



Persistent Inequality and COVID-19 Holding Back Young People in Vietnam:

Evidence from the Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 Phone Survey

This policy brief looks at the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of young people in Vietnam, particularly those from poor households, remote and rural communities, and ethnic minority groups.

While Vietnam was successful in containing the spread of COVID-19 during 2020, the recent surge in infection rates and new restrictions are likely to have significant and worsening economic and social impacts for young people. The primary focus of Vietnam's current COVID-19 response effort remains effective and timely vaccination though the implementation of the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan (NDVP), which began in March 2021.

This brief focuses on the broader economic and social impacts of the pandemic, presenting findings from the Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey conducted in the second half of 2020 (Favara, Crivello et al. 2021). It highlights findings from Vietnam alongside comparative analysis with the other three Young Lives study countries (Ethiopia, India and Peru), to ensure that lessons learned from countries grappling with different stages of the pandemic inform the policy recommendations.

Three key areas of impact are covered: interrupted education and inequality in learning outcomes; increased domestic work, particularly for girls and young women; and current and potential longer-term mental health and well-being implications.

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, now aged 26) and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort, now aged 19).

The Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey consisted of three phone calls with each of our respondents in all four study countries between June to December 2020, to better understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives and help to inform COVID-19 recovery plans.

Overview

Over the last two decades, evidence has highlighted significant improvements in the overall living standards in Young Lives families. Longitudinal data gathered since 2002 across all four Young Lives study countries – Ethiopia, India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam – has shown that young people are substantially better off than their parents and have higher aspirations for social mobility, despite the impact of persistent inequalities and gender disparities.

New research from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey in 2020 reveals that the impact of lockdowns and related restrictions could not only halt progress but also reverse important gains, entrenching inequalities and hitting those from disadvantaged backgrounds hardest (Favara, Freund et al. 2021).

In Vietnam, the COVID-19 pandemic had a much greater social and economic impact on the Young Lives households, relative to the virus' impact on physical health, during the period of our data collection in 2020, though this might change given the significant increase in infection rates in 2021.

Our results show that incomes declined in 6 out of 10 of Young Lives households in Vietnam during 2020, with urban and wealthier households being most affected. Overall, 64 per cent of those in the richest third of our sample experienced a loss of income, compared to 56 per cent of the poorest households; similarly, for 62 per cent of urban households compared to 55 per cent of rural households. The early waves of the pandemic disproportionately affected jobs in urban areas, with poorer households more likely to be employed in agriculture, a sector which was less impacted by initial social distancing measures.

However, despite urban and wealthier households being most affected by initial job losses and reductions in income, our results highlight a number of key areas of concern for those from poor and rural backgrounds, reflecting the combined impact of COVID-19 and persistent inequalities in Vietnam.

■ **Interrupted education due to school closures and increased use of online and distance learning is widening educational inequalities**, with students from ethnic minority groups and those from poorer households and rural communities continuing to be particularly disadvantaged.

■ **The pandemic is exacerbating the already heavy domestic work burdens faced by girls and young women**, suggesting that households tend to resort to more discriminatory gender roles at times of stress. Even where this does not result in dropping out of school, it is likely to reduce the time that girls have available to keep up with schoolwork.

■ **Young Lives findings in Ethiopia, India and Peru show that the pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people**, at a time when access to often limited mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted. While equivalent rates were lower in our Vietnam sample in 2020, the recent surge in infection rates may result in a significant worsening of young people's experience of anxiety and depression. Our analysis shows a strong relationship between the severity of the pandemic and rates of mental health conditions.

COVID-19 recovery plans need to include young people who have been adversely affected by the combined impact of the pandemic and persistent inequalities, if Vietnam is to avoid the pandemic having long-term adverse economic and social impacts which may hinder progress towards the current 10-year strategy (2021-30) and broader Sustainable Development Goals.

Key policy recommendations

1. Strengthen and invest in initiatives to address persistent inequality in education, which is likely be further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.

This should include a focus on supporting students from poorer households and ethnic minority groups, particularly those in rural and remote communities, and whose parents received little or no education.

- a. The quality and accessibility of distance learning should be comprehensively assessed to identify learning gaps and improve future approaches. This is particularly urgent given the likelihood of continuing disruptions to education due to the extent of the current wave of COVID-19 infections in Vietnam. 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.
- b. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) schools should be incentivised to ensure digital platforms are widely available to avoid disruptions to training programmes even during lockdowns. This should not be a one-off exercise and should be mainstreamed into the curriculum of TVET schools. Mass open online courses (MOOC) and digital training programmes should be encouraged with appropriate incentives to ensure that upskilling and reskilling training, including on digital skills, reaches a large number of workers, including those from poor backgrounds and the informal sector.

- c. Ensure that teachers are effectively trained in the use of technology for student-centred learning, particularly those teaching in remote areas among ethnic minority groups; this may include innovative blended approaches combining online resources with other distance learning approaches, including supporting a smooth transition to face-to-face classes once schools can safely reopen.
 - d. Ensure that learning apps (which are more commonly used by students from poor backgrounds) are of sufficient quality and curriculum content, with appropriate language access for ethnic minority students, to avoid students lagging behind. Providing incentives to learning app developers to improve the quality of content and enabling targeted awareness-raising campaigns to raise the visibility and accessibility of these apps should help to ensure more effective and equitable use.
 - e. Extended catch-up education programmes are particularly important for poorer students who may have experienced nearly a whole year of distance learning, to address potential learning gaps and avoid students dropping out in the future. Support should not be a one-off exercise and should include adequate funding and resources to enable additional tuition and extra learning materials, as well as targeted teacher training.
 - f. Ensure adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery plans, including higher education, particularly at a time when significant spending has understandably been redirected to health priorities and the implementation of the vaccination programme.
- 2. Initiatives to help address increasing levels of unpaid household and care work are particularly important for supporting girls and young women.** Improving and extending access to creche facilities and childcare support could help to relieve the burden on girls and young women and help them resume their education or employment, especially in rural and remote areas where services are limited; likewise, the provision of social care and nursing homes for older family members could alleviate additional burdens on girls and young women.
- 3. Invest in mental health and psychosocial support for young people,** including identifying and targeting vulnerable communities. Efforts to increase locally accessible support services (particularly in response to the current wave of the pandemic) should include investment in the training of mental health professionals, social workers and community-based counsellors, alongside expanding and improving the quality of counselling helplines. Implementing programmes in coordination with schools and frontline health workers will help to identify those most at risk.

Key findings

Students from poorer households and rural communities, including those from ethnic minority groups, are much less likely to access higher education

Despite strong government investment and significant improvement in access to education in Vietnam over the last two decades, including the achievement of universal primary and lower secondary education, and gender parity (resulting in girls often outperforming boys), persistent inequality remains for a number of groups, even before the impact of COVID-19 is taken into account.

Young Lives has shown that students from poorer households, particularly those from rural communities, ethnic minority groups and those whose mother received little or no education, are less likely to attend preschool or extra classes during primary and secondary school, underperform in cognitive tests (vocabulary, reading and maths), and are more likely to drop out of education early, compared to their more advantaged peers. The gap between the least and the most vulnerable groups is as wide as 64 per cent in terms of the completion of upper secondary education (Duc and Hang 2016).

Access to higher education (universities and technical institutes) is also strongly affected by inequality.

Overall, 43 per cent of the Younger Cohort (aged 18–19) are no longer enrolled in education in Vietnam. Of these, just under half are from the poorest households, compared to only 20 per cent from the least-poor households.

A significantly higher proportion of 18–19 year olds from ethnic minority groups (75 per cent) have discontinued their education, compared to those from the ethnic majority group (38 per cent). Likewise, 69 per cent of young people from rural communities are no longer in education, compared to only 23 per cent from urban communities, with similar disparities between those from households where the mother had not completed lower primary school (64 per cent), compared to those who had (26 per cent).

Interrupted education due to school closures and increased use of online and distance learning is widening educational inequalities

Education was interrupted for the vast majority of students in Vietnam following the initial closure of schools and universities prior to the national lockdown in April 2020, and subsequent related social distancing restrictions.

Although most students in the Younger Cohort (92 per cent) were continuing with their studies by our second call in August–October 2020, the method of learning had changed significantly. Only 32 per cent of students had attended classes in person since the start of the pandemic, with the remaining 68 per cent attending virtual classes, led by a teacher (via a laptop, computer or smart phone). This switch to remote learning has been made possible by high levels of home internet access across our sample, where only four students (less than 1 per cent) reported having no access to the internet at home.

There was also evidence of broader learning practices, with the majority of students engaging with learning apps (or using educational television or radio programmes). The use of learning apps was particularly common among ethnic minority students (69 per cent), those from the poorest households (55 per cent), and those whose mother had not completed primary school (55 per cent).

However, the regularity and quality of distance learning is likely to have been highly variable, compared to face-to-face lessons, particularly in disadvantaged areas where teachers were not well prepared to deliver online lessons. Recent UNICEF findings show that 93 per cent of teachers in remote provinces reported not having used modern technologies in class prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020).

Across our sample, **students from rural households were much less likely to have resumed face-to-face classes** by our third call in November–December 2020 (63 per cent) compared to their urban counterparts (95 per cent). Notably, only 51 per cent of students from ethnic minority groups had returned to normal lessons, compared to 90 per cent from the ethnic majority group.

Without targeted interventions, there is a real risk that educational inequalities will continue to increase as the current wave of the pandemic unfolds in Vietnam, with potential long-term adverse effects on life chances and job opportunities for young people, particularly those from ethnic minority groups, from poorer households, and in rural communities.

In Peru, which continues to suffer one of the highest per capita COVID-19 death rates in the world, our results show that 18 per cent of 18–19-year-old former students in our sample had not enrolled in education by the end of 2020, with those from the poorest backgrounds most affected. While the comparative findings in Vietnam did not indicate significant dropout rates for 18–19-year-old students in 2020 (only 13 students had dropped out of education because of COVID-19 related reasons), this should be closely monitored as the pandemic worsens in 2021.

Girls and young women have increasing domestic work burdens, which may reduce their ability to study

Across all four Young Lives study countries, COVID-19 is exacerbating the already heavy domestic work burdens faced by girls and young women. While findings vary according to the specific circumstances of country lockdowns, our data show that 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 work during lockdown, compared to only 26 per cent of young men. In India, 67 per cent of young women spent more time taking care of children who were unable to go to school, compared to only 37 per cent of young men.

By comparison, in Vietnam our results show that by our second call in August–October 2020, at least 55 per cent of young women (compared to 32 per cent of young men) were spending more time taking care of children, while at least 59 per cent of women were spending more time on household work (compared to 43 per cent of men). Given the increasing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2021, we may expect even further demands on the time use of girls and women.

Previous Young Lives evidence from India and Ethiopia shows that engaging in increased domestic work is an important factor for girls dropping out of education (Singh and Mukherjee 2018). Excessive domestic work can create a cycle of gender discrimination that puts a strain on the ability to study and can have a detrimental effect on girls' and young women's progress and grades, affecting their likelihood of continuing with schooling.

The recent surge in the COVID-19 infection rate increases the risk of worsening mental health

Young Lives findings in Ethiopia, India and Peru show that the pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people, at a time when access to often limited mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted.

Our analysis shows a **strong relationship between the severity of the pandemic and rates of mental health conditions, in terms of both anxiety and depression symptoms.** The additional stresses faced by many young people, including school closures, increased household responsibilities, economic shocks and increased food insecurity, appear to be directly contributing to worsening mental health (Porter et al. 2021).

In Peru, where the pandemic has hit particularly hard, 30 per cent of young people in our sample reported experiencing anxiety and 40 per cent experienced symptoms of depression, compared to pre-pandemic average levels of 18 per cent.¹

While equivalent rates were notably lower in our Vietnam sample, with 9 per cent reporting at least mild anxiety and 9 per cent reporting at least mild depression at the second call between August and October 2020, the recent surge in the COVID-19 infection rate may result in a significant worsening of young people's mental health during 2021.

Young women were more likely to report symptoms of both depression and anxiety (11 per cent, compared to 8 per cent of young men, for both conditions). Similarly, those from ethnic minority groups were more likely to report symptoms of anxiety (15 per cent, compared to 8 per cent for the ethnic majority group), though they reported lower rates of depression (6 per cent, compared to 10 per cent).

In addition, Young Lives findings in **Ethiopia, India and Peru also show a marked decrease in subjective well-being in 2020 for the Younger Cohort (aged 18–19),²** compared to their reported well-being when they were aged 15 in 2016. Our longitudinal data also show a significant decrease in subjective well-being when comparing the Younger Cohort at age 18–19 to the Older Cohort at the same age in 2013 in India and Ethiopia; prior to 2020, the Younger Cohort had consistently recorded higher well-being than the Older Cohort at the same age (measured seven years previously), but this positive trend was reversed in 2020.

Vietnam was the only country that did not record a decline in reported well-being for 18–19 year olds in our 2020 survey, with the initial success in containing the virus and relatively early relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 appearing to be important factors in explaining this difference.

However, our cross-country analysis suggests that reduced subjective well-being is highly correlated with increasing anxiety and depression symptoms, and so we may also expect to see a future impact on well-being as the pandemic worsens in Vietnam.

A significant drop in well-being may have long-term mental health consequences, and a body of evidence documents a vicious cycle between poverty and mental health. Given limited mental health services, particularly in poor communities, the danger is that symptoms of mild depression and anxiety could worsen if left untreated and affect later life outcomes.

Conclusion

The economic and social impacts of the initial waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam throughout 2020 are already having a significant effect on the lives of young people. The current wave of new infections during 2021 underlines an urgent need for decisive action to contain the pandemic, and thereafter resume economic development and poverty reduction.

Effective and timely implementation of the NDVP is central to this effort, alongside similar social distancing measures that were so successful in containing the pandemic in 2020. There is particular concern to ensure that factory workers in industrial zones (including those in the garment, shoe-making and electronic sectors) and informal workers in contact-intensive service sectors in big cities (for example, the hospitality industry, including hotels, catering and transportation) are protected and vaccinated as soon as possible given the highly transmissible nature of the current wave of infections.

In addition, this brief sets out the case for COVID-19 recovery plans to also ensure that appropriate support is provided to adolescents and young people, particularly those from poor households, remote and rural communities, and ethnic minority groups, if Vietnam is to avoid the pandemic having long-term adverse economic and social impacts.

Further research and robust lesson learning are required to better understand the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of young people, particularly in relation to continuing their education and catching up on lost learning, developing skills, accessing and maintaining decent jobs, and maintaining positive mental health and well-being.

¹ As reported for 18–27 year olds in the Peru Demographic and Family Health Survey (ENDES) 2019.

² Young Lives investigated subjective well-being using the Cantril Self-anchoring Scale (also known as the 'Cantril Ladder').



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