

DEAR DIARY • VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF LIVELIHOOD DISRUPTION DURING COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had unequal and devastating impacts on young people in middle and lower income countries, especially where there are pre-existing vulnerabilities such as government instability, uneven economic transition into 21st century work, a lack of transportation and digital infrastructure, and a scarcity of formal social safety nets.

The extent of this disruption was tracked through the innovative Youth Specific Livelihood Impacts and Responses to COVID-19 project. It is a youth-led diary-based research project led by Restless Development in partnership with the Rutgers WPF Indonesia, University of Cambridge, and the Asian Development Bank. The aim of the project was to assess the livelihood impacts and responses of young people during COVID-19, utilising pandemic-safe, qualitative research captured through more than four months of diary entries written by young people (age 15-29) across Indonesia and Nepal.

How was this done?

The project methodology centred on diary data as an avenue for mapping young people's lived experience during the crises. The study captured weekly diary entries from 100 young people in Indonesia and Nepal between March and July 2021. Based on a robust literature review and categorisation of labour market vulnerability in response to the pandemic, five demographics or 'clusters' of young people were selected as the focus of the project: (i) young mothers, (ii) low-level tourism and trekking workers, (iii) waste pickers, (iv) health care workers and (v) chronically vulnerable groups: lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-sexual, inter-sex and queer (LGBTIQ) in Nepal and persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Indonesia. Ten young diarists were recruited for each cluster using snowballing techniques and open recruitment, resulting in 100 diarists total across Indonesia and Nepal.





Young diarist in the research process.



Female waste pickers collecting plastics from the garbage field.

To facilitate a youth-led approach to research, 10 young researchers - or 'rapporteurs' - based in Indonesia and Nepal (5 in each country) were assigned to work with each cluster of diarists, guiding them through the research process and monitoring their diary submissions. Rapporteurs were involved in designing the diary question formation, developing options for diary flexibility (written, audio, in-person), and cascading research training to diary writers through instructions and focus group discussions.

Diarists typically wrote their diaries on paper and submitted entries to rapporteurs using mobile phone apps . Flexible options for diarists whose digital access, connection, or literacy may have inhibited them from a virtually-submitted diary, included audio-based diaries (recorded by the rapporteur through a phone call) or in-person conversations (used for focus group discussions among migrant waste pickers in Indonesia only). Diary entries were supplemented by one-on-one check-ins from rapporteurs, as well as focus group discussions led by rapporteurs at the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the study. Focus group discussions and regular check-ins served to validate data and go deeper on or contextualise certain aspects of diary entries.

This peer-to-peer approach created a structure whereby all insights of the project first pass from the young diarist to the young rapporteur, through the rapporteur to the respective country coordinators, and lastly to the international research teams. Young rapporteurs translated raw diaries upon submission, and performed a first layer of thematic coding and analysis on diary data, creating a baseline of codes for international researchers in the second phase of data analysis. Thus, the findings and recommendations derived were heavily informed by the young people themselves, ensuring vivid representation of the youth voices.

What were the findings?

The findings of this study highlighted the impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods, education and mental health of young people, as well as the labour market adaptations that were made by young people to cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

Young frontline and non-frontline workers in formal and informal economies faced significant disruption, not only due to layoffs but also largely due to government restrictions and the fluctuation of COVID-19 infection rates. Young people adapted to work and education disruption by migrating home to villages, adopting new forms of work, and leveraging digital technologies.



Students who participated noted the impact of digital literacy on their ability to continue school work remotely and school disruptions pushed diarists to transition into the workforce earlier. Diarists believe they needed to enter jobs at a less skilled level than they would have if the pandemic had not disrupted their studies. The pre-existing discrimination which impedes LGBTIQ students from engaging in school was felt more deeply during pandemic times. Those who identify as 'other' gender reported low involvement with both formal and informal social protection, a product of their lack of integration within mainstream society, and the unequal impacts that can be felt among minority communities who lack strong social capital.

Many diary writers wrote that they felt they had too many problems of their own to help others, indicating a threshold whereby non-state mechanisms cannot sustain social welfare provision due to overwhelming stress and deprivation. Given the lack of comprehensive social protection for vulnerable groups before and during the pandemic, young people filled wage gaps created by unemployment and underemployment incurring formal and informal debt, such as taking loans from banks, co-operatives/microfinance, and/or neighbours and friends. In both countries, debt enabled short-term advantages while simultaneously pushing diarists into long-term bondage, rather than emancipation.

Mental health concerns arose for both informal and formal workers in non-frontline industries, associated with the decline in productivity and increase in economic hardship. Mental health issues were of particular concern for frontline health care workers, who not only experienced increased physical burdens due to working-hour increases during the pandemic, but also underwent a surge of increased emotional burden inside and outside the hospital due to their exposure to the virus. Diaries demonstrated that negative mental health experiences have livelihood consequences, leading some diarists to question themselves, experience thoughts of self harm, and feel unable to be as productive in their search for work. Further, vulnerable young people lack resources to cope with mental health crises, but cope through digital, social connections, and giving help to others when they could.

What was learned about diary writing?

This project served as a case study for performing research that is pandemic-safe, prioritising the health and well-being of researchers and research participants, yet still enabling rich data collection during an unprecedented time.



Female homemaker doing her regular household chores.



Young female observing her agriculture land.



“Future youth-led research should consider including diary methods as a way to explore young people’s thought processes and responses to livelihood disruptions, particularly during times of crisis.”

The fully-remote aspect of this study was imperfect in practice, due to the importance of adapting to the needs and capabilities of vulnerable groups. For example, some diarists required in-person visits to ensure that data collection, payment and focus group discussions operated smoothly. However, it made a significant step forward in remote, climate-friendly approaches to qualitative research. The ability to collect rich data remotely has benefits for social science research that may otherwise be handicapped by movement restrictions domestically and internationally, as well as potentially contributing to climate change mitigation by reducing air travel of international researchers.

Notably, not all diarists in vulnerable groups are able to participate in a study that requires some form of digital access. To adapt to this challenge, diarists borrowed smartphones from family members or friends. This obstacle and corresponding solution highlights that qualitative research can benefit from community resource pooling, or the informal networks of research participants, to encourage the participation of vulnerable groups despite their lack of certain resources.

Building on the experience from this study and the recommendations from the diary writers themselves, future youth-led research should consider including diary methods as a way to explore young people’s thought processes and responses to livelihood disruptions, particularly during times of crisis.

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