

Two years on: COVID-19 threatens to derail the prospects for a generation in the global south

March 9 2022



Over the last 20 years, Young Lives has interviewed some 12,000 people, such as the young woman pictured, in four countries in the Global South, to record their lives. Credit: Young Lives/Mulugeta Gebrekidan

Two years into the pandemic, marginalized young people in developing countries are struggling to cope and going hungry—even more than ever—according to Oxford University-led [research](#) out today (9 March).

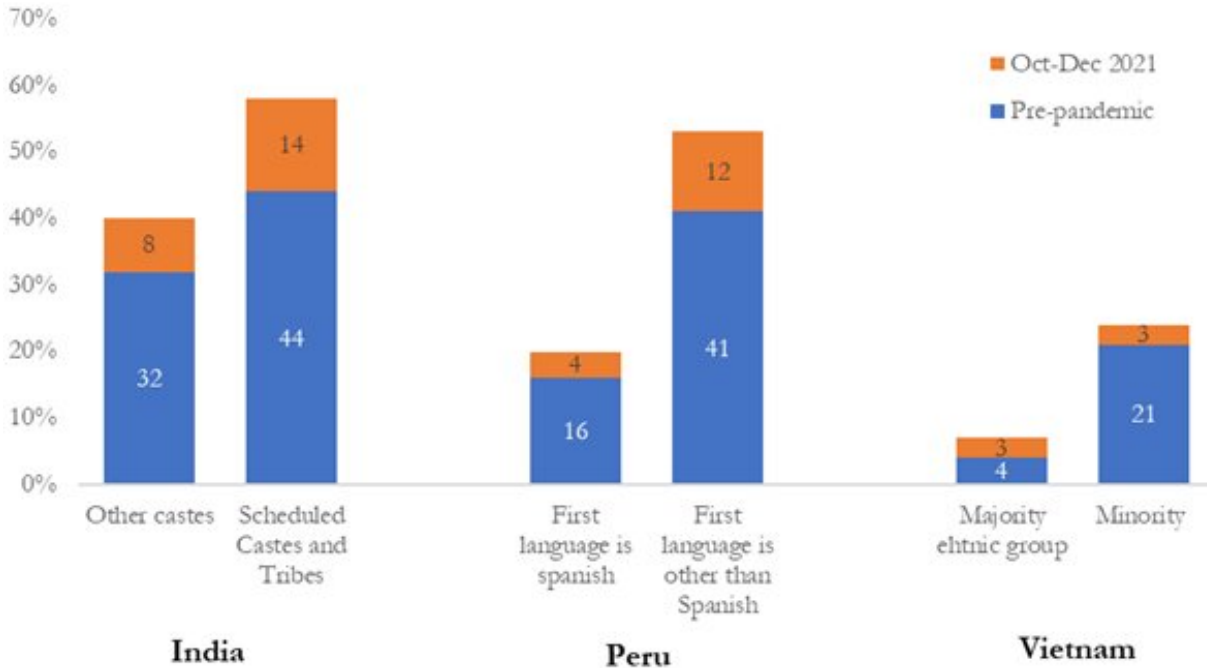
While some countries are recovering and rebuilding, new research published by [Young Lives](#), the 20-year-long study, shows that the pandemic threatens to lock-in inequalities, trapping the poorest young people in developing countries in [extreme poverty](#).

According to the study, the latest research shows increasing [household poverty](#), [food shortages](#), disrupted education, a widening gender employment gap, unequal vaccine access and sustained mental health issues.

Young Lives Director Dr. Catherine Porter says, "Our latest findings confirm our worst fears. Two years on, the pandemic has tightened poverty's grip on the poorest. In 2021, inequalities have widened across many aspects of young people's lives. It is vital to act now, putting young people at the heart of COVID-19 recovery policies and programs if we are to help them get their lives back on track and restore progress towards the [UN's] Sustainable Development Goals."

Since 2001, Young Lives, an internationally renowned research program at Oxford University, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), has followed the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Telangana and Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam.

Dr. Porter adds, "Our research has found that young people are having to cope with multiple stresses as a result of the pandemic, often alongside unprecedented conflict and climate crises. Urgent action is required to support them recover. Young Lives will publish recommendations for policy makers later in March 2022."



Proportion of young people reporting that their household is struggling poor or destitute: Pre-pandemic vs October-December 2021. Credit: University of Oxford

The project has continued to contact the young people (now aged 20 and 27) by phone during the pandemic. In the latest survey, researchers interviewed more than 9,000 young people, between October and December 2021, about the pandemic's impact on their [household income](#), access to food and vaccines, employment, education and well-being.

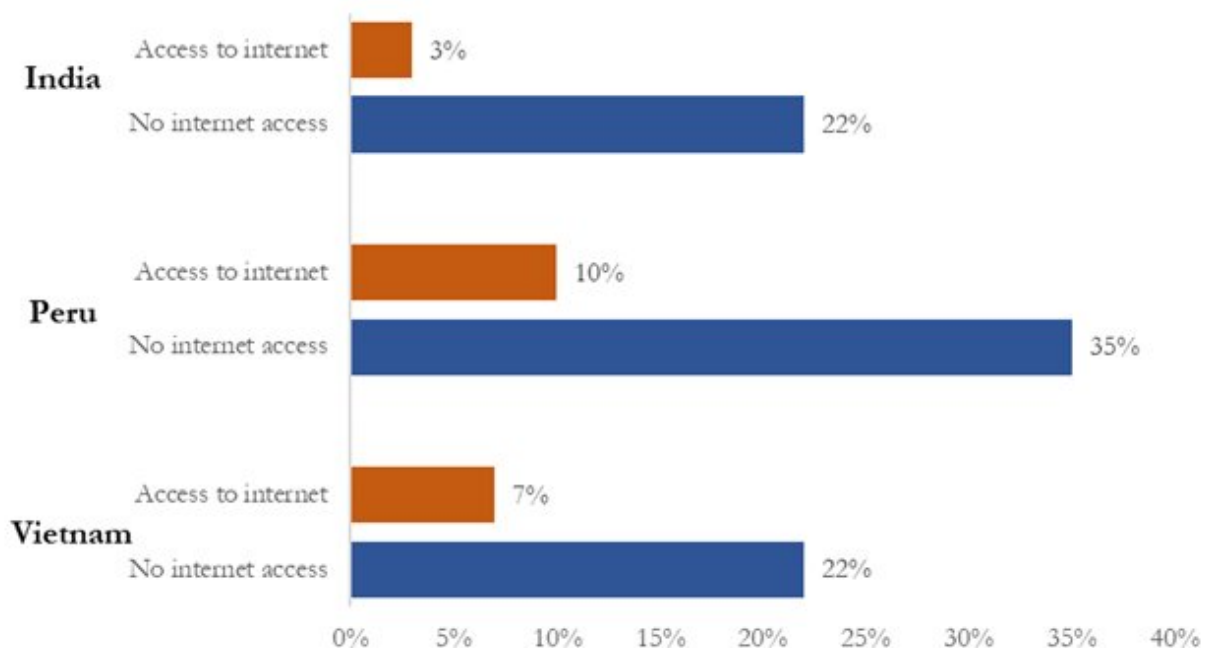
The researchers found:

Household poverty: The number of households in the survey that are struggling has increased during the pandemic. Young people from poor households and marginalized groups appear trapped in deep pockets of poverty, unable to bounce back—despite economic restrictions easing.

In Ethiopia, the number living in households that are poor and destitute or struggling to satisfy the most basic needs nearly doubled from 34% pre-pandemic to 63% in 2021. In India, this rose from 36% pre-pandemic, to 52% in August–October 2020, with only a slight recovery to 46% by October–December 2021.

In Peru, those whose mother tongue is not Spanish were much more likely to live in poor or destitute households, increasing from 12% before the pandemic to 20% by October–December 2021 (compared to only 4% for those whose first language is Spanish).

Food security: In 2021, the number of young people worried about running out of food increased substantially, particularly those living in the poorest households and among marginalized groups. There was acute food insecurity in drought prone regions in Ethiopia.



Digital divide: Percentage of Young Lives students who dropped out of

education due to reasons other than their course finishing. Credit: University of Oxford

More than 40% of families surveyed in the drought hit area of Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region in Ethiopia actually ran out of food in 2021, and 75% were worried about running out of food—a near 100% increase on 2020 figures.

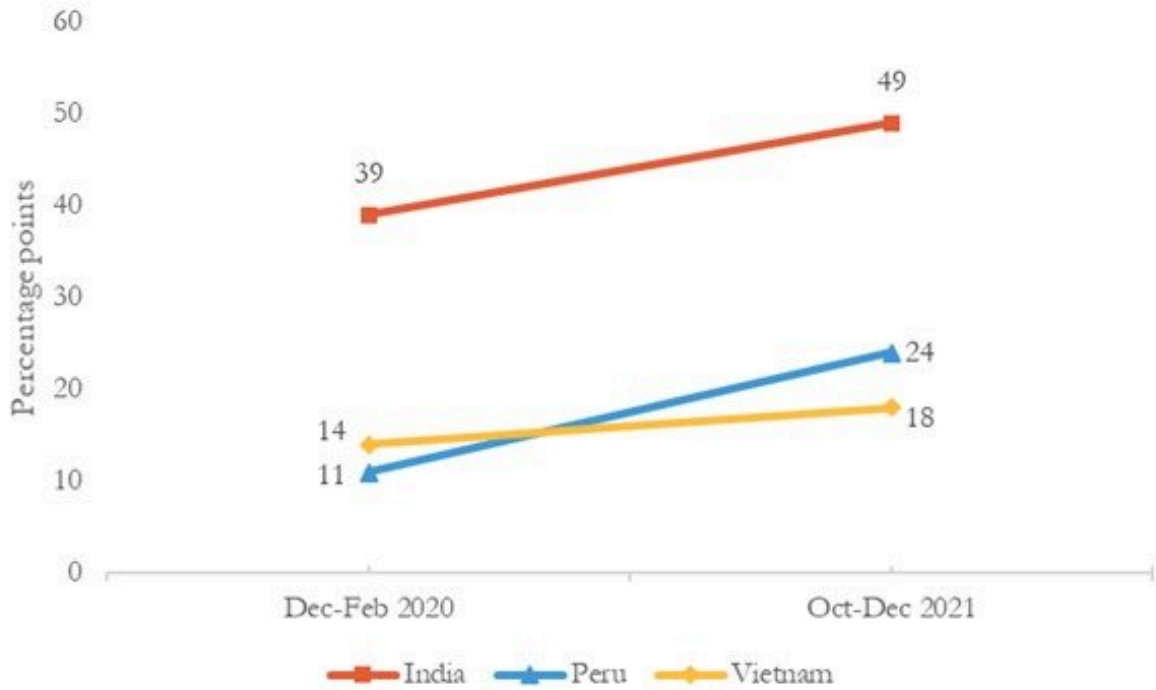
In India, 44% of young people surveyed had worried about running out of food in 2021, compared to 13% reported in 2020.

In Vietnam, 29% of young people had worried about running out of food in 2021, compared to only 14% in 2020, with increases reported even among wealthier households.

Mental Health: Worryingly high levels of mental health issues among young people have sustained or increased over the course of the pandemic

In Peru, 30% of young people reported experiencing anxiety and 24% reported symptoms of depression in October–December 2021, compared to pre-pandemic average depression levels of 18%, as reported in the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey.

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



Increase in gender gap among 26-27 year olds: pre-pandemic vs October-December 2021. Credit: University of Oxford

Education: Young Lives students reported a significant decline in the quality of education. Just under half of all Young Lives 19–20 year old students reported that the quality of their learning had declined compared to before the pandemic (55% in Vietnam, 51% in Peru, 47% in India and 30% in Ethiopia). Continued school closures, a persistent digital divide and low effectiveness of remote learning are widening educational inequalities and increasing drop out.

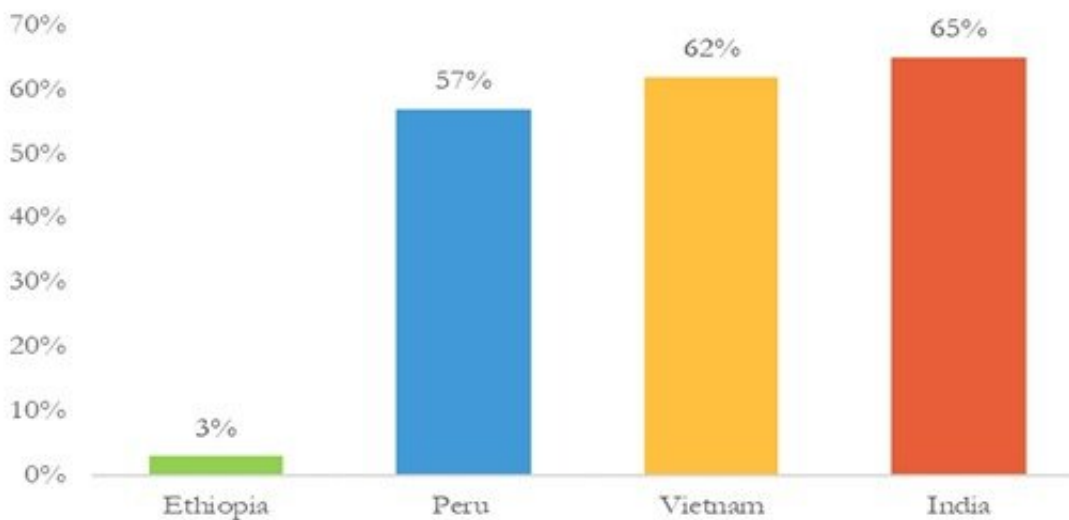
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In Peru, almost one in five (19%) of 19- to 20-year-old students had dropped out of education for reasons other than completing their course.

In Vietnam, 22% of 19- to 20-year-old students with no internet access had dropped out of education, compared to only 3% among those with internet access.

Employment: More young people have returned to work, but the gender employment gap is increasing and job quality may have deteriorated for some with a shift towards more self-employment and agricultural work.

In Peru, the employment level for 26–27 year old women fell from 76% before the pandemic, to 64% by October–December 2021, with the related gender employment gap increasing from 11 percentage points to 24 percentage points over the same period.



Proportion of Young Lives respondents with at least one Covid-19 vaccine dose, October-December 2021. Credit: University of Oxford

Increasing numbers of 26–27 year olds are working in agriculture: in Ethiopia, these rose from 49% before the [pandemic](#) to 53% by October–December 2021; and in India, from 42% to 47%.

Access to vaccines: Unequal vaccination rates both between countries and within countries are putting those in poorer, rural households and marginalized groups at greater risk of COVID-19.

Vaccination programs accelerated over the second half of 2021 in India, Peru and Vietnam, with 65%, 57% and 62% of [young people](#) in our survey having received at least one dose by October–December 2021, respectively.

But in Ethiopia, vaccine uptake remains very low, with only 3% receiving their first dose by October–December 2021, and 29% saying they would not get a vaccine if available.

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

Provided by University of Oxford

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