ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Children and young people's access to food, education, play and leisure in times of crisis: An international, integrative review of policy responses, impacts and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented global moment when the core needs of children and young people (rights for education, food, play and leisure) were not adequately addressed, recognised from a policy perspective and to varying extents, ignored. This paper, by bringing scholarship and grey literature together, provides an integrative, international, comprehensive review and analysis of how the pandemic affected children's core needs (and rights) simultaneously. It also reviews and compares adaptations—often local, informal and/or community-led—that attempted to respond to the shortcomings and negative impacts of more formal policy measures, including lockdowns themselves. By doing so, it engages with the question of resilience and calls for children and young people's needs and voices to be heard in the future, particularly considering future forms of crisis-preparedness that can better account for children and young people's needs.

KEYWORDS

adaptations, children, resilience, rights, young people

INTRODUCTION

While unprecedented, the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly differ from those of many other major crises (Andres et al., 2023). Overall, it revealed and exacerbated existing, intersectional socio-economic burdens, putting the most vulnerable at further risk of deprivation, isolation and worsened living conditions, as well as contracting and falling seriously ill from the virus (Clark et al., 2023; Joiner et al., 2022). Far less discussed—at least in public and policy circles in many countries—was what happened to those not perceived as at *risk of* infection, but who were rather placed *at risk* as the result of policy responses—especially during periods of lockdown. At the core of those 'not-at-risk' were children and young people, specifically those living in monetary-poor households, which were disproportionately affected socially, forgotten by decision-makers in most countries and hit the hardest economically (Andres et al., 2023; Cortés-Morales et al., 2021).

A key focus of recent studies on children and young people during COVID-19 has been on mental health and well-being during lockdowns (Lips, 2021), given the range of emotional, physiological and behavioural stresses they encountered (Kauhanen et al., 2023). Consequences for their everyday lives and trajectories into adulthood have also been discussed (Kelly et al., 2023). However, no work to date has adopted an integrated and international approach to looking at evidence about both children and young people's living systems (Harrist et al., 2019) and their access to services and resources. Consequently, this paper focuses on four key domains, education, food, play and leisure, whose access to is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The emerging scholarship on young people's access to key resources and services during COVID-19 rarely contrasts differences in accessibility across resources/services, nor has it been internationally comparative in scope. In this paper, we critically collate and review these academic literatures but also argue that policy and practitioner responses and their impacts, as accounted for in 'grey' literature from governments, NGOs and other actors warrant greater and more systematic scrutiny (a further contribution of the paper). Thus, we fill a gap by providing an integrative, international, comprehensive review and analysis of how the pandemic affected children's access to food/education/play/leisure, across academic and policy literatures.

Based on the same overall premises, the paper's second aim is to review and compare *adaptations*—often local, informal and/or community-led—that attempted to respond to the shortcomings and negative impacts of more formal policy measures, including lockdowns themselves. For groups marginalised or ignored by such policies—such as children and young people—the ability to survive and even thrive relied on *adaptations*. Such adaptations highlight the importance of human agency and its role in fostering resilience (Bristow & Healy, 2015) and are often responsive to specific geographical and/or social contexts (Martin & Sunley, 2006).

This comparative and international assessment is conducted through an international integrative review of academic and grey literature published up to April 2024. The paper forms a key part of a large-scale, 30-month, internationally comparative research project that explored young people's experiences of and adaptations to COVID-19 and associated lockdowns in Brazil, South Africa and the United Kingdom (specifically England). These three countries were chosen

as broadly representative of very diverse socio-economic and urban contexts as well policy responses to COVID-19. South Africa is an example of a country with entrenched poverty. The Government initially pursued a highly stringent lockdown response, which threatened the livelihoods of the poor, but was then partly relaxed. Brazil has similar poverty and socio-economic characteristics but was characterised by national denialism leading (at least initially) only to partial lockdown. England in contrast has lower incidence of absolute poverty (although increasing numbers of children living in relative poverty) and a stronger economy. The latter went through strict lockdown periods, with its ability to respond to COVID-19 severely undermined by more than a decade of austerity policies and their impacts on marginalised groups (including young people). In order to exemplify key trends in the literature, this paper draws on examples from these three countries, among others; however, its scope is global with a focus on international comparative insights rather than a comparison between South Africa, England and Brazil.

The paper starts by discussing how crisis and adaptations connect and engage with (vulnerable) children and young people's resilience in times of disaster. Resilience is here understood as their ability to cope, survive, adapt and progressively recover from such an unprecedented event. We then turn to our methodology before analysing policy responses, impacts and adaptations related to children and young people's access to education, food, play and leisure. Ultimately, we call for deeper consideration of how future forms of crisis-preparedness that can better account for children and young people's access to resources like education and food and consequent impacts on their everyday lives, development and well-being.

CRISIS, ADAPTATION AND (VULNERABLE) CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The COVID-19 crisis was unprecedented and led to complex policy responses that differed from other emergency responses (Van der Ven & Sun, 2021) for several reasons: The immediate nature of the health threat and its spread across the globe; its visibility and proximity, with tangible impacts physical and emotional impacts on almost everyone's' daily lives; the individualisation of responsibility for people's own health and that of others; an initial and false assumption of universality with a virus affecting everyone equally (an assumption critiqued above); and, often siloed, rushed decisions based on partial scientific knowledge about the virus.

In times of emergency, crisis management relies on the identification of key priorities and lessons from past crisis (which were absent during COVID-19). Additionally, policy decisions are always likely to benefit some populations and harm others (Weible et al., 2020). During the pandemic, measures designed to contain the number of deaths and contaminations barely accounted for *indirect* impacts, such as effects of lockdown on other facets of life including education and access to food (Andres et al., 2023). Addressing these basic rights was not at the forefront of national or WHO priorities (Greer et al., 2020). A key issue that arose from the pandemic was the cumulative effects of such restrictions and their impact on the most vulnerable—not only children and young people, as discussed in this paper, but also (for instance) detainees and those seeking asylum (Lebret, 2020).

When facing the amplification of existing challenges during a crisis, the resilience of the most vulnerable does not rest on 'bouncing back' but on everyday coping mechanisms. The concept of *adaptation* is strongly connected to the literature on path creation (Dawley, 2014), situating mechanisms of survival as alternative solutions. While the path creation literature has been mainly focused on regions, urban areas, industries and firms (Martin & Sunley, 2006), Andres

and Kraftl (2021) have applied it to local communities and how they engage with transformations in cities, through the temporary use of urban spaces. Adaptations in such a framing are connected to forms of activation, allowing individuals or communities to 'un-lock' (Martin & Sunley, 2006) different paths of change involving various parties with numerous outcomes, which can be either temporary or more permanent. In a context of emergency, unlocking means addressing key rights that are (partially) denied. We turn now to what this means for children and young people and later in the paper provide examples of a range of key adaptations created for and by them during COVID-19.

Largely given their positioning in generational orderings (Punch, 2020), children are in many contexts structurally disadvantaged by their legal status, bodily size, lack of economic autonomy and perceived lack of 'knowledge' and skills compared with that of adults. It is well established that their abilities to navigate, have a say, survive and thrive in cities, are patterned by intersecting factors such as socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender and dis/ability (Balagopalan, 2019). This has led to perverse manifestations, for example their persecution in urban public spaces, effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on child carers and socio-economic and educational informality (Gough et al., 2019).

To date, children and young people's resilience in the face of disasters and crises has been discussed primarily through a psychological lens in relation to trauma. This literature has paid significant attention to their welfare, well-being and mental health during wars and 'natural' disasters (Norris et al., 2008), with the COVID-19 pandemic being no exception (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Children and young people's resilience has also been scrutinised in connection to the support systems around their lives. This includes schools (Masten et al., 2018) and communities (Harrist et al., 2019). Elsewhere, attention has also been given to the cumulative effects of disasters, specifically with regard to ongoing trauma that intensifies with intersectional 'burdens' such as race, disability and income (Masten et al., 2015). In terms of *adaptations*, it has been argued that vulnerable children's resilience is linked to forms of nurturing, trust and social belonging, skills and local governance, hope and sense of purpose, established by individuals, communities and institutions directly impacting young people's lives (Masten et al., 2015). Place and cultural contexts also influence how those mechanisms manifest (ibid).

From the start of the pandemic and since then, key concerns were raised in both academic and policy literatures about its impact on younger generations, specifically those already at risk from deprivation, food insecurity, challenging home conditions and other (overlapping) social and environmental crises (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021; Holt & Murray, 2022; Mitra et al., 2020; Rajmil et al., 2021). This paper, therefore, evaluates these burgeoning literatures by focusing on education, food, play and leisure—both in terms of policy (non-)responses and often local adaptations.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a major 30-month research project, whose main aims were to understand how impacts on and adaptations by/for children and young people (aged 10–24) during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, Brazil and the United Kingdom. The international, integrative review presented here constituted the first phase of that project. The methodology involved the search and analysis of academic and 'grey' literatures published between June 2022 and April 2024.

In terms of grey literatures, we focused on international reports and agencies alongside those from our three case study countries, with reports from other countries providing additional comparators. Reports ranged from official government publications, to pieces by prominent national and international non-profit organisations. Our review of academic literatures on children, young people and COVID-19, focused on social scientific research that examined their experiences and adaptations. For both areas of literature, we used Google, Google Scholar and Scopus, concentrating on two subject areas: social sciences and health sciences. We also narrowed down our work to the following fields: geography, urban studies, cultural studies, urban planning, sociology, economics, education, health and nutrition, international development and childhood studies, sport and physical exercise. We developed and iterated a series of search terms related to food, education, play and leisure that were applied to all of the above literatures. From our broad searches of the above databases and resources, we refined thousands of potential documents into 365 that were used to publish a more detailed review (the selection of publications in the present paper is necessarily smaller and hones in on key trends for our integrative review). Sources were selected based on their relevance, quality of data and (where relevant) research design. The team extensively reviewed them in terms of access, impacts and adaptations—where possible linking together the domains of food, education, play and leisure to explore inter-sectoral issues. We rejected those that were either out of this scope or were not robust in terms of the data/evidence presented. This led us to critically analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on policies concerning and living conditions of young people in each country, before situating them internationally. The rest of this paper discusses the outcomes of the project's integrated review for each domain, analysing formal *policies* designed to (attempt to) support children and young people, the *impacts* of such policies and wider lockdown measures and (often local, community-led) forms of *adaptation*.

EDUCATION

From 16 February 2020 to 30 April 2022, the global average for school closure was 142 days fully closed, 151 days partially closed (UNESCO, 2021b). School closures led to significant disruptions in students' learning and continuous right for education. Dropouts increased in many countries around the world (UNICEF, 2023a). Ensuring learning continuity during school closures became both a priority and challenge for governments internationally (UN, 2020).

While all types and levels of education were impacted, inclusive education and vocational courses were affected further. The ability to address students' diverse forms of learning, specifically those with learning difficulties and disabilities was severely challenged (Symeonidou et al., 2024). Similarly, vocational courses were most at-risk given difficulties in delivering practical skills through distance learning (Stone, 2021). In some countries, more flexibility in continuing vocational education was permitted (e.g. in Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Norway; OECD, 2020). However, despite such adjustments, technical skill gaps emerged with wider implications for young people's prospects for employment and career progression. Such challenges were exacerbated in low- and middle-income countries.

A move to online/remote delivery and increased use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) was observed globally, but limited and/or lack of connectivity in some countries led to varied distance learning formats. Distance learning in high-income countries involved up to 85% of young people, dropping to under 50% in low-income countries with striking regional variations (UN, 2020). For instance, most low-income countries (especially in Asia and Africa)

used broadcast media TV (82%) and radio (92%) (ibid). Furthermore, 94% of countries globally used multiple online tools for delivering education, but integrated 'older' media (e.g. use of SMS and phone calls) into their practices (UNESCO, 2021a). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 28% of countries relied on TV and radio: slightly under 40% were offered online-only education, while 22% used a combination of online and broadcast options. In South Asia, close to 40% of countries used broadcast (radio or TV and radio), while half of the countries used a combination of online and broadcast learning opportunities.

With the move to remote learning, some countries attempted to distribute electronic devices to ensure that learners from less wealthy households would not be excluded from remote teaching. In England, a scheme was set up to distribute 220 000 laptops to pupils in need and 6-month internet passes and was followed by further 'waves' of equipment provision (a total of 1.313 449 million devices) (UNICEF and Carnegie UK Trust, 2021). In São Paulo, Brazil, the municipal network announced a programme to distribute tablets in 2020 for remote teaching. However, these only began to be distributed in 2021, in an uneven pattern, and with limitations on internet access and data protection vulnerabilities (Rede & Lidas, 2021).

In many geographical contexts, the inability of education providers to shift fully online can largely be attributed to the digital divide, with the disadvantaged having limited access to basic household services such as electricity, internet and electronic devices. Indeed, the lack of technological infrastructure was often combined with low levels of digital literacy among students, parents and teachers (who also struggled to access working computers, relevant software and the Internet), which worsened learning challenges (ibid). Time to learn was also taken by other tasks, which included children finding paid work and/or undertaking domestic chores (Silva & Vaz, 2020). There were also stark geographical divides in countries like South Africa, where approximately 24.7% of learners in urban schools attended online, with the figure for rural schools being just 7.6% (Nkomo et al., 2023). Moreover, inequalities also existed along racial lines: again, in South Africa, 18.3% of White learners accessed online learning compared to 5.3% of Black learners (Stats SA, 2021).

As national policy responses were often insufficient, around a quarter of all countries globally pushed for supplementary, local-based adaptations, such as school teachers making in-person home visits and the 'paper-based take-home' model (UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, OECD, 2021). Moreover, children's ability to continue learning was mostly related to the relative speed with which alternative support—in the form of localised *adaptations*—was provided. Adaptations were developed by parents, families and friends, but more importantly from informal and communal initiatives; these flourished worldwide with schools, charities, communities and groups of teachers taking extra steps to address issues of access to (online) education and pedagogical tools beyond formal State mechanisms (although the quality and hence impacts of these local adaptations also varied as a result).

For instance, in many contexts, schools, with their in-depth knowledge about their pupils and families and ability to mobilise multi-agency resources, acted as localised system 'hubs' to support children and young people in their learning (for instance, distributing food, providing play materials and/or checking on children's well-being). Sometimes these local hubs extended at larger scales; in Chile, for example, a network of teachers came together to develop a series of 30-minute radio lessons (La Radio Enseña) for secondary students who had no access to online learning. Similarly in the United States, a coalition of actors set up a family hotline to guide parents and children with necessary resources (Vegas & Winthrop, 2020). Like schools as 'hubs', such support was often cross-sectoral, also tackling food poverty and on some occasions access to play and leisure.

FOOD

During the pandemic, across the world, food insecurity and poverty increased due to the disruption of food supply chains and dropping household incomes (Panghal et al., 2022). As a result of struggling to access food children and young people's well-being and overall health was impacted (McPherson, 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Globally, (particularly) vulnerable children's access to food was compromised for three main reasons. First, while school feeding programmes provide the main or only meal of the day for them, school closures often meant no access to such meals. In 2020, the number of missed in-school meals globally reached 39 billion (Borkowski et al., 2021). While the impact was felt on all children (e.g. in the United Kingdom or North America), the most affected were those living in poor households in the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and some countries in Latin America (UNICEF, 2023b), while income also intersected with (for instance) ethnicity in many contexts, with Black populations being particularly adversely affected in countries such as the United Kingdom and Brazil (Schall et al., 2021).

Second, restrictions on movement, fear of the virus and other impacts of lockdowns significantly shrank the ability of households to access nutritious food. In higher income countries, this principally meant not being able to reach specific supermarkets where cheaper food was available and having to change diets and reduce food intake. In low- and middle-income countries, the informal food chains were compromised due to restrictions on movement (Skinner & Watson, 2020). Many countries (e.g. Peru, Mexico, Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, India and Thailand) strictly limited the activities of informal food producers and distributors.

Third, lost household incomes due to pandemic restrictions led to food poverty, with disproportionate effects upon children and young people. Unemployment also increased more generally among young people of working age. According to the Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022 (ILO, 2022), between 2019 and 2020, 15–24 years old experienced a much higher percentage loss in employment than individuals aged over 25. All of these problems hampered young people's access to (particularly) nutritious food. Such socio-economic difficulties were exacerbated towards the end of the pandemic as several food programmes were halted due to soaring international food prices, pushing some countries to rely on local food and farming (Bryant, 2022).

In response to the above challenges, most countries launched national programmes including providing food vouchers/cash, food aid benefits sent to families or distributing pre-packaged meals through schools, charity networks, faith-based organisations and Grab-and-Go sites (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022). The intervention of charities was a global phenomenon, seeing the increased use and role of food banks who adapted and partnered with other organisation to allow the most vulnerable to survive.

However, national programmes were, as with education, frequently insufficient. Hence, public/not-for-profit partnerships were complemented by food distribution secured through ad hoc community support and *adaptations*. Schools and other organisations (e.g. religious communities) stepped in. Typically, schools joined local efforts with food banks and school staff distributed food alongside learning materials, as in England. In Brazil, food distribution initiatives also emerged from school communities and organised groups involving public and private actors and religious entities (Boullosa and Peres, 2022; Domingos et al., 2022) and donations (Memoricidade, 2020). In Honduras, teachers prepared food rations and rode their bikes going door-to-door, to distribute food to students (World Food Programme, 2020). Meanwhile in Iraq, scouts were sent to deliver food baskets to poor families (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022).

Overall, food provision globally, particularly in periods of lockdowns, and beyond, relied on collaborations between various agents, including local and national governments, I/NGOs, private organisations and communities. Local adaptations were at the core of community actions to feed vulnerable children. Such approaches also characterised responses outside of periods of lockdowns and during holiday times. Arguably, then, the provision of food, as essential for survival, was characterised by the most extensive range of adaptations during the pandemic, when compared with education, play and leisure.

PLAY AND LEISURE

Given that play and leisure overlap in the lives of many children and young people, may be used interchangeably and are enshrined in the same Article (31) of the UNCRC, we combine our analyses of play and leisure in this section. During the pandemic play and leisure patterns were disturbed in many ways. Play became confined to the home, as a de facto choice, with significant consequences for those living in more challenging family settings (e.g. overcrowding and no garden). Overall, young people in monetary poor households saw their opportunities and right to play significantly reduced due to the lack of access to their primary playing environments in periods of lockdowns.

Although varying according to specific places, the formal play sector and play/leisure opportunities are more diverse and structured in high-income countries (opportunities for informal play may however be reduced and there may be different understandings of what play is). Despite this, during the pandemic, in higher income countries, young people's access to play and leisure was virtually ignored, with opportunities for playing being significantly restricted and regulated (e.g. Casey & McKendrick, 2023; Children's Alliance, 2024; Pastore & Salvi, 2023).

Outdoor play was also made more difficult, controlled and monitored. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, fines were introduced for play taking place outside the home space, beyond defined activities and allocated times. Around the world, playgrounds were shut or cordoned off. This had a 'destructive impact on children, their freedom to experience. The potential increase in poor mental and physical health from this mix, not to mention its likely developmental consequences is obvious. Children have been imprisoned in the home' (Play England, 2022, p2).

In more deprived settings, play continued to occur more organically, informally and spontaneously (although this is not to romanticise the circumstances in which such children found themselves). Even during lockdowns, this included playing on streets in slums and townships, as social distancing was not possible. In South Africa and Brazil, crowded indoor spaces in most poor households forced children to defy lockdown regulations and to play outside (Chirume & Sizani, 2020; Tebet et al., 2021).

Young people globally expressed their frustration with COVID-19 regulations that affected their (outdoor) play and leisure. In Brazil, for instance, children manifested their desire to be in open and public spaces, such as parks and malls, while expressing signs of distress, irritation or boredom (Silva et al., 2022). They highlighted the need to be able to move around, whether in the internal space of the house or an external environment. The lack of opportunity for outdoor play and leisure had arguably even more severe consequences in some contexts—including exposure to different kinds of violence and abuse. In South Africa, for example, Chimbindi et al. (2022) pointed to higher levels of alcohol misuse and sexual abuse related to lockdown measures and

the lack of recreation. There is also evidence of higher levels of physical violence against and among children (Mahlangu et al., 2022).

While overall physical activity decreased during the pandemic, particularly among older youth (Do et al., 2022), indoor activities increased with high usage of electronic devices for video and e-gaming (Kourti et al., 2021). Online play spread significantly (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2020), however, the digital divide again dramatically affected its accessibility. Online play was not solely an organic response but was also used by schools and teachers for remote learning and by play groups and sport organisations to keep their young people active.

Owing to the lack of structured play opportunities, new forms of play emerged, revealing organic *adaptations* led by parents, community members and young people themselves. Play became more unstructured (Rossi et al., 2021). Free play, walking and play with family members became dominant, particularly in early periods of lockdown (Kourti et al., 2021). Unlike food and education, global actors including UNESCO (2020) intervened by leading online play and sport programmes, *alongside* more localised, ad hoc forms of play and leisure. For example, the *Sports Challenge Against COVID in Africa* was an initiative whereby young people were encouraged to make videos of themselves displaying innovative skills and creativity in participating in any sporting activity of their choice to strengthen their health (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2020).

However, again, local adaptations were also vital. In countries like Brazil, NGOs and civil society organisations provided play kits with educational materials, alongside the kinds of online spaces of interaction indicated above (Memoricidade, 2020). In England, and related to the provision of food to the most vulnerable, play packages and books were distributed to monetary poor families by charities, schools, social services and even adventure playgrounds (King, 2021). In New York City, safe play occurred thanks to the spread of the Open Street programme, led by the Department of Transport, but implemented by local communities; temporarily closed streets became playgrounds, particularly in neighbourhoods lacking green spaces (e.g. Queens and The Bronx).

Finally, and as with education and food, more ad hoc, community-led adaptations (sometimes involving playworkers and play organisations) were introduced. For instance, as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as interactive play spaces (Russell & Stenning, 2021, 2023). Even if these processes were not implemented on a larger scale or supported by local authorities (e.g. through play streets schemes), creativity and adaptability emerged in various temporary small-scale adaptations of outdoor spaces and community streets.

CONCLUSION: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO AND ADAPTATIONS WITHIN A GLOBAL CRISIS

The pandemic was an unprecedented global moment when the core needs of children and young people—particularly for education, food, play and leisure—were not adequately addressed and were often ignored. In this conclusion, we outline the key contributions of this paper to literature on the impacts on and adaptations by (and for) children and young people in times of crisis globally (and particularly pandemics like COVID-19). We also propose priorities for future interdisciplinary scholarship in this area and for future crisis preparedness.

The first contribution of this paper has been to demonstrate that the scale of the problem was and remains a key concern. On one hand, most national policy responses led to, and compounded,

a challenging situation with immediate needs of children to adequate education, food, play and leisure (and more besides) not being addressed. In turn, this situation led to longer term repercussions, all within contexts of the ongoing marginalisation of children and especially vulnerable children, in most countries around the world (Lundy, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). This reinforced and shed light on the role of localised adaptation as well as existing adaptive capacities that have been shaping children's resilience; these however may not always be sufficient or sustainable in the longer term in dealing with the scale of the problem faced by children and young people—whether during COVID-19 or other crises and disasters. To work about children's learning, resilience, agency and activism during (broadly defined) 'environmental' disasters (Williams and McEwen, 2021; Börner et al., 2021), we would add a need for detailed research into their learning, resilience, agency and activism during health-related crises, such as a global pandemic.

Globally, and despite distinct socio-economic and political characteristics, the impact of the pandemic on children and young people was amplified due to path-dependent and intersectional burdens that were already affecting youths' lives before the pandemic (such as political austerity measures and pre-existing inequalities). COVID-19 revealed the dramatic extent of those inequalities, typically concerning accessing affordable and nutritious food and in-person education, in terms of the domestic sphere, where over-crowded and conflicting home environments, limited or no access to outdoor spaces and distance to green spaces and play facilities impacted particularly on the lives of monetary-poor children and young people. All those factors led to an acceleration of challenges which hampered children and young people's access to basic needs, and especially education, food, play and leisure. Policy failures and an inability to respond to the scale of the problem—particularly the challenges of lockdowns for children and young people's access to key resources, services and networks, led to the need for localised adaptations.

A second key contribution of this paper has been to look across the food/education/play/leisure domains and across international contexts, to assess which areas of these complementary needs and rights were (not) prioritised and where there were overlaps between these domains. From our analyses, responses towards the provision for education were clearly at the forefront of governmental policy, internationally, with direct implications for access to food. The most significant policy and localised adaptations were clearly in alternative educational provision—albeit via a range of technologies that could not be (fully) accessed by all children. Nevertheless, many were insufficient and partially failed despite significant resources being distributed in quantitative terms. Play and leisure on the other hand were deprioritised in comparison with the other two sectors, even though they are crucial to child development.

A third key contribution has been to highlight differences as well as striking similarities in the impacts of COVID-19 upon the needs and rights of more vulnerable children, young people and their families, across international contexts. The pandemic further reinforced households' vulnerabilities due to lost incomes for parents and carers. Poverty hindered children and young people's abilities to cope and survive and the voices of the most marginalised young people were hidden through the intersectional burdens and 'multiple intensities' of the pandemic (Eaves & Al-Hindi, 2020; Ho & Maddrell, 2021; Maddrell et al., 2023 p: 385). Here the unilateral lack of recognition of the importance of playing, having leisure and socially interacting is worth reiterating as a fundamental failure in governments' pandemic responses towards children and young people (Russell & Stenning, 2021). Pandemic responses and restrictions translated into school disruptions, interrupted food chains, and significantly diminished opportunities for play and leisure outside the home. As such, while policies with regard to access to food, education, play and leisure differed from one country to another, with key differences between low-, middle- and high- income countries, responses and adaptations actually followed similar trends. This is

true even in countries like Brazil, which were characterised by COVID-19 political denial, and where regional states stepped in to counter national discourses and policies. Children and young people's resilience was deeply challenged with significant long-term impact on their lives (Kelly et al., 2023).

Having their basic needs put on stand-by was not a decision without consequences and we call here not only for further, in-depth, especially qualitative and comparative research on vulnerable children and young people's experiences of COVID-19, but also for a re-interrogation of how children and young people's voices, needs and rights should be at the forefront of key international discussions (typically WHO) in times of emergency. There is also a need for more longitudinal and again internationally comparative research that tracks the impacts and outcomes for children and young people who lived through COVID-19. Ideally, that research should be interdisciplinary and able to trace not only the impacts on their rights to education, food, play and leisure, but impacts on (and adaptations for) health, well-being, employment, socialisation and political participation.

Fourthly, this paper has demonstrated that, especially in the Majority Global North, national, regional and local responses around education were financially substantial; however, in most contexts they were ill-targeted, insufficient in scale, scope and/or focus in providing for the most vulnerable children and young people. Hence, we have highlighted how transformative support was achieved thanks to local and communal responses led by schools, teachers, volunteers and I/NGOs who stepped in to support children, their knowledge, well-being and even their families. Children and young people's coping, survival and resilience were ensured thanks to the support of community groups, charities, individuals (including teachers) who stepped in during an unprecedented time of crisis. The adaptive practices of these groups were at the core of how children and young people's basic rights were considered and in many cases met, during COVID-19. These directly connect to adaptative capacities widely discussed in the resilience literature, particularly in everyday resilience debates (Chinis et al., 2024; O'Loughlin et al., 2023). Such reflections feed into ongoing discussions about how to re-frame resilience in the context of unprecedented crisis and with the view of leaving no-one behind or at least giving a stronger emphasis to intersectional socio-economic vulnerabilities. In addition, it is important to stress the need for innovations that oppose monocultural tendencies in governmental rationalities, allowing for openings and dialogues, as in the case of young people's own knowledge and actions, which can contribute to more inclusive policies and are therefore better suited to strengthening resilience during crises (Bronk & Jacoby, 2016).

Finally, this paper has also highlighted specific places where children and young people's needs could be better addressed through existing examples of good practice, which were amplified during COVID-19. In many countries, these places were schools or community facilities which acted as life and care 'hubs' within communities, and as sites of support for children and young people's everyday life and well-being, played a crucial role during the pandemic globally. Their role went far beyond education and learning, to include food provision, play activities and mental health support. Indeed, while vulnerable children and young people's access to food was already channelled through schools before the pandemic, their role in tackling food poverty and accessibility became even more apparent and critical during COVID-19. Hence, while mindful of the implications for schools without the necessary resourcing, we call both for further, critical research about how schools and community centres can operate as 'hubs' (during, outside, and in anticipation of times of crisis and disaster) and for greater attention in national and international policy-making and advocacy for children's needs and rights to such hubs.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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