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The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Subjective Well-being of Rural and Urban Young People in Peru

Qualitative Findings from Young Lives

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1. Introduction

This report addresses the multidimensional effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the subjective well-being of rural and urban youth in Peru. It focuses on participants in the longitudinal study Niños del Milenio (Young Lives), who have been followed from childhood through adolescence to young adulthood, and seeks to understand how their perceptions of their well-being have changed over time. The paper is based on data collected during the 5th Wave of the qualitative component in 2023.

Young Peruvians, especially those who grew up in poverty, have been deeply affected by the public health crisis, not only economically, but also socially and emotionally. The

pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and has had particularly severe effects on women and young people in rural areas, who experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety and loss of educational and employment opportunities.

2. Study objectives

- To identify young people's perceptions of well-being throughout their lives and understand how those perceptions evolved from childhood to adulthood.
- To analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these perceptions, focusing on differences by age, gender and area of residence (whether urban or rural).

3. Methodology

- A longitudinal qualitative methodology was used, based on the Niños del Milenio study, which follows two cohorts: the Younger Cohort, now 21 to 22 years old, and the Older Cohort, now 28 to 29 years old. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young participants, as well as focus groups with young people from the same localities who were not part of the study. The interviews and focus groups took place between March and April 2023 in four regions of Peru (San Martín, Lima, Apurímac and Puno) in both urban and rural areas.
- The methodology also included the ‘timeline’ technique, which allowed young people to reflect on changes and continuity in their life trajectories and how these have influenced their well-being. Individual and cross-sectional profile analyses were also used to capture differences by cohort, gender and place of residence.
- The study followed ethical protocols, including informed consent, ethics committee approval and the use of a safeguarding policy.

4. Main findings

4.1 Subjective well-being and the life cycle

Participants revealed that subjective well-being is closely related to the life cycle and varies according to developmental stages.

- For the Younger Cohort, subjective well-being is mainly related to the completion of higher education and the transition to the labour market. Family and social relations play a fundamental role in emotional and motivational support for educational continuity. However, family finances also play an important role. For the Older Cohort, subjective well-being is associated with economic and employment stability. Access to a stable and well-paid job is crucial to ensure economic security for them and for their families. The process of family formation also comes to play an important role in their definitions of well-being.
- Over time, young people identify certain key elements for their well-being, such as family support (emotional, motivational and economic), access to education, economic stability and physical and mental health. These elements have been constant from childhood to adulthood, although their importance and perception vary according to age, gender and area of residence.
- Throughout all stages of their lives, young people highlight **family support** as a central pillar in building their well-being. In childhood and adolescence, this support manifests itself mainly in terms of care and financial provision, while in adulthood it is perceived

more as a network of emotional support and guidance. Women highly value the support of their families in raising their children, as it allows them to fulfil other responsibilities, such as work or studies.

- Access to quality **education** is perceived as one of the most important factors in achieving well-being throughout life. In adolescence, young people see education as a gateway to opportunities for social mobility and a way to improve their living conditions. Participants from rural areas, however, reported that the quality of education in their communities is lower than in urban areas, which is a significant barrier to their well-being. In addition, those who have access to higher education mentioned the importance of the quality of this education, as they perceive that higher-quality education will open up better job opportunities.
- As young people enter adulthood, **job stability** becomes central to their concept of well-being. For young people in the Older Cohort, having a formal job with social benefits is a crucial marker of well-being. Those with jobs in the informal economy or who have not been able to access stable jobs reported lower levels of satisfaction and constant concern about future economic security. In addition, many young people said that owning their own business is an attractive alternative, as it provides economic independence and flexibility, especially for women, who seek to balance family and work responsibilities.
- Personality, responsibility and emotional control are **individual characteristics** that young people also consider vital to their well-being. Men stressed the importance of managing their emotions and avoiding impulsive or violent behaviour, as this helps them to maintain positive relationships and achieve their work and educational goals. Both men and women consider good mental and physical health to be essential for well-being, highlighting that self-care and leisure activities play an important role in remaining emotionally stable.

4.2 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic disrupted young people's lives and had a profound impact on their conceptions of well-being, introducing new challenges and vulnerabilities but also, in some cases, promoting forms of adaptation and resilience.

- **Economic impacts:** The pandemic severely affected many young people's economic stability, particularly those already living in poverty. In rural areas, where agriculture and informal work are the main sources of income, many young people and their families saw their economic opportunities reduced due to mobility restrictions and lack of demand for products. In urban areas, young people reported having lost their jobs or faced wage reductions, leading to high levels of anxiety and uncertainty about their future.

- **Educational disruption:** The pandemic also significantly affected educational continuity, as many young people saw their education disrupted due to the closure of educational institutions and the transition to virtual classes. Young people in rural areas were most affected by a lack of access to the internet and technology, which limited their opportunities to continue learning during confinement. Even those who were able to continue their studies virtually reported a decrease in the quality of education, which affected their future job prospects.
- **Mental and emotional health:** One of the most important effects of the pandemic was the deterioration of mental health among young people. Feelings of isolation, lack of social interaction, economic stress and uncertainty about the future were some of the main causes of anxiety and depression among study participants. Young women, in particular, reported higher levels of stress, due to the multiple responsibilities they assumed during confinement, including housework, childcare and, in many cases, the need to work to contribute financially to the household.
- **Adaptations and resilience:** Despite the challenges, many young people demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to the new conditions imposed by the pandemic. In rural areas, some young people became more actively involved in their families' agricultural activities, while others sought employment opportunities in their communities. In urban areas, the flexibility of remote work allowed some young people to engage in other leisure and self-care activities which, despite economic uncertainty, contributed to their emotional well-being. Social networks and internet access were also mentioned as key tools for maintaining contact with family and friends during confinement, providing emotional support in difficult times.

4.3 Gender differences

The study also reveals striking differences in women's and men's experiences of well-being.

- **Caring responsibilities:** Young women, especially those in the Older Cohort, reported that the pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities in the household. Many women took on most of the care responsibilities, not only for their children but also for other family members, limiting their opportunities for personal and professional development. Those who had access to family support, such as from their mothers, mentioned that this was key to being able to balance their responsibilities.
- **Gender-based violence:** In rural areas, some women reported an increase in gender-based violence during confinement. This is consistent with findings from other studies, indicating that the stresses generated by the pandemic, coupled with social isolation and restrictions on mobility, led to an increase in such violence.

- **Employment opportunities:** Women were also more affected by job losses and disrupted education, as in many cases they were forced to prioritise household chores and childcare over career or educational aspirations. However, some women, especially in rural areas, noted that working in their own enterprises gave them greater flexibility to manage their domestic responsibilities and generate income.

4.4 Differences by area of residence

- **Rural areas:** Young people in rural areas faced greater difficulties during the pandemic, mainly due to lack of access to basic services such as internet connectivity and health care. This limited their opportunities to continue their education and access formal employment. However, many rural young people mentioned that the strong sense of community in their localities provided them with emotional and social support during the most difficult times.
- **Urban areas:** Urban young people, although having better access to services, also experienced great uncertainty during the pandemic, particularly in relation to employment. Most relied on jobs in the informal economy or in sectors that were heavily affected, such as commerce and hospitality, resulting in significant losses of income.

5. Conclusions

The study reveals that the subjective well-being of young Peruvians is profoundly influenced not only by social, economic and emotional factors, but also by the stage of the life cycle in which they find themselves. This qualitative research, following two cohorts of young people, provides a detailed look at how perceptions of well-being vary over time and the implications of these differences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One key finding is that subjective well-being is not a static concept, but changes as young people move through different stages of their lives. Two main stages stand out in the cohorts: the transition to adulthood (for the Younger Cohort) and the consolidation as young adults in the process of forming their own families (for the Older Cohort).

5.1 Transition to adulthood

Young people in the Younger Cohort, those aged 21–22, are in the early stage of adulthood, where priorities for their well-being are mainly linked to the completion of higher education, the beginning of their employment trajectories and the search for economic independence. At this stage, education is perceived as central in ensuring future well-being, as it is seen as the means to achieve social mobility and improve living conditions. However, the pandemic has hindered this process, with many young people facing educational interruptions and economic barriers, leading to uncertainty about their ability to achieve their goals.

Moreover, at this stage, family relationships remain an important pillar of their well-being. The Younger Cohort depend on the financial and emotional support of their

families to continue their education and face the challenges of adult life. Access to such resources provides them with a foundation on which to build their future.

5.2 Consolidating in adulthood and forming families

Young people in the Older Cohort, aged 28–29, are at a more advanced stage of adulthood, where many have already formed or are in the process of forming their own families. At this stage, well-being is linked to job stability, parenting and the ability to provide a secure and comfortable life for their family. For these young people, having a stable job or their own business is a key indicator of well-being, as it allows them not only to meet their basic household needs, but also to envisage a more secure future.

The process of family formation also introduces new challenges to well-being, especially for women, who often assume most of the care and domestic work responsibilities. The ability to balance paid work with the demands of the household is crucial to well-being at this stage, and those who have the support of their families for childcare and other household tasks reported higher levels of satisfaction.

5.3 Impact of the pandemic on both cohorts

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the two cohorts differently, in both cases it has deepened inequalities and created new challenges to well-being. Young people transiting to adulthood (the Younger Cohort) have faced interruptions in their education and greater difficulties in accessing the labour market, creating a sense of uncertainty about their future. In contrast, young people

already established in adulthood (the Older Cohort) have experienced greater economic and social pressures in providing for their families in a context of economic crisis.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights the resilience of young Peruvians. Family support networks, using technologies to stay connected and adapting to new forms of work such as entrepreneurship have been key factors that have allowed many young people to overcome the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic and find new forms of well-being in an adverse context.

6. Public policy recommendations

- **Strengthen social protection:** It is essential that the Peruvian state develops social protection policies that respond to the specific needs of young people, especially those in vulnerable situations. This includes improving access to quality education, strengthening mental health systems and expanding employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas.
- **Promote gender equity:** Policies should have a gender focus that recognises the disproportionate burden that the pandemic has placed on women. Programmes should promote joint responsibility for domestic and care work, as well as equal access to employment and educational opportunities.
- **Build community resilience:** Community networks should be strengthened, especially in rural areas, where young people rely heavily on informal social support. Policies should focus on the development of basic infrastructure, such as access to water, sanitation and connectivity, which are key to improving young people's quality of life.



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