Amhara). Our previous findings showed that the outbreak of civil conflict in November 2020 led to an increase in mental health issues, not only in the primarily affected Tigray region, but also in the neighbouring region of Amhara (Favara, Hittmeyer et al. 2022).

While further research is needed to better understand the direct impact of the pandemic and other crises on young people's mental health, it seems likely that many of the related challenges and stresses outlined in this brief may be directly contributing to a decline. Indeed, recent Young Lives analysis suggests a relationship between levels of anxiety and depression experienced by young people and the experience of food insecurity since the beginning of the pandemic (Porter et al. 2022).

Box 7. High levels of mental health issues

In Peru, reported rates of mental health issues remain alarmingly high, with 30 per cent of young people experiencing anxiety and 24 per cent reporting symptoms of depression in October–December 2021, compared to pre-pandemic average depression levels of 18 per cent, as reported in the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey.

In Vietnam, the number of young people suffering from depression (12 per cent) had doubled by October–December 2021, compared to the previous year (6 per cent), with reported levels of anxiety increasing from 5 per cent to 8 per cent over the same period.

Emerging policy recommendations

- **Prioritising and expanding urgently needed mental health services and psychosocial support for young people is vital** to mitigate potential long-term consequences of the current crises. Support services need to be tailored to the different needs of young women and young men and be fully accessible, especially to the poorest and most marginalised households, and in both urban and rural communities.
- **Ensuring adequate funding and new resources for mental health services is critical.** There is little doubt that the previously underfunded service provision in this area will struggle to meet the growing needs of young people. Increased investment in the numbers of available mental health professionals is vital, alongside expanding social worker programmes, including training in mental health.
- **Integrating mental health into existing services**, such as primary health care, social services and community-based services to train health professionals in basic counselling, could help to deliver vital new services in resource-constrained settings. In addition, including support for mental health as part of emergency schemes and social protection programmes could provide an effective way to target services to vulnerable young people, helping to break the vicious cycle between poverty, food insecurity and mental health disorders.
- **Schools and education institutions can also play an important role** in supporting young people's mental health. Providing regular mental health and psychosocial well-being training to teachers and other personnel can help them identify at-risk students and help young people learn about mental health issues and develop healthy habits.

- **In countries where mobile phone coverage is high (such as Peru and Vietnam), using new technologies can be a cost-effective way to expand access** to mental health services; digital care options through dedicated phone apps have seen explosive growth during the pandemic.
- **Increased investment in awareness-raising campaigns** to raise the visibility of mental health issues among young people is also vital. This is important not only to encourage young people to seek support, but also to challenge related stigma and discrimination.

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.

Continuing to follow Young Lives

Further research analysis of these new findings will be undertaken in 2022, including on food security, education, work, and mental health. We will also test and refine our emerging policy recommendations, working closely with our long-term study country partners, to develop focused thematic or country-specific policy outputs to inform national and international policies and programmes that seek to improve the lives of young people and their families.

Young Lives expects to resume face-to-face surveys in 2023 (Round 6), to continue monitoring the long-term impacts of the pandemic and other global crisis on young people's lives three years after the coronavirus outbreak.

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by Kath Ford and Richard Freund. Thanks to Alula Pankhurst, Tassew Woldehanna, Renu Singh, Revathi Ellanki, Santiago Cueto, Alan Sanchez, Nguyen Thang and Duc Le Thuc for their valuable insights and policy information. We also extend our thanks to Catherine Porter, Marta Favara and Doug Scott for their comments and suggestions.

We particularly wish to thank the Young Lives respondents for generously giving us their time and cooperation.

Thanks also to Adam Houlbrook for copyediting, Garth Stewart for design and Julia Tilford for overseeing the publication process.

Special thanks to the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for funding Young Lives at Work and enabling this research in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the Old Dart Foundation for enabling us to complete the phone survey in Peru.

The views expressed are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the University of Oxford, Young Lives, the UK Government or other funders.

