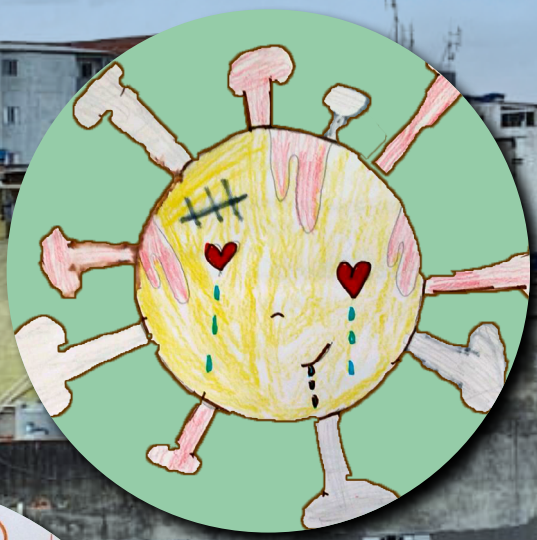
Youth and Children's Adaptations to COVID-19 in Brazil:

Repercussions on Education, Food, and Play/Leisure



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Summary

Editors' Introduction

The PANEX-Youth project was born from the recognition that children and young people were widely neglected in political decision-making during the pandemic, despite experiencing numerous consequences that have accumulated over time. Although excluded from key decision-making processes regarding crisis response by political authorities, they intensely experienced the pandemic, taking on significant roles, engaging in deep reflections, and undergoing transformative experiences, particularly at the local level.

This book presents original data from an interdisciplinary and participatory research project, serving as a historical record of the challenges faced by young people during the greatest health crisis of the past century. The data were collected through reflective and semi-direct interviews and workshops with young people and representatives of public organisations and civil society involved in policies for childhood and youth. More than just documenting losses and impacts, this work encourages reflection on the systemic damages suffered by this population in the context of an emerging crisis such as COVID-19. At the same time, it highlights the strength and resilience of youth, emphasising their innovative potential and capacity for action in the face of adversity.

By questioning the generational position of children and young people living in peripheral territories, the study sought to amplify the voices of a population often rendered invisible not only by adult-centrism, but also by social inequalities that shape and deepen disparities in times of crisis. The book challenges essentialist views of these individuals through accounts of local experiences, underscoring the plurality of their trajectories and perspectives while also reaffirming

social participation as a fundamental strategy for adaptation and crisis response in the contemporary world.

In an era where we are witnessing multiple and threatening crises emerging simultaneously, we argue that the situations and experiences presented in this book can contribute to more diverse, adaptive, and inclusive political actions, particularly in recognition of the potential of children and youth agency. This book is, therefore, dedicated to all the children and young people who participated in the research and extends to all other Brazilian youth facing the consequences of such critical context.

We also express our gratitude to the supporters of the PANEX-Youth project, which was funded through the T-AP Recovery, Renewal and Resilience Programme by FAPESP (2021/07399-2 and 2022/07771-1), CNPq (314947/2021-3), the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ES/X000761/1) and the National Research Foundation of South Africa (149083).

Luciana, Leandro, Leonardo, Yorman and Lauren.

Introduction

PANEX-Youth is a large-scale international research project (conducted between 2022-2024) which aims to understand how young people adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic and to assess the broader impact of these adaptation processes in South Africa, Brazil, and the United Kingdom (England). The project is jointly funded by ESRC, NRF, and FAPESP, bringing together researchers from five universities: University College London (UCL) and the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom; University of the Free State (UFS) and University of Fort Hare in South Africa; and the University of São Paulo in Brazil.

We adopted a nexus approach to achieve this objective, focusing on the interconnections between three key elements of children's and young people's daily lives that were affected by the pandemic: food, education, and play/leisure. These elements were analysed within a broader understanding of both local and domestic/personal contexts (household composition and personal life) of children and young people.

The research findings aim to support global recovery and the long-term resilience of societies in a post-pandemic world. To do so, we used an action-research methodology to co-create knowledge with young people and the communities in which they live, alongside public services, social movements, non-governmental and non-profit organisations focused on this age group. The results of this later phase of the research will be published in a subsequent report. The research stages include:

Stage 1: Global mapping exercise

Objective: To map and develop typologies of the pandemic's impact by considering the food/education/play-leisure nexus, with a focus on youth vulnerabilities worldwide.

Stage 2: National and regional mapping

Objective: To situate and decipher the main repercussions of pandemic-related policies on the food, education, and play/leisure nexus, as experienced by young people during and after Covid-19, the policies/programs/initiatives developed, and the role of local scale policy-makers in this process in each of the three countries and regions (West Midlands/ Birmingham, UK; Central RSA/Mangaung and Moqhaka, South Africa; and São Paulo City/ Paraisópolis and Heliópolis, Brazil).

Stage 3: Zooming-in on local youth adaptations in vulnerable communities

Objective: To conduct an in-depth analysis in each of the study regions mentioned above, focusing on incremental and innovative strategies and the impact of these adaptations on daily survival and recovery.

Stage 4: Co-Designing multiscale solutions to promote youth recovery and resilience

Objective: To co-create solutions, together with the youth community and organisations, which are aligned with the food, education, and play/leisure nexus to help young people in vulnerable territories recover and prepare for potential future major health and socio-economic crises.

This book presents and summarises the main findings from the research, with a focus on Brazil: the global and national mapping exercises and interviews with key organisations and professionals.

The mapping exercise was exclusively conducted through desk research. The methodology used for this assessment involved searching and analysing publicly available documents between June 2022 and April 2023. The documents were sourced from various platforms: UK government websites (e.g., Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), Department for Education (DfE), Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), UK Parliament websites, HM Treasury website, Bank of England monetary publications); South African government websites; Brazilian government reports (Department of Basic Education, Department of Health, Department of Higher Education and Training, the Presidency); Statistics South Africa; national research institutes such as Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), João Pinheiro Foundation (FJP), National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), and the National Youth Council; South Africa's Communicable Diseases Institute; and the South African Government Gazette.

Additionally, academic articles, press releases, multinational INGO reports (e.g., UN, UNESCO, UN Habitat, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP), IGO reports (IMF, OECD, World Bank), international advisory groups (i.e. KPMG), think tanks (i.e. Brookings Institution), and reports from philanthropic and non-profit foundations (e.g., Catholic Relief Services, Carnegie UK Trust, Child Poverty Action Group, The Edge Foundation, Sutton Trust, Plan International) were consulted. Furthermore, data was gathered from NGOs (i.e. Youth Employment UK) and collaborative networks such as the Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) and the Internet Management Committee in Brazil (CGI.br), the PENSSAN Network (Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security), the Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação, and the Civil Society Working Group on the 2030 Agenda. These documents were reviewed multiple times throughout the study.

Following this review, the research team proceeded to the next data collection phase, aiming to situate and identify the primary consequences of pandemic-related policies on the food, education, and play/leisure nexus for young people in Brazil in greater detail. A particular focus was placed on the marginal regions of São Paulo due to the complex urban context of this megacity: with over 12 million residents, it recorded the highest number of Covid-19 deaths in Brazil while simultaneously presenting multiple layers of vulnerability. Our analysis in this book focuses on territories which, like many peripheral areas of São Paulo and Brazil, are characterised by a concentration of low-income and racialized populations who are displaced from urban centres due to high real estate prices, and in turn inhabit areas with precarious infrastructure and limited access to public services. The focus on the *favelas* of Heliópolis and Paraisópolis was based on their unique engagement in community-led initiatives and youth leadership, as well as the territorial diversity of local responses to Covid-19, shaped by factors such as social mobilisation and organisational principles.

The interviews sought to examine which policies/programs/initiatives were developed and how local specificities influenced them (including domestic life/family contexts). The goal of the 32 interviews was twofold: to understand how each organisation supported young people during the most critical period of Covid-19 pandemic and the following years, and organisation to identify the adaptations and strategies used by young people from the perspective of these organisations to cope with the challenges imposed by the pandemic and its progression. Thus, representatives from a variety of organisations which played a key role in supporting young people and/or assessing the pandemic's impact on them were identified. These included representatives from different types of organisations: non-profit organisations (9), community-based organisations (5), social movements (5), advocacy organisations (3), and public services (10). All interviews were recorded, and our study fully adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of São Paulo (protocol no. 61337722.1.0000.5421). The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed, with 113

key themes extracted. Figure 1 presents a map showing the locations of the organisations in São Paulo, and Table 1 describes the typology of these organisations.

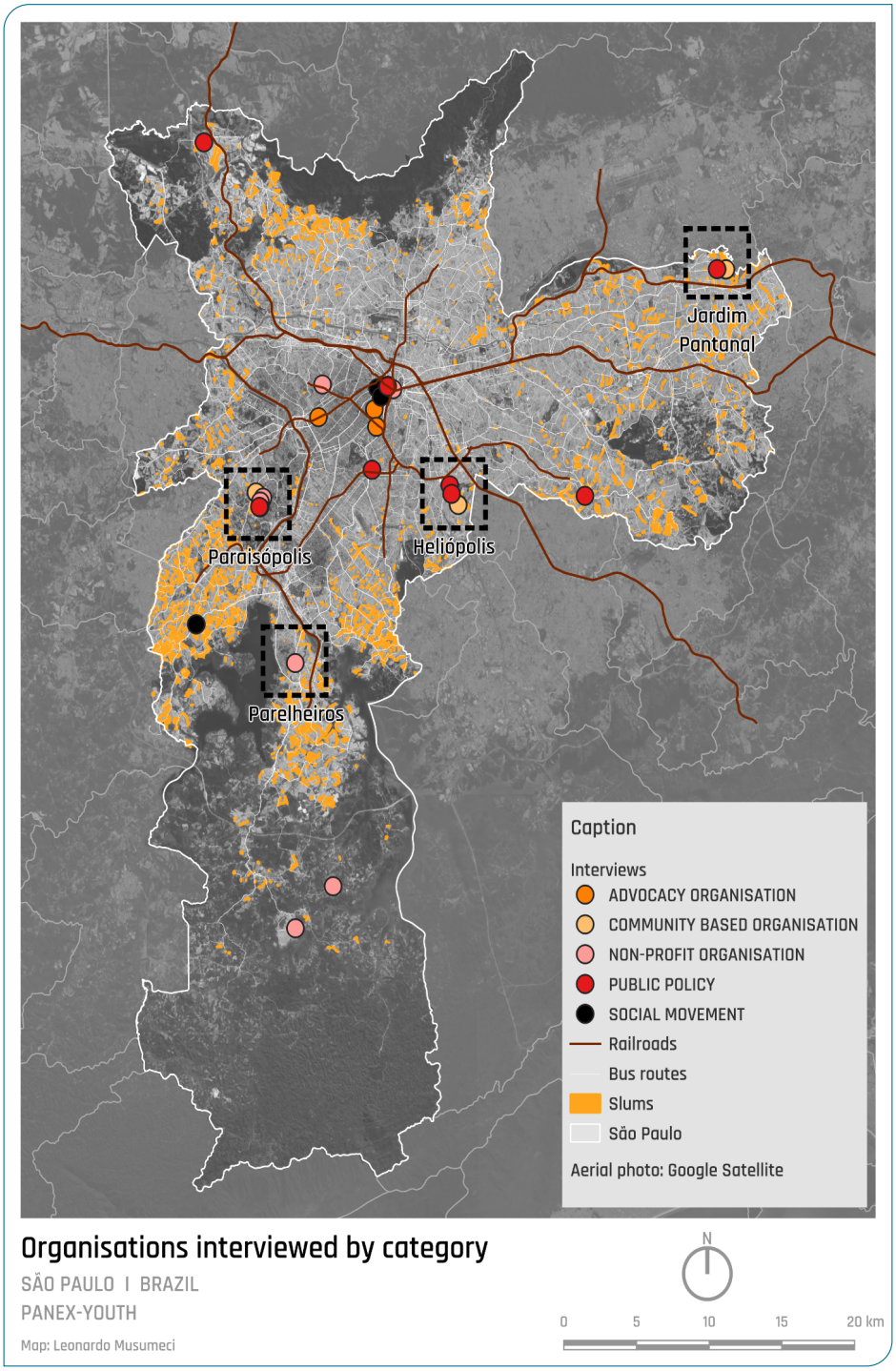

Figure 1 – Location map of the interviewed organisations in São Paulo (SP)

Source: Own elaboration based on data provided by the São Paulo City Hall, Google Earth, and the research archive.

Table 1 – Typology of the interviewed organisations in São Paulo (SP)

Territory	Organisation name	Type of organisation
Paraisópolis' Complex	Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis	Community-based organisation
	Geração Portela	ONG (Culture)
	Instituto Fazendinhando	Community-based organisation
	Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis	ONG (Culture)
	Pró Saber	ONG (Education)
	UBS Paraisópolis	public service (Health)
Parelheiros	Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância (CEPI)	ONG (Health and Social Protection)
	Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento (CPCD)	ONG (Culture and Social Protection)
	Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário (IBEAC)	ONG (Culture and Social Protection)
	Nossa Fazenda	ONG (Health and Culture)
Heliópolis	Centro da Criança e do Adolescente (CCA)	Public Service (Social Protection)
	Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada	Community-based organisation
	Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental (EMEF)	Public Service (Education)
	Fala Jovem	Community-based organisation
	UNAS Heliópolis e Região	Community-based organisation
Jardim Pantanal	Associação de Moradores do Jardim Pantanal (AMOJAP)	Community-based organisation
	Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental (EMEF)	Public Service (Education)
	Espaço Alana	ONG (Culture and Education)
Other locations in São Paulo / Brazil	Apé-estudos em mobilidade	Advocacy (Education)
	Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação	Advocacy (Education)
	Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (CEDECA)	Public Service (Social Protection)
	Centro Integrado de Educação de Jovens e Adultos (CIEJA)	Public Service (Education)
	Coordenadoria de Políticas para a Criança e o Adolescente da Prefeitura de São Paulo	Public Service (Social Protection)
	Coordenadoria de Políticas para a Juventude da Prefeitura de São Paulo	Public Service (Social Protection)
	Instituto Alana	Advocacy (Education)
	Movimento Sem Teto do Centro (MSTC)	Social Movement (Housing)
	Núcleo de Apoio e Acompanhamento para Aprendizagem da Secretaria Municipal de Educação da Prefeitura de São Paulo (NAAPA)	Public Service (Education)
	Programa Cidade Solidária da Prefeitura de São Paulo	Public Service (Social Protection)
	Cozinhas Solidárias do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST)	Social Movement (Housing)
	Rede Litera Sampa	ONG (Culture and Education)
	Rede Ubuntu	Social Movement (Education)
	Uneafro	Social Movement (Education)

1

The federal government's response to Covid-19 and its impact on local realities:

challenges and strategies to address socioeconomic inequalities

Between 2019 and 2022, Brazil was led by a far-right government under President Jair Bolsonaro, whose denialist approach to the coronavirus crisis had profound and unprecedented effects, deepening socio-economic inequalities. This was further exacerbated by an intensely polarised political climate, fuelled by the federal government's refusal to acknowledge the pandemic's severe health and social consequences (Giatti et al., 2021). Despite the efforts made by some authorities at municipal and state level, thousands of preventable deaths occurred. According to the study by Werneck et al. (2021), approximately 120,000 lives could have been saved in the first year of the pandemic alone if adequate preventive measures had been implemented.

Although the virus posed less of an epidemiological risk to young people, deepening inequalities showed how vulnerable this social group was to the mental and social challenges caused by the uncertainties, risks and anxieties brought on by the pandemic over time. The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically affected young people living in vulnerable urban conditions in Brazil and has reinforced the absence of this social group in being accounted for in public policies. The rights of young people were denied during this period by a series of factors: the closure of schools; worsening of the unemployment situation, especially for those working in the informal sector; the reduction in family income and the increase in food prices, leading to a situation of hunger and food insecurity for thousands of families; and restriction of the use of public and collective spaces for socialisation and leisure activities (Andres et al., 2023).

Before, I even agreed with people staying at home. We even ran a huge campaign in Jardim Colombo, asking people to stay at home. But then... I'm a mother, I have children, and I suffered a lot. Today, if I could have reviewed it and the children could have gone to school earlier, I would have campaigned, I would have done everything to make it happen. And I think what complicated the whole thing was this political thing: one group kept saying, no, the children need to stay at home, everyone needs to stay at home, and the other group said, no, but how are you going to work? (Instituto Fazendinhando).

In our own way we managed to promote this physical distancing and everything else. But, on the other hand, we had a president who was judging, not the hunger of the people, but the fame of the virus. that he said it was just a little flu and everything. When that sentence appeared in the media, everything we had done here went down the drain. Then all the bailes funk came back again and everything. Then we had to rethink our strategies, because it demobilised our entire positioning. So it was very challenging for us to be able to create strategies, the best way to talk to the population, fight the virus, fight misinformation and fight a government that didn't care about us, didn't look at poor communities. All these issues ended up aggravating the situation here in Heliópolis and many deaths could have been avoided (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).

Regarding income and prompted by actions within the National Congress, the Brazilian government implemented the Emergency Aid policy in April 2020. This measure provided temporary financial assistance to low-income families, enabling them to secure minimum living conditions without exposing themselves to the risks of working outside the home. The program reached 80% of young people who were not studying or working (Silva; Vaz, 2020), and the percentage of children living in monetary poverty fell from 40% to 35% after its implementation (Nassif-Pires; Cardoso; Oliveira, 2021). However, food insecurity dramatically increased during the pandemic; more than 33 million Brazilians were hungry in 2022, which was 14 million more than in 2020 (PENSSAN Network, 2022). In particular, children, women and the black population suffered the most from hunger (Schall et al., 2021). These figures reveal the multifaceted challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic for young Brazilians in vulnerable situations who had to deal with various risk factors, facing anxieties about meeting basic needs such as food or shelter (Samij et al., 2022).

Despite the fundamental role of schools in providing rights for young Brazilians, schools were closed for more than 40 weeks in Brazil (UNESCO, 2021), which not only compromised access to education, but also access to food among low income families (Pereira et al., 2020). Brazilian students also faced a number of barriers to participating in remote classes or activities, mainly due to the digital divide and weakening of the student-teacher relationship, which is an important motivator for learning (BRASIL, 2021). Young people from the lower classes faced addi-

tional pressures related to the need to look for a job and look after the home, siblings, children or other relatives, which severely affected their education (Silva; Vaz, 2020).

> *Specifically with this misgovernance we've had in Brazil, in short, it was very difficult to talk about these vulnerabilities. And I feel it was very difficult to put the city on the agenda when basic services were nowhere near guaranteed. The discussion of the city was on the third, fourth level, you know, and in our material, obviously; in addition, the inequalities in relation to the black and peripheral population in the city of São Paulo, for example, were much more glaring (Ape – estudos em mobilidade).*
>
> *The lack of national coordination, of public policy, had an impact on all of this. Not having a Ministry of Education, a Ministry of Human Rights... They could have created a crisis office, anything. Not to mention the autonomy of the states, which was very problematic. We know what it means to be a municipality in the interior of Brazil, they don't have that obligation. And the transfers were very much for health, and there was a whole discussion about taking transfers from education to send to health. The difficulty I think the government has had is understanding that all these policies form a cog in the wheel (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).*

Given the federal government's omission in addressing risks and its engagement in disinformation practices (Di Giulio et al., 2023), self-organisation emerged as a consistent response in vulnerable urban communities to overcome the challenges caused by the lack of public policies and basic rights, resulting from the process of precarious urbanisation in Brazil. The Brazilian urbanisation model leaves the peripheries and populations already excluded from land access with a legacy of marginalisation contexts of urban vulnerability which combine a lack of access to adequate housing, basic sanitation, electricity, mobility, and internet, among other public services and facilities. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this accumulated social capital ensured the success of networked solidarity actions in tackling the health crisis and its socio-economic consequences.

1.1. Tackling actions at local level

This book focuses on the reality of peripheral communities and their arrangements and actions spread throughout the municipality of São Paulo. These contexts do not necessarily represent the complex territorial realities in Brazil, but seek to bring a diversity of experiences in the urban context of a very large metropolis.

The analysis is based on a perspective which looks at subjects within **intergenerational relations** (Alanen, 2009), i.e. not from the centrality of their experiences, but from the relationship they establish with their families, communities, schools and other social organisations. This

theoretical-methodological choice is constructed on the understanding that young people's experience of the pandemic is intertwined with their experience of the territory, which cannot be dissociated from the analysis. Such perspective understands that the subjects' experiences are not hegemonic, but are rather crossed by contexts of **territorial disprotection**.

The distinct histories of different territories lead to varying organisational forms, generating diverse potentials in fostering responsive actions (Santos, 2006). Our interview results with organisations supporting young people indicate that this is related to various factors, including: 1. the degree of construction and maintenance of community-based work prior to Covid-19; 2. the capacity to organise within the territory, which means that there is a group of actors joining forces on various fronts of action; 3. the breadth of the relationship network and the capacity to communicate outside the territory, which implies in the possibilities of raising funds; 4. geographical location; and 5. the socio-demographic profile of the resident population.

To illustrate this point, we look at four of the contexts studied: Paraisópolis, Heliópolis, Jardim Pantanal and Vargem Grande (Parelheiros).

Paraisópolis is one of the four communities which compose the so-called Paraisópolis Complex. It was originally an unoccupied plot of land used to build houses for the upper class. Located in the south of São Paulo, the Paraisópolis '*favela*' (slum in Portuguese) arose from the area being occupied by a subdivision that was never fully implemented. Installing infrastructure was a challenge due to the difficult topography, which is why the urban development project did not materialise. The area was first occupied informally in the early 1960s, a period of intense expansion in the city, mainly by families of construction workers who migrated from other regions of the country attracted by job opportunities. This process resulted in a very densely populated favela, with more than 120,000 people currently living there, highlighting the city's high social inequality in contrast to its surroundings.

Community initiatives in the Paraisópolis *favela* during the Covid-19 pandemic stood out for using their **social capital,** embodied in organisations such as the Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis, to mobilise on behalf of the community (Boullosa; Peres, 2022). One of the most innovative actions adopted in Paraisópolis was the formation of 'Street Presidents': a resident of the community was responsible for surveillance of every 50 houses, including distributing resources (food, hygiene products and protective materials) and monitoring the health status of other residents (ensuring the isolation of Covid-19 cases and medical care for the most vulnerable). As several participants from Paraisópolis pointed out, this process involved the fundamental participation of young people, since they were less exposed to the risks of the disease. The extent of young people's participation was highlighted in some interviews:

We opened an application for people to be able to be president and volunteers. Young people met the requirements. They weren't older adults, they weren't symptomatic, they didn't have cardio-respiratory problems, so they could be with us. So a lot of young people helped us, they were here, they helped in the lunch queue, they helped in the vegetable garden, they helped deliver food parcels. I had a team of almost 100 people, most of them young people, aged between 16 and 29. We gave them a grant so that they could be here to help their families and support themselves (Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis).

Young people were the ones who mobilised the most during the pandemic to be on the front line. I think they had that feeling of 'Well, my grandfather, my grandmother can't leave the house. I'm young, the risk is lower for me, so I'm going to put myself on the front line, I'm going to help in any way I can to improve the situation'. And it was something very beautiful to see, this network that was being created, this collaboration, this structure with them. And it was something, most of the time, that was kind of spontaneous, it wasn't something we were forced to do, no (Instituto Fazendinhando).

A task force was created around the G10 Pavilion (Figure 2) among the local initiatives in Paraisópolis, which is a large shed initially built with public funds to house a social project; G10 Pavilion was then unoccupied and housed several autonomous projects during the pandemic. Among the projects developed, we highlight the production and distribution of lunch boxes (Mãos de Maria) and protective masks (Costurando Sonhos), the creation of a logistics centre for distributing online shopping in the community (Favela Brasil XPress), as well as a series of projects focused on social communication. These initiatives were driven by public and private resources mobilised by G10 Favelas, a non-profit organisation that works in *favelas* promoting **social entrepreneurship**.

There is an idealisation and romanticization that people who live on the outskirts are very united, very happy, and so on. It [the pandemic] was a moment when we saw the power that communities have (Pró Saber).

The pavilion, this space was nothing like what you're seeing here, like, it was a totally neglected, abandoned space. The houses in front of it didn't even have a house, the street was horrible to walk on, it flooded. So it was all transformed by G10. These projects were born, and this pavilion was built with this vision that we have to be an example, people have to come here and feel at home. We've managed to set an example. When we went on social media, people were doing the same thing as us. A survey came out saying that Paraisópolis had fewer cases of Covid-19 in the first year, because we did what the government didn't do. So we did more than the government (Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis).

Figure 2 – Interior view of the G10 Pavilion

Source: Research archive.

The community is situated in an area adjacent to middle- and upper-class luxury mansions and condominiums in the Morumbi neighbourhood (Figure 3). This has created a mutual dependency between Paraisópolis and Morumbi, as many residents of the Complex work in the elite neighbourhood, while many of the social projects and philanthropic initiatives being funded with resources from Morumbi families and businesses (Newton; Rocco 2022; Boullosa; Peres 2022).

> *Other organisations also came to us, private schools that had never had contact with us – and it wasn't for lack of trying, because we had already tried, but anyway. I think they became more aware in the process, and they also started to donate a lot of individuals, they also started to collect money among families, and then they brought it to us (Instituto Fazendinhando).*
>
> *We still have no sponsorship. We have everything nice, CNPJ, everything else, but we have no sponsorship. Everything to date within the project has been done by individuals, not legal entities, not companies in this case. So it was people who lived in Morumbi - sometimes someone who saw it on Google, on the internet, on our social network, and got in touch there and said "I want to donate 20 basic food baskets to you, do you accept?" (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).*

Figure 3 – View of a street in Paraisópolis with the luxury buildings of the Morumbi neighbourhood in the background

Source: Research archive.

The second study area, Heliópolis (Figure 4), is located on the border between São Paulo and the city of São Caetano do Sul, bordered by the Tamanduateí river. The occupation arose in the 1970s, in the western region of São Paulo. Its history began with the removal of around 150 families – mostly migrants, as in Paraisópolis – from the Vila Prudente *favela* to temporary housing that became permanent on the land where it stands today. Social movements for the right to housing grew stronger with the 1980s economic crises, and the community reached the milestone of more than 200,000 residents. After winning the right to remain in the territory, the strength of the housing movements in Heliópolis expanded into other fields. The role of the organisation União de Núcleos, Associações de Moradores de Heliópolis e Região (UNAS) was reinforced; since the 1990s, it has been operating as a non-profit organisation, implementing projects, programs and services aimed at improving quality of life and overcoming poverty by promoting citizenship and social inclusion. Following principles such as autonomy, responsibility and solidarity, they strongly defend the importance of education, arguing that schools and social projects are centres of leadership in the community. In this sense, their project is built from the perspective of

an **Educating Neighbourhood**, as a local social protection network for the fundamental human rights of young people.

Figure 4 – View of Heliópolis
Source: UNAS Heliópolis e Região.

With decades of resistance and social mobilisation, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic required the Heliopolis community to redirect its local capacities (Figure 5). In addition to ongoing economic, political and social problems, the community had to create strategies to overcome and adapt to the challenges posed by the health crisis. This included registering thousands of families to manage the distribution of food baskets provided by donations from the public and private sectors, mapping Covid-19 cases in the region to ensure isolation and care for the sick, among others. The challenge of combating disinformation in the community was also one of the main lines of action, as a representative of UNAS, a movement of which the young people were also members, pointed out:

> *We had to challenge this narrative. So we went through a whole process of organising this campaign so that our information would reach all the residents of Heliópolis. Children, young people, teenagers, and older adults; in short, we thought of everything. Because there was no point in talking to adults without talking to young people. It was the children who were having the greatest impact (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).*

Figure 5 – Community communication action to combat Covid-19 in Heliópolis

Source: UNAS Heliópolis e Região.

Another example of a hub for community service and empowerment is a community initiative by a group of non-profit organisations in Parelheiros, a more isolated territory in a zoning regulation in São Paulo's law dedicated to environmental preservation; it is located in the vicinity of the Billings and Guarapiranga reservoirs, also known as the 'Amazônia Paulista', and is a rural area with a strong ecotourism hub. The Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário (IBEAC) has been developing projects in the region since 2008, with a focus on human rights and participatory citizenship, mainly aimed at babies, young children, women, adolescents and young people, totalling around 15,000 families. Many of these projects aim to generate income based on the perspective of **solidarity economy** and **agroecology**, given the region's agricultural production potential.

We've been working very much on prevention. "So let's go after food, so we can make sure that people can feed themselves". And along with this, this issue of the collaborative economy, which was to give the traders a pension, but at the same time, to create a network: "What do we have that we can make a solidarity economy here, so that no one is vulnerable?" (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).

These social projects, IBEAC and CPCD, took money from investors and bought food baskets. A basket of personal hygiene products would come and we would add a basket of organic food, two loaves of bread and a jam. So every family that received a basic food basket received all this together: the basic food basket, a basket of organic products, two loaves of bread, a jam and a personal hygiene basket. That was a revolution" (Nossa Fazenda).

In partnership with the NGO *Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento* (CPCD), the "4P methodology" was implemented during the pandemic: "bread", through the distribution of food (food baskets, organic products and food cards); 'protection', through the production and distribution of personal protection products (masks, cleaning and hygiene products), as well as guidance on self-care through media (podcast, videos, WhatsApp and sound cars); "poetry", by distributing play kits with books and promoting online meetings with reading mediation and storytelling workshops, based on what they recognise as '*quilombo* literature' (Souza, 2011); and 'planting', by encouraging the creation of community gardens and backyards in partnership with local farmers (Mayer et al., 2021). Most of the essential work was performed by the so-called "Mobilising Mothers", community residents who ensured contact between the organisation and the families, even at a distance. As one of the project's educators points out:

> *We know that many parents also continued to work, and the children were left alone at home. So they [the children] received at least five activation activities within the kits, so to speak. It was a way of giving them something to do at home. We heard the mothers and the children also say: "Oh, uncle, that's nice, I liked doing that" or "I didn't like doing that, I'm not going to do it." Then we saw magnificent results of families saying: "Look, when my son went back to school he wasn't so late, because he had this support." (Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento – CPCD).*

Finally, the Jardim Pantanal territory experienced heightened vulnerability during the pandemic, which hindered social mobilisation efforts. Located in the far eastern region of São Paulo, this area began to be occupied in the 1980s on the floodplain of the Tietê River. Its urban conditions reflect a stage in a harmful urbanisation process that combines social exclusion with environmental susceptibility. Given its location on a low-lying plain along the Tietê River, the area faces a significant risk of flooding, and consequently an increased likelihood of disease transmission (Vendrametto; Jacobi; Giatti, 2021). Efforts were made over the past decade to develop a Neighbourhood Plan (Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil, 2024) through a participatory process involving institutions, non-governmental organisations, and the municipal government to address both urgent and structural socio-environmental issues. This initiative brought together local organisations such as the Associação de Moradores e Amigos do Jardim Pantanal, the Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil and Instituto Alana, which played a key role in engaging children and young people in the process.

The presence of the Espaço Alana (NGO) facility is an important catalyst for investment in local projects for children. The aim is to foster local development through free play, reading and community coordination. The space has a playroom and a square where children can move

around and play freely, and where cultural events and other reading activities are also held. It is also home to the headquarters of the Associação de Moradores do Jardim Pantanal (AMOJAP). Even though the space, provided by the Instituto Alana, was closed during the pandemic, professionals conducted communication initiatives with the community to combat fake news and strengthen local care practices against the virus.

Despite recent political action, the impact of the pandemic on the community led to weakening social mobilisation in the area, especially due to the high mortality rates in the region. Thus, the case of Jardim Pantanal showed that even though there was accumulated social capital at the local level, the experience of mourning in a context of greater lack of access to resources contributed to demobilise the population. In this sense, it reinforces the argument about the importance of strengthening public policies that ensure the sustainability of community engagement.

We lost a lot of the residents' articulation during the pandemic, which used to be so strong. We have an event called 'Arte e Cultura na Quebrada'. It's one of the biggest graffiti events in Brazil. Of course, this event couldn't take place during the pandemic. But this movement has also weakened because of the pandemic. This event was also the main source of income for various artists in the area, but the events were closed down due to the pandemic. So the artists who worked on behalf of the event went off to find something else, to look for a formal job. So some of the groups here in the area were disbanded. Even the Cursinho Pré-Vestibular, which we had here before the pandemic and after the pandemic, has failed to resume so far. So community coordination in the area has been greatly damaged (Espaço Alana).

We know that many families went through a lot of hardship during the pandemic. Many people didn't stop working. This also affected them in the sense of being exposed to the virus. So the epidemic was really serious here in our region. A lot of people died, passed away, caught Covid here. The hospital closest to us, which is Tide Setubal, in São Miguel Paulista, was one of those that had the highest Covid mortality rates at the time of the pandemic, and most of the people from the neighbourhood who had to be hospitalised went there. So it was a really difficult situation, especially in 2020 (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).

1.2. Formation of solidarity, care, and protection networks

The formation of solidarity, care and protection networks in *favelas* and urban communities has been an important adaptation strategy to face the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Together, actors from organised civil society, NGOs, the public sector, social movements and the private sector have formed a social protection network, which can be classified in five levels of effort, as proposed by the Brazilian Ministry of Human Rights (Gonçalves; Guará,

2010): primary networks (informal, based on affective relationships), community social networks (organised within the community), social movement networks (involved in monitoring social programs), public networks (public institutions operating in the territories) and private networks (actions by companies and other private initiatives). Primary networks played a crucial support role among friends and family during the crisis, while secondary networks filled the gaps left by government infrastructure, carrying out activities such as food distribution and providing exclusive ambulances for the community. Public networks also played an important role, providing financial support and resilience opportunities to families, as in the case of the emergency aid policy and the creation of temporary shelters in schools to accommodate people in recovery. On the other hand, private networks contributed through donations and partnerships with companies, helping to maintain community initiatives that would otherwise not be sustainable.

The intense work during the Covid-19 pandemic activated networks constructed upon emotional coping (i.e. care, affection and empathy) and learning processes; it allowed connecting small and powerless actors who ally themselves with macro-structures having secured consolidated power over the years. This highlights the importance of embodied and territorialised experiences in the political field (Boullosa; Peres 2022). It is in this sense that solidarity and empathy appear as important "lessons learned" from the pandemic, as highlighted in several interviews.

So there was a lot of empathy, of looking at it like, 'Man, there's no way that Paraisópolis can do social isolation. How is a person who lives in a two-room house with almost ten people in it going to be socially isolated? What if they get Covid? So there was a lot of this look, of seeing that there was a problem there, of thinking of a solution. I think [this look of empathy], due to the fact that the whole coordination team lives in Paraisópolis, and has been through the same situations of having a flooded house, of living with a lot of people inside, and then when you started talking about isolation, you started sewing masks - not everyone had the money to buy a mask, not everyone had the money to buy hand sanitizer... It's the moment when most people help, but you were welcomed at that moment, during the pandemic (Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis).

There are things we only learn in the course of our work, of life, that we live. Even to be more humane towards others. We've seen this through the pandemic: people have seen each other more, there's recognition that we can't live against each other, without each other (Associação de Moradores do Jardim Pantanal – AMOJAP).

[The pandemic] reminds me a lot of this care thing, of getting closer, of exchanging affection, of strengthening these welcoming spaces (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

I learned to be more supportive. I already had a bit of myself, trying to help people. But after the pandemic, that came, that I tried to be a better human being. For example, sometimes you don't have the money to donate, to help someone, but with your work, with your love, with your affection, you're already doing a great job (Projeto das Cozinhas Solidárias do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST).

The pandemic was horrible, many people died. But I feel that it has formed a new generation of young people. A little more empathetic towards others. They already had that. And I think the pandemic has shown them how important it is to look out for others. Even if you're not in a good situation, there's someone in a worse situation and you can still help them (Geração Portela).

The boom in social actions in the area was also made possible by the influx of financial resources resulting from successful communication strategies. The financial help came from an external public that, in an unprecedented social isolation context, was attracted by the idea of building a network constructed upon care and affection and going beyond the dimension of charity; it was based on the perspective of "doing together" and "becoming part of something bigger". As a result, a contradictory phenomenon emerged, in which there was greater rapprochement with agents outside the community and distancing from the residents (Boullosa; Peres, 2022). It is worth noting that the social welfare policy history in Brazil was deeply influenced by the actions of benevolent and religious institutions. Many initiatives led by private entities are often shaped by a notion of charity rather than the guarantee of rights. This philanthropic aspect of relationships can be read as "simultaneously a market, a moral obligation, a form of interest and a way for members of the elite to establish networks among themselves" (Silva; Oliven 2020, p. 28), and is strongly present in social protection networks in territories such as the Paraisópolis Complex and Heliópolis.

When resources reach the grassroots and are well managed, community leaders are able to do a good job (Instituto Fazendinhando).

We rely a lot on partnerships. Whether it's public authorities or the private sector. Because community work alone is not enough. There comes a time when people say: "No, I can't stay as a volunteer. I have to support myself at home". So what did we do? We've maintained this essence of work, of articulation, of mobilising the territory through the projects we've developed in partnership. It's also challenging, because you end up playing the role that the state has to play. But at the same time, we want the state to play this role (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).

We have everything nice, CNPJ, everything else, but we have no sponsorship. Everything to date within the project has been [donated by] individuals, not legal entities, not companies in this case. So they were people who lived in Morumbi, sometimes someone they saw on Google, on the internet, on Instagram, on our social network, and they got in touch through there. I often say that the project was done by people, literally. People who donated instruments to start music classes, the raw material for the project was the instruments they brought, just mine (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).

Many of the resources used, even before the pandemic, were sustained through donations and partnerships, as revealed by the majority of testimonies. This implies an intermittency of projects, dependent on such public and private resources. The influx of donations that the organisations received during the pandemic was greatly increased, which meant that they were able to expand the actions carried out and the scale of service in the territory. The structure of many of the organisations facilitated the influx of resources, since documents and accountability procedures were often required.

As the leaders had CNPJs, they had very well-structured governance, they had documentation, so it was much easier for the funds to reach us and then be distributed to other communities, which often didn't have documentation, didn't have anything, which could then be audited, which could then prove everything with an invoice (Instituto Fazendinhando).

We were lucky, because we were taking part in the São Paulo City Hall's Call for Proposals, the Vai program, which values cultural projects in the peripheral neighbourhoods. And we passed the Vai. So we did online classes with the students and then, with the money we got from the public notice, we were able to buy the instruments so that they could stay at home with the instruments, because that was something we didn't have. And when we came back, we had to record the lives for the public notice (Geração Portela).

However, three elements stood out as main challenges: first, the limited flow of donations, which fell sharply after the first year of the pandemic; second, the difficulty of obtaining funding for programs with young people compared to projects aimed at children; and third, the **overload of women's work** in the emergency pandemic context. This overload was amplified when the work took place on a voluntary basis, particularly led by black women, and supported by "empathy" and "the desire for social transformation".

There was a boom in donations in the first year. Then, we started to suffer more in the second year, because the donations dropped, even to zero, right, but afterwards we kept going, the critical situations continued for people, we kept hearing, right, that the people were going hungry (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).

One of Pró's biggest challenges is maintaining this youth program. Because we see all the beauty, the strength of this program, we see how young people arrive and how they leave, all the potential, all the transformation. But the youth program, for example, is the only program that doesn't have an investor. We can't. Because what we deliver doesn't seem to be valid. So the children we can tell, right? We deliver an average of 80% of literate children. What do we deliver to young people? A young person who knows how to talk, who has responsibility, who knows how to talk about themselves, who recognises their challenges, their abilities, who knows how to work in a group, but it doesn't seem to be much. So the other programs come along, and then the administration divides up the young people's money (Pró Saber).

There were 15, 20 people helping to unload [the food parcels] - because it's also a job, unloading the truck, organising, sorting, separating for the families. So there's a whole process that people can't imagine. Those who aren't here can't imagine what it's like. But it was very, very difficult work. To see that the person is in need, that they need it. And those of us who are here in the WG are so buried in what we do here. And we can't stop to breathe (UNAS Heliópolis e Região). We are funders. All the teachers and coordinators are volunteers. We mobilise resources in various ways, such as from Catholic churches, participating in Rede Globo's LED award. Many of the teachers and coordinators even end up donating part of their salaries to the course, buying the things they need on a daily basis. And every year, each person does something to raise money, like a feijoada (Brazilian pork and black bean stew) with bingo, something like that (Rede Ubuntu).

It's voluntary work. The cook doesn't get a salary, she gets a stipend. I hope that from now on they can earn a fair wage. This is my dream, the dream of many. I'm here out of love for the cause, out of love for others (Projeto das Cozinhas Solidárias do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST).

Despite the insufficiency of policies supporting peripheral territories, which worsened in the pandemic context, many of the organisations which compose these solidarity, care and protection networks are funded by public resources. These services are generally linked to social protection policy, supported by public funds, and their services are provided by third sector organisations, which include neighbourhood associations, NGOs and religious organisations. We illustrate this point with two examples of organisations which closely collaborate with the municipality of São Paulo: the Centro da Criança e do Adolescente (CCA) and the Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (CEDECA).

The CCA is an important public service developed to provide a protection network for vulnerable young people (aged 6 to 14) and their families, linked to the municipality's social assis-

tance policy. These places offer cultural and socio-educational activities after school hours. The UNAS Heliópolis e Região's long-term project in Heliópolis ensured that the organisation took over managing some of these facilities through a concession of the local government. In doing so, this social movement had the opportunity to become a place for training citizens and building grassroots work with residents. Although the face-to-face activities of the CCA were paralyzed during the pandemic, the duration of this paralysis was shorter than the period during which the schools were closed and these sites also performed actions to fight hunger and support remote education.

CEDECA is a non-profit civil society organisation that protects and promotes the rights of children and adolescents in order to guarantee the rights provided for in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA). It especially works for young people in disprotection situations, particularly involving the breakdown of social ties, such as those legally referred to the Socio-Educational Measure Service, in monitoring and reporting rights violations, which can happen through legal and psychosocial assistance or social mobilisation campaigns. Although they are not public services, they work in partnership with government bodies, such as the Guardianship Councils and the Rights Guarantee System. Face-to-face activities were paralyzed during the Covid-19 pandemic, and a lot of effort went into guaranteeing access to information and maintaining links with families, even through the use of telephone and the internet.

UNAS has a fundraising project. So there are people who work on these fundraising projects. And they do this project. So we make the project, we send it. There's an amendment, we make it, we send it. So we've had help from members of parliament, we've had help from parliamentary amendments, we've had help from banks, we've had help from the community, we've had help from people who don't even know UNAS, but saw the work that was being done, called and asked to donate. So we have a great relationship with all of the UNAS partners (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA, Heliópolis).

CEDECA has this very qualified space to really listen to people. As well as being an executor of policy, it has this capacity to welcome people. We worked closely with the UBS on the vaccination campaign during the pandemic. We made materials to pass on information and guide people on the importance of vaccination – folders for adults, but for children we made colouring books. We also have the Regional Forum for Children and Adolescents. It's a forum that seeks to articulate all the policies that work to defend the integral protection of children and adolescents, but it's much more frequented by people from social assistance and health. Education still has a hard time getting to and participating in this forum, precisely because it is a grassroots organisation, it is a popular space that is attended by civil society, so the school's difficulty is quite imperceptible. We find strategic people who support us in this articulation, but this should be strengthened with the network itself, with the policy, and not with the person (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

These organisations play a central role in guaranteeing child and adolescent rights in situations of territorial disprotection and their operation is based on the principle of partnerships in order to access resources. This also involves the state through its services and public funds, even though these organisations operate beyond it. What we see again is a generalised overload of work directly associated with devaluation of care work. This also has a direct impact on the conditions in which the adults closest to the children and adolescents in the existing services are able to care for them and face the challenges posed by multiple crises.

We implement public policy, but we don't have the same guaranteed rights as civil servants. The service has been going through additions and reducing the team, which ends up making the work even more scrappy. Not only has the technical team for monitoring and qualifying this work been reduced, but also the resources for food and teaching materials, which are no longer high resources. So we've been going through this precarious process as well, of staff reduction and work overload. Because the cases are decreasing, but that doesn't mean that the demands made by these families who live in extreme social vulnerability, who live in violence, even more so in this pandemic process, are decreasing (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

There were times when I delivered food parcels to the house, the person didn't answer, I went back to the project and then I got the news that he was dead at home. It was very difficult. We took a lot of risks. I caught Covid twice. I caught it, recovered and went back to work. I got it again, recovered and went back to work. There came a time when I couldn't stand wearing a mask any longer. I said, "Guys, I can't take it anymore, because I've already caught it twice wearing a mask. I'm already immune to Covid". And there was no vaccine. I said, "My God, I think I'm going to die" (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).

And I've seen a lot of people fall on this journey, not just from Covid, but from depression, anguish, anxiety, disbelief. And nurturing our faith, our hope, is a collective effort. You have to be among your peers, you have to be with people who are a little healthier than you on your side, to take your hand and say "Go on, go on, you're important, go on, you're needed in this fight". What remains [from the pandemic] is this pain, this awareness that when the rope snaps, it always snaps on the weaker side. I think there are a lot of mental health consequences for almost everyone. I feel deeply violated in this context" (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Community processes and the formation of these emergency arrangements resulted in socialisation processes for young people in peripheral territories. As Neto (2017) points out, community organisations have played an important role as socialisation spaces for young people, thus holding a formative dimension. Additionally, a study by Samji et al. (2022) indicated that social capital became an important mechanism for health promotion due to the impact of Covid-19

on mental health, particularly among women, young people, and low-income populations. The study found that the greater the support and integration of individuals within a trusted network, the less fear and stress they experienced. The impact of the pandemic on the **mental health** of young people and other adults involved in community actions was also highlighted by the interviewees. In some cases, this diagnosis led to creating organisations which promote psycho-therapeutic treatments and self-care practices for project participants, often in partnership with higher education institutions.

There were people who joined in, who found ways to become activists on social networks. But I think there were a lot of people who were also left alone, and who were left alone without even knowing how to act, or who to ask for help (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).

It was difficult for them, we had children with depression, children as young as six. We realised that they also had a very difficult time coping with it, but the children were the most affected in terms of trauma. And I believe this because we see it today. They were affected physically and psychologically, above all. And they always need to talk to someone. We have a group of psychologists who see these children who are victims of violence and those who aren't, but who somehow want to say something. They always talk about something that happened during the pandemic, they relate it a lot to the issue of staying at home. When they are in these [therapy] spaces, they want to talk, they want to let go" (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).

What we've heard the most from the educational institutions that we partner with, and even for us, is how the children have come back different, not knowing how to deal with other people, other children, not knowing how to play, very violent, so this living together at home, often with very violent people from their own family, has had an impact on this difficulty in relating, not having this basis, has made this relationship difficult later, in this current moment, post-pandemic (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).

Today, when we go around schools doing research, we always hear from principals that the students came back totally without social interaction, more violent, because there was more violence at home. Because it's a daily stress for you to be locked up at home and not be able to go out and socialise with people other than your family (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).

Young people really like this contact, to be close, to be together. And you say to a 13 to 15-year-old, "You can't leave the house anymore, you can't see anyone anymore, you can't see your friends anymore"? I felt that it really affected their psychology. So much so that many students came back with very different behaviour. Some came back more reclusive, you know, interacting less. Many came back ashamed, with a shyness they didn't have before (Geração Portela).

The demands linked more to mental health began to come in, especially from young people, who were becoming too idle, wanting to break things. And so we moved towards health promotion, more focused on this issue of emotional literacy, working not only on the body, but also on the mind. These connections we came to understand in the process. "We're working with holistic care, we're there taking care of food, the body, giving guidance, prevention. But we're also going to bring in the issue of mental health, emotional literacy, this more spiritual issue, too, because various demands have arisen, and along with this, which is already part of what IBEAC does" (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).

We're going to have to face up to this crisis related to the mental health of children and young people. All of us, right? Once again, these children and young people need to be looked at through the lens of absolute priority. At Alana, we've tried to ask ourselves how we can contribute. Within the Children and Nature program, we believe that playing outdoors – the freedom that children experience, the power that children experience when they are outside, playing alongside their peers, autonomously, independently – we strongly believe that this is a strategy. Of course it's not the only one, we'll need to use various strategies. But we strongly believe that it is a strategy that will help to tackle this crisis (Instituto Alana).

In the following section, we turn to the main impacts reported by the organisations interviewed with regard to the central axes of analysis of the PANEX-Youth project: education, food and play/leisure.

2 Impact of Covid-19 on child and youth access to education in vulnerable territories and related adaptations

2.1. Education as the most affected dimension

As a matter of introduction it is important to revisit the education policy context in the country in recent years in order to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of young Brazilians. Democratic spaces for the construction, evaluation and monitoring of education policies were weakened after Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. The spending ceiling introduced by the National Congress and the Federal Government in the same year, under the pretext of controlling the public deficit, compromised development of social investments in health, education and infrastructure and prioritised policies of business interests. This intensified under Jair Bolsonaro's government (2019-2022), with education being a low-priority sector with few resources, and consequently very fragile, making room for **strengthening a damaging neoliberal agenda**.

Analysing previous trends since 2000, school enrolment and achievement rates particularly increased in Early Childhood Education and Higher Education in Brazil (OECD 2021), as well as in the proportion of young people who completed Primary and Secondary Education (Senkevics; Carvalho, 2023). Although this scenario is positive in terms of access, 80.9% of Brazilian students were enrolled in state public schools in 2019 which operated with few financial resources, which points to **the fragility of the quality of education** offered.

Faced with the health crisis, the Ministry of Education decreed the **suspension of face-to-face classes** and their replacement by remote activities. This decision was preceded by a series

of diffuse and unclear proposals that reflected a lack of leadership and vision about the educational context. This left decision-making in the hands of the federal states and municipalities, which developed different contingency plans to replace face-to-face classes and use alternative technological tools. This was highly problematic, since the majority of Brazilian teachers had never used these resources (Vieira; Seco, 2020), and the majority of Brazilian students had no previous experience with remote teaching (CETIC.BR, 2021).

Schools were closed for more than 40 weeks in Brazil (UNESCO, 2021). School meals were also compromised in this scenario, aggravating food insecurity among children and young people from low-income families to whom school meals represented a big part of their access to food (Pereira et al., 2020). Furthermore, leisure and recreational activities were significantly impacted as a consequence of the closure of school buildings (Silva et al., 2022a, b; Tebet; Abramowicz; Lopes, 2021). The omission of the federal government and the absence of a coordinated policy at regional and municipal levels led to educational insecurity, causing the country to move away from meeting the targets set by its own **National Education Plan (PNE)**. For example, education professionals and families in the city of São Paulo reported a lack of information from municipal authorities about emergency remote teaching or the return of classroom activities, which reflected concerns and generated low expectations regarding support from public authorities to ensure the safe reopening of schools (Ape, 2021).

Among the difficulties faced by young people in studying remotely were the **lack of infrastructure in their homes** due to overcrowded houses, the absence of specific spaces to carry out this activity, and the absence or unwillingness of family members and others to participate in the teaching-learning process. It should be noted that the home was also permeated by other care and social activities, which meant that education took a back seat in vulnerable communities.

These impacts were revealed in different ways depending on the age group in the educational cycle. Adults highlight the excessive use of screens and games during the social isolation period among the youngest groups, such as those in kindergarten and elementary school, which affected socialisation skills and concentration on studies. The difficulty of socialising among teenagers when they returned to school was also mentioned repeatedly, with emphasis on feelings such as shame, anxiety and inattention. Young people representing local organisations who were interviewed strongly criticised the New High School model and its consequences in terms of deepening educational inequalities. Complaints of mental health issues and the low prospects of young people who finished high school in the pandemic context generally stand out; young people were frustrated by the process that the entrance exam represents in their lives, given the high degree of competitiveness and exclusion, which were added to the low prospects of employ-

ment and income. In turn, remote learning in higher education was seen as advantageous among some groups, especially considering the reality of young people's social vulnerability; many study and work at the same time and saw this as an opportunity to have more time to rest and dedicate to university activities, since commuting time was combined with study time. Along the same lines, adoption of digital platforms was seen as an important inclusion technology in the popular preparatory courses for entry to higher education, and was maintained after the isolation period. Its role was however tempered by a severe digital divide.

Dialogue with the organisations generally reinforced the **inadequacy of the remote system adopted**. Digital exclusion was one of the main factors justifying this inadequacy but wasn't the only one. The fragility of the student-teacher relationship, which pre-existed the pandemic and was the result of a long precarious process of the profession leading to the so-called teacher malaise (Esteve, 1999), worsened in the context of social isolation; this was repeatedly highlighted as another contributing factor. Numerous strategies for maintaining activities remotely were also pointed out; the use of WhatsApp and social media to maintain links with families was highlighted as a positive element by schools and social projects. Virtual learning environments (VLEs), especially for primary education, were seen as failed emergency attempts as these were not taken up by students, especially after the pandemic. This points to the need to reflect on improvements and transformations in the national education system.

Education thus appeared among the interviewees as the **most affected** dimension of Brazilian children's and youth's everyday routine during Covid. Measuring and assessing the long-term impacts will take time and understanding its subjective and qualitative dimensions is extremely important for shaping policies that move towards meeting the main needs of young people today. This is especially clear in the discourse of young people and organisations when they highlight the inadequacy of the online teaching method adopted to replace face-to-face teaching and criticise the decision to close schools far too long, compared to the average closure in other countries.

2.2. Adaptation strategies when face-to-face teaching is interrupted

2.2.1. Adoption of remote learning

The dialogue with the São Paulo organisations highlighted different views on school closures. The prevailing **political polarisation** in the country (Di Giulio et al., 2023) also influenced these views. Far-right pro-Bolsonaro groups, with the goal of prioritising economic interests, advocated for non-school closures and pressed for an early return to classroom teaching in search of a quicker return to economic activities. On the other hand, the more progressive groups, su-

pported by teachers, lobbied to maintain remote education under the discourse of defending the lives of educators, children and their families.

> *I understand that there were emergency actions that the city council took. What would we expect from the state, from the government, in a context like this? To guarantee actions to minimise the damage, to guarantee health and safety. So the method we had to guarantee health and safety was isolation. The school closed" (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).*
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> *Today, if I could have reviewed it and the children could have gone to school earlier, I would have campaigned, I would have done everything I could to make it happen. Because it wasn't right for the children to stay at home. I think that at the beginning, at the peak, it was fine. But I think it was too late for the children to go back to school. First, there's the education part, then you see the children suffering with the issue of food, then you see the children suffering with the issue of relationships with their friends that have been lost (Instituto Fazendinhando).*
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> *We got together and made this manifesto, which in the end resulted in several letters to the city council, saying: "Well, if the city council has the bureaucratic structure and the money to vote on a project thinking that the bars can use the street to make their economic comeback, why not also use the street in the schools? Why not think of a similar project for the use of these school surroundings - obviously with the necessary adaptations, but understanding the importance of this relationship with the street, of these outdoor teaching spaces, basically using the same logic as we were doing for the bars in this tactical urbanism key of temporary occupation of the streets?" (Ape – estudos em mobilidade).*

As a result, Brazilian students faced various barriers to participating in remote classes or activities. The **digital divide** was an important factor in deepening educational inequalities in the country. Three quarters of Internet users aged 16 and over from the lower classes exclusively accessed the Internet via their cell phones. While 70% of upper-class Internet users aged 16 and over who attended school or university used a portable computer, such as a laptop, and 46% used a desktop computer, the proportions fell to 32% and 19% among middle-class users, respectively, and to 12% for both devices among lower-class users. The majority of young people aged 15 to 17 (92%) owned their own smartphone, which means that a small proportion of users shared their phone with other people in the household. In an attempt to adapt to the crisis, the main resources used to keep up with remote activities among children and adolescents aged 6 to 15 were school websites, social networks or videoconferencing platforms (CETIC.BR, 2020). Connectivity

became the agenda of some community projects, but its limitations were still prevalent in young people's experiences.

> *Her mother only had one cell phone. She had to take it to work so she could call her neighbour's cell phone to find out if her older brother had eaten. So how was a mother with three or four children going to leave a cell phone so that the children could attend class? And then there were two children who studied in the afternoon and one child who studied in the morning, so the afternoon child couldn't do any activities (Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis).*
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> *There are young people here at the Observatory who say like: "Oh, I didn't go to high school, you know? I did the first year. In my second, third year, I went online. I didn't even go to school. There was no way, because I have two, three brothers and, like, it was either my brothers learning to read and write, or me going to high school. And the mother, obviously, opted for the brothers to learn to be literate" (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).*
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> *There was a time when there was free community internet, but it was community internet that worked at first and then didn't work anymore. We had these students in our classes who only handed in their work at other times, because they went to a cousin's or relative's house or something like that (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).*
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> *Another way of working was through the 4G to study campaign, because we know that it's very difficult for people to have internet at home in these areas, especially a good connection that brings stability. So we ran this campaign mainly to pay for a data package on students' cell phones so that each and every one of them could study (Uneafro).*

In addition to issues related to access to technology and the internet, concerns were raised about the poor quality of the content of classes, the lack of access to study materials and the impossibility of clarifying doubts and seeking help from tutors (BRASIL, 2021; Silva et al., 2022a; Tebet; Abramowicz; Lopes, 2021). In addition, lower-class students faced additional pressures related to the need to search for a job and look after the home, siblings, children or other relatives, which seriously affected their education (Silva; Vaz, 2020). This challenge also revealed a problem for some organisations that predates the pandemic concerning the **fragility of the relationship and communication between schools and families**, something that is often only overcome at an individual level rather than institutionally.

This connection between school and families was very weak, and the pandemic has shown us this dramatically. Families participate very little in children's school life, they know very little about what happens there on a day-to-day basis; they participate very little in everyday life, in learning - for cultural, economic, social and violent reasons. But this is a problem we still face today. It's so disgusting to think that there's a discourse there, in common sense, "Oh, the learning losses"... That's the last thing we should be thinking about at school. This welcoming process is very difficult for us, because everyone has had a unique experience, everyone has their own issues, and the school treats everyone like a mass of people. There are 1,500 students in a precarious space, with very hurt teachers too (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Communication with families improved a lot when we implemented WhatsApp. Many parents have a prepaid phone plan and WhatsApp is off limits, so they can access it. This teacher, she'd go after the students, she'd call the students' homes, she'd talk to them on WhatsApp, she'd schedule individual lessons for the students via WhatsApp. Just imagine, there were 27 students, she would schedule 15-minute, 20-minute lessons with each of them. And she got on their nerves, she was someone who insisted. A teacher who, in the middle of the pandemic, had a day when parents had to pick up materials, books, which were made available, she delivered 95%. Her participation rates were much higher. And we realise that she has a great deal of personal dedication. So, it's really something that sets her apart, a characteristic of hers."(Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).

Many **adaptive strategies** emerged to address the growing challenges for online learning related to inequalities and digital exclusion, led by schools; this included the use of television and radio broadcasts, delivering printed materials and using digital media, such as apps and virtual platforms. **Social media** became the most adopted technology by 91% of Brazilian schools to keep in touch with students or their guardians. This made sense, since 86% among Brazilian youth aged 10 to 17 had a WhatsApp profile and 61% a Facebook profile (CETIC.BR, 2020). In addition, national and regional initiatives led to establishing agreements with mobile Internet operators to offer subsidised access to students, with the distribution of chips with access to the network.

The municipal network in São Paulo typically announced a program to distribute tablets in 2020 for remote education. However, they only began to be distributed in 2021, a year after the announcement, in an irregular pattern and with various Internet access limitations, data protection vulnerabilities and limitations on software use (Rede NAI-FEUSP and Instituto Lidas, 2021).

In effect, no programs or adaptations adequately reduced the digital access gap in Brazil overall, and therefore failed to meet educational needs during the pandemic. The following testimonies highlight the multiplicity of mechanisms created with the aim of guaranteeing access

to education even in the context of social distancing, which reinforced the political commitment of a number of professionals.

The school had already organised a communication agenda via WhatsApp. The teachers had daily meetings with the pedagogical director to prepare remote classes, but everything was still in its infancy. I think the first step was for us to try to create a methodology for planning activities that connected the teachers' content. And then we started organising ourselves as a group to deliver interdisciplinary scripts. This movement was very important for the group of teachers, because it brought people together. We sent these scripts via WhatsApp, and also put them on Google Classroom, which was very little accessed. The script was important in some respects in terms of thinking about the curriculum, but the methodology was still very difficult for students. Firstly, it was very textual, so students who weren't fully literate couldn't follow the script. We started investing in synchronous classes, which also had low take-up. We additionally tried some asynchronous class formats, some teachers recorded the class and we sent it via Google, WhatsApp, posted it on Facebook. In short, we used all the tools at our disposal (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

At no time was there any advice from the Department of Education. They sent us some books, which are the Learning Trails, to distribute. Many students didn't even go to the school to pick them up. But that was the way the City Council found to get some content into the hands of the students. When the tablets arrived, it was about a month before we had to go back to the classroom, it was an absurd delay. There were students who said, "no, I don't want this, I'm not going to get it, I don't know how to use it, there's no one here to teach me how to use it, it's going to break, they're going to steal it from me, I'm going to press the wrong button here, it's going to explode in my hand". They were very afraid of this technology thing too. So we had to deal with that bureaucratic novelty during that period too (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

The students got an e-mail and a login, the teachers would post things there and the students would go and do the activities. Now, we also had the school Facebook, which we explored at the beginning, and at the time we added WhatsApp. That became a permanent feature of the school. We had an average participation of a third of the students during that 2020 in activities in general. We had one teacher who achieved 95% participation, the hero of the school. The other teachers had an average participation rate of a third. One of the problems related to education was access to technology so that they could participate (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).

From the perspective of **community education**, in addition to the work done in schools, a number of NGOs and other organisations carried out their social projects during the pandemic

to guarantee access to education for children, even while practicing social distancing. Initiatives such as the donation of books, creation of online activities, distribution of kits of teaching materials, provision of spaces for using computers and printers, training for the development of socio-emotional skills, as well as food donations were highlighted. The following testimonies point to the diversity of adaptive strategies, according to the profile of each organisation and the network of supporters and access to mobilised resources.

We had partnerships with Itaú itself, which helped a lot with the books, and we distributed them. There were kits with different themes and some were very important too, dealing with racism, things along those lines (Instituto Fazendinhando).

We did online percussion classes with the students and then, with the money we got from the public notice, we were able to buy the instruments for them to keep at home, because it was something we didn't have. We had five pandeiros that we lent out and took turns each week. We had to buy a lot of pandeiros because of the pandemic, we bought 20 pandeiros for the 20 students to have at home (Geração Portela).

I was in the third year of my doctoral research on self-care practices, meditative practices linked to this issue of self-regulation. So we ended up adopting these practices in a socio-emotional and ethical learning program. We adopted this as a strategy to work with the children and adolescents as well, providing training for the educators who were in the schools and who were also falling ill. And they reproduced and multiplied the strategies of this program with the children (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).

They also did online storytelling. It was the way we found to maintain the bond, so that the children wouldn't drift away and to provide support, especially with regard to food, which was the most worrying thing at the time. We gave up the programmed didactic content, because there were other things that were more important. And we started talking about "Look out of the window, what are you seeing? what are you hearing?", to try and take some of the stress away. The houses here are very small, sometimes there are people, large families, so they felt very... They said: "gee, it's very suffocating, it's tiring, I can't take it anymore" (Pró Saber).

The importance of the teacher-student bond for the teaching-learning dynamic was repeatedly noted among the challenges of access to remote teaching. Thus, the centrality of the relational dimension in the pedagogical process partly explains the inadequacy of the remote teaching model. This conclusion was an important lesson for many organisations in the pandemic context, with a call to reinforce the importance of the affective nature of the learning process.

The pandemic has enabled us to understand that information and knowledge are different things. Children can access information, but it doesn't turn into knowledge. So the importance of mediation is for this child to learn. And I also argue that activity doesn't teach. That's what we did during the pandemic. We produced incredible things, activities. Look, there were websites offering educational activities, but activity alone doesn't teach. We need the teacher. I'll tell you that the pandemic has shown how important this relationship between the student and their teacher is (Support and Monitoring Centre for Learning of the Municipal Department of Education of the Municipality of São Paulo – NAAPA).

We realised that online didn't work. There was no point in spending three hours over three days. So we started to meet twice a week for an hour. And so there was no activity or lesson, it was an exchange of "how are you? how are things at home? what are you feeling?". So it was a time for them to learn how to name feelings. The biggest lesson for me is this bond with people. How much education needs this bond, this bond-building (Pró Saber).

Despite all the efforts made to build a system that would guarantee access to education in times of the need for social distancing in order to preserve life, the organisations' testimonies point to a generalised view of the **inadequacy of the remote education model**. This is revealed in the difficulties of access, which are justified by a series of factors which already characterised the vulnerable situation to which young people were exposed before the pandemic, but also in the feeling of anguish that permeates young people afterwards, in the assessment that years of training and important socialisation processes have been lost.

Talking about adolescents specifically in socio-educational measures, it didn't work. I think that of the 60 cases we were dealing with at the time, if three went to school and managed to keep their education remote and do their activities, that was a victory. Because it didn't work. The children end up having more contact with education and even wanting to have that contact, because of the experiences they've had at that school up until that point. But the relationship with teenagers was already broken, even before the pandemic. So when the pandemic hit, the boys - I say boys because at the time, at least, they were all boys - generally withdrew. Some of them we'd guide, we'd schedule a visit or two, kind of in secrecy, to support them, to print out material. But they couldn't cope, they didn't understand the content being taught, they had no time to ask questions. They couldn't even diagnose and construct in an organised way what their doubts were, because many of them weren't literate. So in distance learning, these doubts end up putting a magnifying glass on a problem that already existed (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

I didn't have the psychology to sit at a desk at home, because at home there's noise, you're trying to study on one side, your brother is trying on the other, your mother is working, cooking, cleaning the house. And then you don't have a moment. I was at a point in my life when I had to help out around the house all the time, and being with a child locked inside is horrible, because the child needs to run, they need to play, they need to develop. And you're in a room with five other people. I didn't do ENEM, I didn't do anything because I didn't feel capable of doing it, because I missed two years of school. I do private university, distance learning, because it's what fits in my pocket, because otherwise I'd do it in person, but I can't afford to do it in person (Fala Jovem).

The remote mode I was having was often repetitive classes. I accompanied my brother who was going through this process. Sometimes he would watch the same video and there wasn't much information exchange. Honestly, he didn't learn anything. And he passed the year, because they're always going to pass the year, even if they miss a lot. I've seen mothers here in the occupation who have asked for tutoring, because of the difficulty their children are having. (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro – MSTC).

In order to guarantee remote teaching, many educators, both in schools and in social projects, exposed themselves to risky situations. It was revealed that many school principals in São Paulo had to remain in person at the institutions, even during the school closure period. They were exposing themselves to high risk of contamination during the distribution of resources (such as teaching materials, play kits, books, tablets or even food and food cards). This fact expresses the **historical devaluation of the teaching profession** in Brazil and reveals how, even in the face of strengthening the discourse on the importance of education during the pandemic, it had no transformative effects on the everyday working reality of professionals.

We, the management team, never stopped going to school. Because someone had to be at school every day. What we did was review. So I came to school every other day. There were two or three servers at the school every day in 2020. I'm lucky to live nearby, I cycle to and from school, so I didn't have a problem with this issue of contact on transport, particularly. But many colleagues did. Curiously, the Covid symptoms came two weeks after we distributed the basic food basket, when we received 200, 300 people during the day. No matter how careful we were, it could have been there, because that was when I was most crowded with people (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).

As a result, the **impact on mental health** was widespread, not only affecting young people, but also educators from schools and other social projects. Feelings such as anguish and loneliness predominated on the part of the young people, given the difficulties in socialising and feeling behind or losing out in the training process. According to adults, these feelings were also associated with the excessive use of screens and the influences of social networks. On the educators' side, there was a feeling of powerlessness in facing the generalised situation of lack of rights and everyday protection, plus the personal dimension of the overwhelming experience of the pandemic. Faced with this situation, the return to face-to-face teaching after years of school closures was an even more challenging and sensitive process.

Everyone was extremely unwell, some people were depressed. They isolated themselves. I was able to observe some who sought other alternatives in order to live well during that period. We have a lot of students who are artists, so they dedicated themselves to the arts. There were students who invested in TikTok for dancing, there were students who made vegetable gardens, there were students who focused on their cats, their dogs... But they didn't organise anything collectively. I spent two years in a white room. My room doesn't have any artwork to distract me. I have a little plant here. I'm in a white square, which makes no sense. I'm not sunbathing, I'm not doing anything. My house has no sun either. I looked up research on how the environment affects mental health, and I made this connection. Then I went to talk to the coordinators and they realised the same thing. But, as a network, we didn't have a conversation to talk about it. Because it was a very disorganised year due to many issues (Rede Ubuntu).

Until then, everyone was at home, we didn't know exactly how things were going in everyone's lives. When we went back to the classroom, things started to get more intense and our helplessness became very evident. How do you say to a teacher, "Look, your student is violent, he's aggressive, because he's not well, he's disrespecting you because he's ill", and then the person turns to you and says, "But so am I, so what?". You have a protection network that doesn't work, the social welfare services have been completely dismantled. I have several cases of girls who have been sexually assaulted, and I've sent them to the Guardianship Council, I've sent them to CREAS, I've sent them to all the legal devices we have for referral. But they aren't called for help. This also makes you ill, this feeling of powerlessness (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

I include myself in these issues too. Having to stay locked up at home, having little contact with the outside world, at the same time watching television you're bombarded with news on the internet, on Instagram or on the news (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).

You see the disasters that are happening in schools, it has to do with the game they've learned. Because young people, children, have gotten into vices and things they shouldn't, like gambling. I don't know if all this that is happening today with these young people, with these children, isn't caused by this pandemic disaster, because they had more time on their cell phones, on the computer. And they never did research just for lessons (Associação de Moradores do Jardim Pantanal – AMOJAP).

However, remote learning had positive effects for some young people who were part of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or engaged in popular courses. This is because many of these young people often divide their working week between study and work, whether in informal work or in activities deemed essential; these young people could not cease in-person operations even during the most critical period of the pandemic (such as transportation, delivery services, retail commerce like supermarkets, cleaning services, etc.). The virtual remote learning model allowed shortening commuting times, which could be invested in studying or resting. This shows that, to some extent, remote teaching practices allowed to promote greater inclusion and reinforces the importance of not generalising education guarantee policies.

The proposal is for the virtual centre to continue operating, because we've started to see that our reach goes beyond the territories where Uneafro's in-person centres exist, and that we can also help those students who for some reason can't attend classes and activities. I've already received messages from students saying, "I can attend classes in the morning, at five o'clock in the morning, which is when I'm on the train, going to work. So during those 40 or 50 minutes of travel, I turn on the teacher's class and study (Uneafro).

2.2.2. Return to face-to-face teaching

The multiple challenges for education did not end with the return to face-to-face teaching. The resumption of children and young people going to schools was affected by the transformations that the closure of schools had on students' lives. There is widespread concern in the discourse of the organisations interviewed about new emerging challenges: socialisation blockages, expression of feelings of shame and anxiety, and teaching-learning difficulties are among the main issues described. Added to this is recognition of the government's lack of preparation to receive students back in schools, even in a context in which it was still necessary to adopt protective measures against contamination by Covid-19. In addition to socio-emotional preparation for

welcoming students, this also required adaptations to school infrastructure and to the logistics of school routines.

The main problem highlighted in the return to face-to-face teaching at the centre of this debate was the **high dropout rates**, especially among older groups: data from the 2023 School Census, collected by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep), indicated that high school dropout reached 5.9% (Brasil, 2024). This dropout rate was partly due to the migratory movements of students between private and public schools and between cities in the context of social isolation. This disfigured the enrollment distribution arrangement. On the other hand, it is strongly associated with the discouragement that the years of remote education caused for many young people and their families. This added up to the pressure to find employment and income, dramatically affecting the lower classes at an earlier age.

We have a serious problem of exclusion from school, a serious problem of families realising that the routine of taking a child to school is very complicated and it's much easier to leave them at home doing nothing, or to include them in these domestic activities. This non-return continues to happen, but it's very gradual. For example, there has been a huge influx of students from private schools into public schools because of the crisis. We don't yet have a diagnosis of what happened, whether these children left school and have returned, or whether these vacancies are children who left and haven't returned. There was also a migration movement during the pandemic, of families returning from their home states and taking their children with them. So it's been an upheaval in various scenarios, in various contexts, which I don't think we're yet in a position to gauge (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).

They're totally demotivated, they're away from school. Many schools in the area have already returned from the pandemic with the strategy, with the PEI program, which is the full-time education program. So, for a teenager who hasn't been at school for a year to come back to school full time, either from seven in the morning until two, or from half past two until half past nine at night, not only is the workload very heavy, but it also breaks with other spaces that this teenager has created bonds with. For example, CEDESP, which is a social assistance policy that offers vocational training. The boy finds himself in this situation of having to choose, "either I study, or I do CEDESP". And then he becomes totally discouraged. Suddenly that boy is neither at CEESP nor at school (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

When they go back to school, people, and especially children and young people, don't know how to relate to each other. Many teenagers and even children have anxiety attacks. We've been asked more and more in these spaces to carry out these kinds of workshops, dynamics that work with mental health, with self-care practices, which is what we're calling these meditative practices, this facilitation of these dynamics about emotions (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).

I think the main factor we noticed was the feeling of abandonment. And then those strong bonds that the child had in relation to the school space became very fragile. For us in education, our main perception was that the meaning of school had diminished for many families. Those children who already had challenges staying at school, whose bonds were already more fragile, were the most affected. People came back much more anxious, much more restless, with more difficulty sustaining their attention, the school meaningless, people more intolerant - and when I say people, this is something we see on both sides, both the adult and the child themselves (Núcleo de Apoio e Acompanhamento para Aprendizagem da Secretaria Municipal de Educação da Prefeitura de São Paulo – NAAPA).

There are young people who are in the courses, and who are managing to get into university. This is very important. But... there's always a lot of cost, isn't there? So there are two parts. People are managing to access things, they're managing to access training, they're managing to access education - popular, quality education. But there's also the other issue of being informal, in these informal jobs, which are consequently often not decent jobs, right? And being in this rush to contribute at home. And the issue of hunger is still there, right? (Uneafro).

Although the general perception was that there was no preparation for resuming face-to--face teaching, some measures were adopted through the secretariats of each city and state, but also on the initiative of school communities. In terms of **public policies for adaptation**, in São Paulo, for example, there was a plan to carry out this return gradually, in the sense of dividing students into groups that interspersed the days of the week on which they attended face-to-face teaching. Although there was a desire for hybrid teaching by equipping classrooms with technologies allowing to connect with students who were at home, installations were late, as was the delivery of the tablets mentioned above.

An example of an innovative policy adopted by the municipality was the "Operation Work Back to School Program", known as "Mothers POT", an initiative which created jobs for students' socially vulnerable mothers and helped schools adopt safety and security measures during the return phase. Although not designed as a continuous public policy but rather as an emergency measure, the program functioned (much like community health workers in primary healthcare units) as a bridge between services and the community. This connection enabled active community participation in policy implementation for the first time. These women were then employed at a later stage to help with active-search measures to engage students in returning to school and reduce dropout rates. These elements highlighted in the interviews reveal that there were some minor attempts from the state to respond to education needs; their impact was however relatively limited due to the magnitude of the impact that the years of school closures during the

pandemic had on children and young people. The lack of participatory spaces and dialogue with the school community partly explains these failures. The testimonies of two educators reveal the different nuances of this return process.

> *This return was gradual, it didn't happen all at once. We had 30% returning to the classroom and there were certain criteria we had to meet, in terms of social vulnerability. In the end, those who had the courage to go back came back first. We didn't have this mapping of who was most vulnerable. We posted a voting link on Whatsapp asking who wanted to return or not, and from that we drew up this list of the 30% who would return first. Many families didn't want to go back, even at that time. There was no crisis in this sense, it sort of adjusted naturally, because people were still too scared to go back to school, even though they were almost all on the streets. As there were fewer students, what happened there in person had a lot of quality. We started holding assemblies once a week, created committees, and the students who were in the classroom were very happy. Firstly because the school was a very pleasant place to be, because - despite having to wear a mask, having to rub alcohol on their hands all the time - they were with their friends, in classrooms that had eight students, in a school that was clean, that wasn't noisy, that was prepared with welcoming activities. When it was announced that it was going to go back to 100%, the students who were in the classroom mobilised and asked for this not to happen. And everyone still arrived with a lot of fear, they had a lot of restrictions, they couldn't share material, they couldn't go to the reading room, they couldn't go to the computer room, which are the things they like, physical education was still very adapted, in a way they didn't like (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).*
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> *We're thinking of expanding the team - it's almost going to triple - so that we can provide the school with better quality. We're working on a major program aimed at the mental health of both teachers and children in our network. We're thinking of creating a centre dedicated to the students in our network for psychotherapeutic care. We're calling it a studio, because we want to think about mental health from the perspective of art, culture and sport (Núcleo de Apoio e Acompanhamento para Aprendizagem da Secretaria Municipal de Educação da Prefeitura de São Paulo – NAAPA).*

The return to face-to-face teaching in a scenario in which the contamination risk was still worrying generated a broad discussion around the **inadequate infrastructure of schools**, which also appeared in the discourse of the organisations interviewed. In turn, although the discussion gained momentum at an early stage and continues to be on the agenda of organisations that advocate for children's rights in the national context, this was not reflected in effective changes in school environments, which for some of the people interviewed is a sign of neglect and the absence of political interests in social transformation.

When the pandemic started, we saw a very interesting movement of schools outside of Brazil that were thinking about how to combine the care measures that will need to be taken with classes outside. Couldn't we take advantage of this opportunity and propose that we make better use of open spaces, both in schools and around them, such as squares and parks? And then we developed various materials, showing that this was already a practice in other pandemics, especially tuberculosis. We continue to make this case, about how we can take a better look at school infrastructure, so that we can have a healthier school. We also advocate for these schools to be climate resilience spaces, because they need to rethink their infrastructure, be greener spaces, healthier spaces for the school community and also for the cities (Instituto Alana).

It's very important that the architecture of the school no longer resembles a prison. Anyone who has ever entered a public school, for example, and seen the library room locked, passes through several gates, through several bars, until they can access their classroom or the video room. The video room, for example, is surrounded by a thousand padlocks. The problem of basic education here in Brazil can be understood as a political project, from the moment we see classrooms with structural problems, undervalued teachers, with no career plan and low salaries. This is a project to scrap public education and a way of privatising it at some point (Uneafro).

We had contact with people who were engineers specialising in air quality. These guys had never heard of schools, they didn't know how a school worked. And then they discovered that public schools didn't even have working air. And that many schools didn't even have windows. And they wanted to talk to us to find out if it was true. So the pandemic gave visibility to education and to the problem of education infrastructure in the country. And when it came back - which we also expected - the school disappeared. Now we're in the process of political discussion about various other things. The public school agenda has fallen. We now see the students moving around, the teachers are back, everyone is on the streets again, so it seems like normal life. But in terms of infrastructure, there has been no representative investment in the whole country to provide infrastructure in these schools, they are still the same (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).

A large part of the strategies adopted by the school community and social projects to adapt to the **return to face to face activities** work consisted of attempts to welcome young people back, recognising the impact on their mental health after months in isolation. This meant permeating classes with greater affection and listening, rather than prioritising a content-based approach, as well as seeking psychotherapeutic support. Teacher training was also among the strategies mentioned, highlighting the importance of multiplying welcoming actions through playful approaches and encouraging reading.

When things started to improve and we were allowed to stop wearing masks, I had a lot of teenagers who didn't want to take their masks off, because they were ashamed of their mouths, their teeth, "oh, everyone met me wearing a mask, they'll laugh at me". It was a difficult time wearing the mask: it was hard to put it on, it was hard to take it off, because there was also this self-image thing. Imagine a child who started the pandemic, she was in fourth grade, she was a child there in fourth grade; suddenly she's back in sixth grade, elementary 2, barely literate, with no ties to her classmates, with a changing body, entering adolescence... It's a lot to manage (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

On our return, we had to change a few things. I realised that everyone was a little more stressed, a little more vulnerable psychologically speaking. And so, at first, I had to adapt too. The approach had to be a little calmer, the didactics had to be calmer and lighter, with longer breaks for people to breathe and talk to each other. I came up with this idea: more relaxed moments, focusing less on the lesson and talking about other subjects (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).

We organised ongoing training for teachers, because we came to understand the need for such training, precisely because we are a small group that can't meet all the demands in the area. So how can we contribute more to reading? And so we thought about continuing education, to train teachers to become reading mediators as well (Rede Litera Sampa).

This year we focused even more on training educators. We have been one of the three institutions here in Brazil that have focused on this socio-emotional education program. And this year we've been working very hard with educational institutions, specifically taking care of these mental health consequences in the aftermath of the pandemic (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).

2.3. The community role of schools

Despite the numerous challenges faced during the pandemic, public schools in Brazil adopted various strategies to guarantee provision of essential services in their communities. This action is intrinsically linked to the evolution of citizenship rights in the country, historically materialised by the concrete action of public services. Public facilities stand out as a vital structure in the urban context in which they are located. Thus, school units and educators play a crucial role in guaranteeing children and young people's rights at the local level. Considering that the network of public schools is more extensive than that of other services and maintains daily contact

with the community, it is closer to the living conditions of the population, which reinforces its role as a point of reference for local public policies.

This structuring character of public schools is not something recent or related to the pandemic context, but is present in some of the most sophisticated formulations throughout the history of educational thought and policy in Brazil. Some examples are: the Convênio Escolar park-schools, under the management of Mário de Andrade in the 1950s in São Paulo; the Early Childhood Education schools and their relationship with the superblocks in the city of Brasília, transforming the schools into planning units; and more recently, the Urban Structuring Centres (called CEUs) in the city of São Paulo, whose structuring of equipment is combined with the city's landscape and infrastructure and integrates a series of public services.

Some examples have been highlighted herein to reflect on this centrality assumed by schools. In a public school in **Jardim Pantanal**, a neighbourhood located in the eastern region of São Paulo, where residents faced one of the highest Covid-19 mortality rates in the city, an average of one third of students participated in remote activities in 2020. This school is located in an area with a strong history of social mobilisation, where a master plan was built with community participation – including children – to promote land regularisation and sustainable urbanisation of the neighbourhood. An award-winning project, "Children's Street", was also built to promote the urban requalification of the sidewalk in front of the school. Despite the difficulty of access to learning for remote students during the pandemic given the digital divide, the school was an important distribution point for food parcels and food cards with a monthly subsidy from the municipal administration. Being on the front line meant that workers were infected with the virus, which is why many of them joined a national strike to guarantee priority vaccination for this category.

In another public school in **Heliópolis**, São Paulo's largest *favela*, in the southeast of the city, knowledge production was an ally in the fight against the pandemic and other associated crises. The school organised preparation of interdisciplinary scripts to distribute to students with themes related to the pandemic in order to discuss the impacts of the pandemic on the community and the students' lives. The scripts were sent via WhatsApp and printed out for those who wanted to pick them up at school. A partnership with the Federal University of ABC (UFABC) conducted a survey on food security within the school based on a questionnaire distributed to families by sampling, which reported that 80% of the school's students were in a situation of hunger – between the variations of high, medium and low risk. However, there was strong criticism of the absence of the Municipal Administration, including a lack of transparency about the criteria for distributing food baskets, which did not cover all families. The school therefore worked together with other organisations in the neighbourhood to ensure that the families who were not covered

were taken care of. Regarding games, as there are few free public leisure spaces in the community (considering the predominance of alleys and short streets where cars predominate, and the closure of existing ones during the pandemic), many students over the age of 10 started going to *baile funk*[1]. This raised problematic issues considering the presence of violence in various senses involving child labour, sexual abuse and drug addiction. According to one interviewee, the use of school facilities, even in the face of closure during the pandemic, was an important strategy to guarantee the rights of young people:

> *They find their own way, they climb on the slab, on the roof of the school, and I have to fix it every week, because they go up there every weekend to fly kites. My effort during this period has been to open up, remove the bars, remove the gate, and I'm leaving the school playground open at weekends, which is difficult, because I get there on Monday and the playground is a mess. So there are a lot of conflicts that arise when trying to open the school. We've talked to the neighbours, but it takes time (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).*

A third example is an educational centre in the Perus district, located in the far northwest of the city of São Paulo, dedicated to Youth and Adult Education (called Centro Integrado de Educação de Jovens e Adultos – CIEJA), designed to guarantee the rights of young people and adults. This unit, one of 16 in the city, began operating in 2016. The region is located in the middle of important forest remnants in the city and has a history of environmental damage, precarious infrastructure and insufficient public services. As a result, property values are low and the resident population is predominantly low-income. The school's premise is the constant dialogue with local stakeholders; it was hosting diverse training activities for the community even before the pandemic, while being a privileged place for dialogue and food distribution. Aware that the disprotection situation in the region was worsening during the pandemic, and that municipal actions did not take into account the specificities of the periphery, the educational centre developed various initiatives without the support of the Municipal Department of Education. According to the person interviewed, the actions based on delivering vouchers by post were extremely ineffective and reflected the school's abilities to seek for self-organised solutions to problems in the absence of institutional support. This is widely practised among local social movements, and is known as *"sevirologia"*.

1 *Baile funk* is a Brazilian dance party, typically held in favelas or urban areas, featuring a music genre that fuses hip-hop, electronic beats, and Afro-Brazilian rhythms. It is deeply connected to youth culture and serves as both a social gathering and cultural expression.

We raised some money, bought food parcels or collected donations. But we buy a lot of coupons at the local supermarket, because it's a way of encouraging commerce to work. There's a theory here in the community, created by Mestre Soró, who has unfortunately left us, which is the science of 'Sevirologia', right? You can't do it, so you 'get by'. This picture that I'm detailing for you, I'm sure you'll find everywhere in São Paulo, that public policies haven't arrived, because of a lack of understanding of what a peripheral territory is. It's one thing to have a nice address in the centre. And then you leave it at the entrance to your building. It's another thing to deliver it in the community, in the alley that doesn't have a number in front of the house. It had to be someone from here. They should have given us the money and said: "Hey, go on, hire people". Because it would also have been a job for the delivery man who was out of work because of the pandemic (Centro Integrado de Educação de Jovens e Adultos – CIEJA Perus).

These testimonies reveal the **nexus between education and food**, since schools play an important role in the country as a gateway to accessing public rights and services (including the right to school meals). As we will see in more detail in the next section, while the closure of schools had an impact on the food insecurity situation of thousands of families, there was no single, coordinated policy in the country to provide guidance for schools. For example, food donations in the municipality of São Paulo were organised (via basic food baskets and food cards) and distributed by organisations recognised by the government and/or schools to the most socially vulnerable families. However, these were criticized for the lack of transparency with many families being excluded from the donation circuits. Solidarity actions led by frontline agents in schools using their own resources emerged as a response to deal with this situation.

Testimonies also point to the **nexus between education and play/leisure**, since it is schools which often provide spaces for socialising and leisure for children and young people. Excursion activities, recess time, physical education classes and integrated school workshops are some of the examples cited, in addition to the school space itself (which can contain a court, a room with multimedia equipment, and dance rooms, among others). Thus, the closure of schools also meant a drastic reduction in leisure opportunities for young people from low-income families.

Institutional reports also indicated that social distancing would increase the exposure of children and young people to domestic violence (OECD, 2021). This context was present in the testimonies of the organisations interviewed, in which, once again, the school played an important role in guaranteeing students' **right to protection**. This is particularly evident in conversations with public sector professionals in the education system, who emphasize the crucial role of teachers as trusted figures for young people experiencing violence and abuse.

We had a group of about 400 children that we monitored because they lived in domestic violence situations. The first impact for us was: "Now they're alone". Very quickly we created a website that had a tool, a bot, which allowed our team to talk to the student, and we could talk about violence issues in a playful and accessible way. We had around 74,000 hits on this site. Do you know what they were asking for? To talk to the teacher (Núcleo de Apoio e Acompanhamento para Aprendizagem da Secretaria Municipal de Educação da Prefeitura de São Paulo – NAAPA).

Today they tell us a lot about their worsening mental health. Especially the girls, who tell us more. They were just looking after the house, the little brothers and sisters, cooking, cleaning the house, not leaving the house, working inside the house. And they were very idle, in the sense that they didn't have any activity there, any motivation to do something different, they didn't have access to anything, life stopped and they were locked inside. Then there are the terrible stories that we've been trying to deal with up until now, of a lot of domestic violence, a very strong increase in sexual violence, many cases of girls reporting abuse, many cases of alcoholism, drug addiction in the home, they tell us a lot about this too (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Dialogue with organisations reinforces the **community role** that schools play in Brazilian society. It means recognising that in addition to providing education, these spaces act as powerful facilities capable of integrating actions and policies aimed at guaranteeing the rights of children, young people and families, acting **intersectorally**. The closure of such facilities in a crisis context, such as the pandemic, meant dismantling a series of policies that serve families in situations of greater socio-economic and spatial precariousness; the responsibility fell on frontline professionals who work directly with these populations to reorganise and develop adaptation strategies amid a landscape of helplessness and precariousness.

The public school is Brazilian school. Less than 10% of Brazilian students go to private school, and those 10% are in the big centres of the southeast. From there, the rest of the school is public. This public school institution is a fundamental part of this process, whether it's training, guaranteeing rights or simply keeping the child somewhere (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).

The pandemic showed how necessary human relationships are for social development. My perception is that we have come back more hardened, more individualistic, with more difficulty in relating. This reinforces the importance of school in developing our human experience. How important it is for us to be together, to be close, to relate individually and collectively. The school has a very important role to play in freeing us from barbarism and in helping us develop as a civilization (Núcleo de Apoio e Acompanhamento para Aprendizagem da Secretaria Municipal de Educação da Prefeitura de São Paulo – NAAPA).

2.4. Other reflections on education

The testimonies generally highlighted that the impact of the pandemic on children's and young people's experiences show the need for a **significant transformation in the concept of education in Brazil**, with an emphasis on valuing the active participation of all those involved in the educational process. The country has a long history of pedagogical approaches which emphasise active participation of all those involved in the educational process. This understanding should guide the future and be combined with recognising the importance of investing in school infrastructure as well as ensuring adequate environments and sufficient resources for the full development of pedagogical activities. In addition, education professionals should be better valued through better working conditions and opportunities for continuing training, to raise the quality of teaching. This also means recognising and valuing students' different backgrounds and choices, so as not to perpetuate inequalities and exclusionary processes.

> *The school deals with different classes, different people and these people are not always at school with a project of social or economic ascension. The history of Brazilian education is the history of education for forming a new person who becomes a democratic citizen, who is formed to make progress. Progress is always about evolution and anyone who doesn't want to take part in this evolution is looked down upon. But this education is limited if it doesn't understand that not everyone is part of this project. Even because this project only works if there are people who don't want to move up, who want to carry on doing other jobs (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).*
>
> *I think the idea of school has to change, the concept is wrong. The people who hold the pen have no idea what a school is. When governments in general understand the power that a school has within a territory, perhaps we can start talking about a project. There's a lot of talk about a comprehensive school, but the dimension we have is a prison. It's a school to extend the time students spend in school without any resources. You lock everyone in and throw away the key, without foreseeing that people have already started killing themselves inside. What we see today in Brazilian public schools is a total disregard for education. We think about a lot of things, but we don't think about the main purpose of our work, which is to educate people. And educating people is something you can only do if you have a holistic view of that person (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).*

Fundamental questions were brought to light about the limits and structural inequalities of the Brazilian education system, insofar as they recognise the historical cross-cutting reflected in **social markers of difference**, such as race, gender, class and religion. In this sense, transformations in education involve adopting a holistic approach which recognises the multiple vulnerabilities faced and the potential for diversity present in children and young people who attend

schools. Furthermore, changing the historical narrative to include the perspective of oppressed peoples, by adopting practices such as decolonising the curriculum, is a strategy for empowering students and tackling structural racism and social exclusion. Thus, a truly transformative education must both confront social inequalities and question and reconfigure the narratives that sustain these inequalities, promoting a more inclusive and critical education. To do so, special care must be taken to avoid further reinforcing authoritarian and oppressive practices and models that restrict autonomy and diversity.

The more we look at a society with unequal income distribution, and it's not just income, but services, the less access the population has to services, the more this impacts educational inequalities, because school is not a world apart. School is connected to life, and the suffering that takes place outside school is reflected inside school. So I think our first challenge is to recognise education as a right, and recognising education as a right means looking at this child comprehensively, so it means understanding that this child who arrives at school is a child who carries this history, this history of precariousness, abandonment, violence, violation of multiple rights, and that the school, we need to turn the key, which is to say, "look, so the child who lives through this doesn't learn", "the child who is a victim of violence doesn't learn", "the child who has a precarious socioeconomic situation doesn't learn". The school's challenge is to ask itself "how do I teach a child who has a very precarious socio-economic situation? how do I teach a child who lives in contexts of violence? how do I teach a child who experiences other dimensions of rights violations?" (Núcleo de Apoio e Acompanhamento para Aprendizagem da Secretaria Municipal de Educação da Prefeitura de São Paulo – NAAPA).

A very important point would be to decolonise the curriculum. From the moment we manage to have a history lesson that, for example, stops saying that the Portuguese arrived in Brazil and starts saying that they invaded our territory, I think a lot can change. Because then we start to understand from the point of view of who was defeated and why many populations were defeated. From there, we will understand why racism exists in our country, why prejudice and social exclusion are so great in the peripheries and poor territories of our country. I think this empowers students and leads to questioning. This can be very transformative and has a very qualitative leap within education and our country (Uneafro).

We also raise issues of citizenship, of citizens who are more accepting, right? We are a class struggle, so we try to bring this reflection to the students, like, who we are, where we are, why is education bad, why is the entrance exam difficult, why is university so far from my home? We ask them these questions. "Oh, I'm trying to pass the entrance exam, but I know that the entrance exam has to end". We want them to arrive at the end of the year with this notion, like, "Oh, maybe I won't pass this year, but I'm not the problem" (Rede Ubuntu).

3 Impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's access to food in vulnerable territories and related adaptations

3.1. Brazil's return to the hunger map

Although Brazil left the UN Hunger Map in 2014, political change since 2016 has led to an increase in food insecurity and poorer living conditions. Brazil is currently characterised by a process of nutritional transition, in which malnutrition is decreasing but obesity is increasing (Martins et al., 2021). This particularly affects Brazil's young population and especially the most vulnerable, while reflecting broader global trends in which poverty, inadequate nutritional behaviours and socioeconomic vulnerability lead to obesity. This change is also linked to environmental challenges (including access to water and sanitation). Together, these factors promote an increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods to the detriment of fresh and healthy foods (Swinburn et al., 2019).

Food security in Brazil improved between 2004 and 2013 (Cotta; Machado, 2013). This was largely due to successful programs, such as '***Fome Zero***' (Zero Hunger) and the ***Bolsa Família*** Program (PBF), which transferred income directly to families living in poverty and extreme poverty with the aim of fighting hunger and promoting food and nutritional security. As a result, the number of PBF beneficiaries had reached 12.4 million by 2009 (Cotta; Machado, 2013). Another important measure was the National School Feeding Program (PNAE). Created in 2009, it has provided access to nutritious food for more than 41 million schoolchildren (Pereira et al., 2020).

However, the country faced a reverse path with the change of governments and the economic situation in the last decade: severe food insecurity increased by 8.0% per year between 2013

and 2018, and hunger increased by 27.6% from 2018 to 2020 (Rede PENSSAN, 2021). The number of people facing severe food insecurity in the first year of the pandemic in 2020 reached 19.1 million, affecting more than 60% of households in the North and 70% in the Northeast, compared to the national prevalence of 55.2%.

Some socio-economic support programs were adopted as a result during the pandemic, such as Emergency Aid, which aimed to mitigate poverty and extreme poverty. After its implementation, the percentage of children living in monetary poverty fell from 40% to 35% in the third quarter of 2020. In turn, it rose again to 39% in the following months after the benefit was reduced (Nassif-Pires; Cardoso; Oliveira, 2021). This program reached around 80% of young people who were not studying or working at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic (Silva; Vaz, 2020). However, the data revealed that hunger was present in 21.5% of the families receiving Emergency Aid, which points to its insufficiency (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). In addition, many low-income families were excluded from the program and had a significant increase in food and nutritional insecurity, which has been steadily increasing ever since.

Added to this is the inflation context: inflation of food consumed at home reached 16.12% in April 2022 (Campos; Jaime; Campello, 2022). The federal government generally made little effort to prevent hunger and rising food prices in that period. The healthiest food products with the highest nutritional quality registered the greatest increase, while those with low nutritional quality and ultra-processed foods varied below average inflation.

School meals were also compromised in the context of school closures, exacerbating food insecurity among vulnerable children and young people. A national emergency law authorised reallocation of resources from the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) to support monetarily poor families with children enrolled in the program. However, many children and young people were left out from letting local governments decide whether or not to distribute the food (Pereira et al., 2020).

As a result, food insecurity increased dramatically during the pandemic (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). Only 41.3% of households were food secure in 2022, while 28.0% were uncertain about access to food. Moreover, 30.1% of households faced quantitative food restriction, and 15.5% of them were in a situation of hunger. In fact, 125.2 million Brazilians lived in households with some level of food insecurity in 2022, and more than 33 million were in a situation of hunger (14 million more people than at the time of the same survey in 2020). Children, women and the black population suffered the most (Schall et al., 2021). More than 6 out of 10 households with some level of food insecurity were headed by women and identified themselves as black or brown (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). Severe food insecurity doubled in households with children up to 10 years old between 2020 and 2022, from 9.4% to 18.1% (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). Brazil also faced a concomitant weakening of policies to combat hunger since 2016, which further aggravated the impact of the pandemic.

In turn, food distribution initiatives emerged from school communities thanks to the involvement of civil society, involving public and private actors and religious entities (Boullosa; Peres, 2022; Domingos; Mitkiewicz; Saldiva, 2022). The country experienced a great wave of solidarity mobilisation and donations increased. These donations were mainly food baskets, but also involved organic food, milk and food for children's breakfasts. Initiatives also included distributing vouchers to spend in supermarkets to give families more autonomy (Mayer et al., 2021). In addition to NGOs, individuals, public institutions, private companies (i.e. banks), religious and community organisations came together. Two exemplary urban *favelas* in the city of São Paulo (Paraisópolis and Heliópolis) witnessed and hosted a wide range of community-led initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of the pandemic and meeting broader social needs (including food, health and assistance to the most vulnerable) (Boullosa; Peres, 2022; Domingos; Mitkiewicz; Saldiva, 2022).

3.2. Solidarity networks in the fight against hunger

The spread of hunger in thousands of Brazilian homes was one of the most devastating impacts in the early years of the pandemic. This scenario became the central focus of emergency actions performed by communities and social projects, even among those that had not previously dedicated themselves to welfare activities. Community organisation in vulnerable territories has emerged as a powerful response to this crisis, highlighted in numerous testimonies: all 32 organisations interviewed reported having participated in solidarity actions aimed at families in situations of greater socio-economic vulnerability in the territories where they operate.

Food insecurity emerged at the start of the pandemic as one of the biggest concerns in these territories, driven by massive job losses, especially in the service sectors such as restaurants and cleaning. The impossibility of working remotely exacerbated the situation for those in underemployment, increasing uncertainty about subsistence and paying for basic necessities such as rent. Therefore, community projects quickly mobilised to raise funds and provide food to the most affected families, highlighting the **importance of solidarity and collective organisation** in the face of socio-economic crises.

> *The big concern was food: "how are we going to keep the house? how are we going to pay the rent?". And then we started, as a project, to mobilise to get resources and food for these families (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).*

Many of these organisations were forced as a result to re-evaluate their traditional approaches, leading them to adopt **welfare practices**, even when this was not their main vocation. The urgent need to provide food and other basic resources to families in extreme vulnerability

challenged the limits of their projects, showing that direct and immediate support is indispensable in such severe crises. This realignment revealed both the flexibility of the organisations and the depth of the crisis, which affected those with precarious working relationships even more.

> *We were very afraid of this place of assistance, and today we look at it differently" (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).*
>
> *It's not a place where we normally work, but at the time of the pandemic there was no way of teaching people how to fish: you had to give them ready-made fish. At times, for some families, we even gave them ready-made food, because they didn't have any gas to cook with (Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento – CPCD).*
>
> *We had some donations, people who contacted us, basic food baskets, these things, so we gave them to some families. We couldn't cope, so we selected some people who we knew were very vulnerable. Then, during the pandemic, it also became a bit of a welfare program, even though it wasn't the focus of the project. But we did all this mobilisation and made door-to-door deliveries (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).*

The numerous **anti-hunger initiatives** adopted in the territories were broad and diverse, ranging from distributing basic food baskets and food cards to providing ready meals for those unable to cook. The testimonies also reveal how the experience demanded improved efficient resource management strategies in order to guarantee fair and equitable distribution in the face of growing demand. The creation of trust and partnership networks, as well as **investment in communication channels**, made it possible to expand the reach of donations, transforming local initiatives into large-scale support movements that benefited thousands of families.

> *We launched a campaign via WhatsApp, via Instagram, on our website too, to try and see what we could raise in funds. But the campaign didn't work out very well, because we were only able to produce 28 food baskets, if I'm not mistaken. It was at this point that a trust group was created with leaders from different territories. They began to mobilise more resources from this network, which began to be allocated to those leaders who had CNPJs, very well-structured governance and documentation. So it was much easier for the funds to reach us and then be distributed to other communities that didn't have documentation and could then be audited and backed up with invoices. So much so that those 28 basic food baskets turned into more than 25,000. We set up a group of around 50 volunteers – most of whom were young people and women – and each person in this group had a role. One part was responsible for registration, and they went door to door, alley to alley. Another group was responsible for distribution, another group was responsible for receiving these donations (Instituto Fazendinhando).*

We distributed 2,000 tons of food in 2021, at the peak of the pandemic. And we were able to impact the lives of more than two and a half thousand people directly, by serving them. And with the lunchboxes, we helped produce and distribute 100,000 lunchboxes (Associação de Mulheres e União de Moradores de Paraisópolis).

We donated more than 25,000 tons of food to the six communities and more than a thousand food cards. In the process, we came to understand the importance of the food card, as well as the basic food basket, because sometimes that family needs washing powder, they need shampoo, they need gas that has run out, which is just as important as rice and beans. And then they can buy it at the market with the food card. Today we've focused on the food card, because we understand that it's not about being a welfare agency, but really understanding what the demand is in that community, in that family (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).

We had to set up a process where all the donations that arrived here at UNAS were distributed equally. Heliópolis is divided by nucleus, so each nucleus has a leader, a director or a piece of UNAS equipment there. We started receiving the donations and divided them up equally. First for 5 nuclei, then for 10 nuclei, then we had 13 nuclei. Because we also started dividing it up between the region we serve and other communities that came to us to be able to carry out this donation work for the residents of the region they live in. We also conducted a registration process for these families. Together with the research that was taking place through the Heliópolis Observatory, we were able to improve our campaign and donation strategies (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).

In many cases, these organisations went beyond providing basic items, recognising the importance of offering families greater autonomy. This included distributing food cards that allowed for more flexible choices, programs that integrated sustainable food security practices or training projects. The following testimonies point to nuances in the different organisation strategies during this period. This ability to adapt and sensitivity to the specific needs of the communities they served showed the **resilience and social innovation** that emerged in response to the crisis.

I had a cell phone just for food parcels. We'd ask people to text us and we'd schedule deliveries every 10 minutes, so as not to overcrowd. I had to leave my cell phone in airplane mode to be able to answer everyone's questions, because when I took it out of airplane mode, 200, 300 messages would come in and I wouldn't be able to keep up. A lot of people aren't literate, so we took care to send them in audio, answering everyone (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

Are you going to make a food recipe? Then we'll send the ingredients, or we'll think of a recipe in which the ingredients can be bought, or we'll send it ready-made, for some situations. For example, we did a cookie workshop: we sent the recipe to anyone who could make it at home, but we sent a ready-made cookie, so that you could try it (Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento – CPCD).

We took advantage of what was being discarded [at supply centers], then we washed, cleaned and separated what could be used. There was no point in giving some families a basic food basket if they had nowhere to cook. So the food we made for the Solidarity Kitchen events was also provided: the same hot food that was sold went to the community. Then motoboys (motorcycle delivery boys) were hired to distribute it, to generate income. One helped the other (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro – MSTC).

We set up a fair to distribute organic products. You didn't just go there and give the person what you wanted to give them, they went to our fair and chose what they wanted to get. I remember at the time, we had beautiful cauliflower, beautiful broccoli. And the person would say: "My son, you're donating to me, you can donate anything". "No, I don't want you to take anything, I want you to take what you want". So it was a revolution for us, to see the sparkle in people's eyes. At the same time, we managed to sell a lot of products that farmers were losing on the farm. A lot of products that were in the legal standard and a lot of non-standard products, but which were perfectly consumable and even more so at a time when people were short of food (Nossa Fazenda).

We started training. The first was for women, the women farmers' project. There was also a group responsible for technology and education. The gastronomy course took place online. The teacher created the recipes, recorded everything and then shared it in the group. And every Wednesday we'd go into the kitchen and they'd make the recipes, we'd give them all the supplies and the teacher would follow everything that was happening online (Instituto Fazendinhando).

Universities and research centres were also important partners for the communities in the solidarity networks formed. Some organisations highlighted the **role of research** in mapping situations in the territory in order to understand the reality and design proposals for action to guarantee rights.

We had a project called the School Feeding Observatory that took place during the pandemic. There were two surveys in this project, which included listening to these students about food. For example, there were questions like: "Do you remember before the pandemic, when you ate in your school, did you have legumes, fruit and vegetables?", "And how is it now?". And it was blatant, because they had some food. Even if it didn't correspond to what should be in the National School Feeding Program (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).

In this partnership with the Federal University of ABC (UFABC), we conducted a survey on food security within the school. Based on a questionnaire administered to some families, we were able to establish a figure through sampling that 80% of the school was food insecure (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Community gardens and solidarity kitchens stand out among the innovative strategies, integrating aspects of nutrition, solidarity economy and promoting community well-being. In several initiatives, gardens were set up in alternative and reduced spaces, such as slabs and backyards, to grow vegetables and essential spices. These projects not only help meet basic food needs, but also foster social integration and environmental education. These spaces therefore emerge as multifunctional care hubs, which promote food security, mental health and social cohesion, while contributing to the economic resilience of communities.

Let's chase food to ensure that people can feed themselves. And, along with this, work on this issue of the collaborative economy, which was to give pensions to traders, but at the same time create a network: "So, what do we have that we can build a solidarity economy within, so that no one is vulnerable?" (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).

The basic food basket has rice and beans, but this family also needs vegetables and fruit. That's where the organic baskets come in. There was bread, jam, lettuce, other vegetables, some unconventional food plants. And the community garden comes out of this, thinking about this complete, integral diet. It's a combination of everything, because it brings the children together to be together and build another relationship with the land and with what the land gives us, it brings families together to talk, to have this space for dialog that guarantees mental health. There have already been studies that prove that this connection with nature, with the land, can help treat some mental illnesses (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).

We also had a community garden project – there's one that's still going today. It distributed organic food without poison, very much along the lines of food security, given that pesticides were being released within the national context we were in. We tried to make this movement within the territories, so that people could actually eat without so much poison. So we have an environmental centre, thinking about community gardens" (Uneafro).

The *Cozinhas Solidárias* initiative by the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST) stands out among the various organisations for its national scope. The movement is fighting for the right to housing in the national urban context. Faced with the situation of extreme food inse-

curity in the country, especially during the pandemic, the Solidarity Kitchens project arose from the need to promote food security in the urban occupations (how contemporary squatting social movements are referred to in Brazil) and gained strength in tackling the hunger situation beyond the occupied territories.

The movement began by collecting donations online for distributing basic food baskets, but considering the difficulties many families had in producing a nutritious meal, it began a mass production and distribution process of packed lunches at strategic operation points, supported by the voluntary work of activists. Thanks to a bill initiated by the current federal deputy Guilherme Boulos, who is also president of the MTST, the ***Cozinhas Solidárias* Program** became a public policy instituted by Law No. 14,628/2023, which reveals the strength of this process of social mobilisation. One example of a Solidarity Kitchen is in Embu das Artes, in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, where there are high poverty and inequality levels, as one of the volunteer workers shared:

> *There are a lot of homeless people here in Embu, a lot of users. They are very needy. So if people are hungry, they come to eat. It doesn't matter if they're users. We're fighting for equality. Who doesn't dream of one day being equal to everyone else? We have that dream too. The solidarity kitchen will feed these people. But later on, these people, these children, will have a better future. And I think this is within the Solidarity Kitchen project, with the educators, because they have a lot of hope and a lot of strength to be able to turn things upside down (Projeto das Cozinhas Solidárias do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST).*

Initiatives such as solidarity kitchens and community gardens are also examples of how integrating support actions with territorial dynamics can optimise the response to emergency needs. Thus, the effectiveness of solidarity network actions in crisis contexts tends to be greatly enhanced by their proximity to and understanding of local realities. Many of the organisations interviewed demonstrated the importance of their previous work in the territory in order to create adaptive strategies that take into account local specificities, reinforcing **the power of the local level** in promoting more effective and sustainable solutions.

> *We started distributing 7,000 basic food baskets a month, which is the number of families we have here in Jardim Pantanal. During this time, more than 60,000 baskets were distributed door-to-door. We notified the community via WhatsApp. We already had a transmission list with residents and during the pandemic this list even grew - today there are 6 transmission lists with more than 1500 residents. We started delivering along the river banks, coming towards a more structured area, throughout Jardim Pantanal. The information that was coming in about protective measures didn't match up with the daily life of the community. "Ah, keep a social distance. We know that there are large families living in one room, so how do you keep your distance? (Espaço Alana).*

Although embedded in care and solidarity, community action at the local level was also marked by conflict. Episodes of tension between beneficiaries and volunteers reinforced the importance of trust in support networks in order to minimise conflicts and maximise the positive impact of actions. Investing in **transparency and communication** was a necessary strategy for many of the initiatives to sustain themselves in the communities.

> *We had a lot of complaints about how these Street Presidents were chosen. I saw a lot of these issues of neighbours not understanding, thinking there was a privilege behind it, that they were the chosen ones, that they stole, I don't know what. But in the end, the initiative helped a lot of people. And it still helps today, there are people who still get lunch (Pró Saber).*

The Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário (IBEAC) is a non-profit organisation whose activities in Parelheiros are a strong example of a community care and empowerment centre at the local level. It has been developing projects in the region focused on human rights and participatory citizenship since 2008, being aimed at babies, young children, women, adolescents and young people, covering a total of around 15,000 families.

During the pandemic, in collaboration with another local NGO, the Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento (CPCD), IBEAC developed what they called the **4Ps strategy**. Each P refers to: *"pão"* (bread) through the distribution of food (food baskets, organic products and food vouchers); 'protection', through the production and distribution of personal protection products (masks, cleaning and hygiene products), as well as guidance on self-care through media (podcast, videos, WhatsApp and sound cars); "poetry" through the distribution of play kits with books and the promotion of online meetings with reading mediation and storytelling workshops, based on what they recognise as '*quilombola* literature' (Souza, 2011); and 'planting', encouraging the creation of community and home gardens in partnership with local farmers (Mayer et al., 2021). Much of the essential work was carried out by the so-called 'Mother Mobilisers', community residents who also worked on the projects and who ensured contact and links between the organisation and the families, even at a distance.

> *We know that many parents also continued to work, and the children were left alone at home. So, within the kits, they [the children] received at least five 'trigger' activities, so to speak. It was a way of giving them something to do at home. We heard from the mothers and the children themselves: "Oh, uncle, that's nice, I liked doing that", or "I didn't like doing that, I'm not going to do it". Then we saw magnificent results of families saying: "Look, when my child went back to school, he wasn't so far behind, because he had this support" (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).*

The interconnection between the care dimensions and life reproduction was a response for the need for integrated adaptation strategies. This is in line with the **nexus approach** (Brouwer et al., 2023; Giatti et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2022), which proposes integration and coordination between different areas and aspects of life in order to face complex challenges more effectively. In this study, the scarcity and difficulties in accessing food, education, and leisure for young people were conceived through supposed interdependencies. The interviews therefore highlighted the practical application of the nexus approach in the form of trade-offs in accessing scarce resources. For example, combining food baskets with educational kits, adopted by various non-profit organisations, illustrates how integrating food and education can enhance the response to community needs, going beyond mere food assistance. Similarly, initiatives such as the Solidarity Kitchens project demonstrate the interconnection between food, education, and leisure by offering meals alongside educational activities and play for children. From a nexus perspective, actions which generate multiple benefits or reduce interdependent scarcity can be considered synergies.

> *We started distributing food parcels to the families enrolled and to others who came to us asking for help. And together with the food parcels, we put together an educational kit, which is a book made by an author or illustrator that the children know and who is a partner of Pró Saber (Pró Saber).*
>
> *There are various sectors within the MTST: education, communication, health. We had a solidarity kitchen at a time when the children were in great need of educators, they were out of school. The queue was full of children coming to get food. The coordination of the MTST called on the education sector to take part in the solidarity kitchens and give tutoring, play games with the children. That's when the educators were born in the solidarity kitchens. Solidarity kitchens and education go very well together. Let me tell you why the children come here: on the day they come, there's a snack, there's juice, there's cake, there's cookies, there's everything. They know they're going to learn to play and interact" (Projeto das Cozinhas Solidárias do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST).*

However, it is worth noting the challenge highlighted by most of the organisations in relation to the **unsustainability of solidarity actions and networking**. Most of the people interviewed emphasised the significant reduction in donations in the year following the pandemic, which coincided with the closure or weakening of several parallel projects and initiatives. The decrease in contributions underlines the limits and weaknesses of community initiatives that rely heavily on external donations and points to the need to build more sustainable strategies,

especially with regard to access to resources which guarantee the paid work of the engaged community.

> *We weren't able to continue with the baskets because it was an emergency partnership. And even though the issue of hunger is still an emergency, the collectives we were able to partner with have come to an end. One issue we have today is the question of food. We're not getting partnerships, for example, to guarantee lunch for the people who are taking part in this course. The course is serving around 50 students who want to prepare for the entrance exam. And so we're struggling" (Rede Litera Sampa).*

3.3. Governmental initiatives

Despite the predominant discourse of state omission during the pandemic exacerbated by the denialist stance of the federal government, a series of initiatives by the public authorities, at various government levels, were implemented to tackle the crisis. Institutionally, many states and municipalities created or strengthened specific departments to combat food insecurity, especially in the education and social assistance sectors. However, interviewees revealed the crucial importance of mobilising civil society to put pressure on public authorities to guarantee the necessary institutional support. This engagement not only strengthened food and nutrition security policies, but also demonstrated that community action is fundamental to creating sustainable solutions in response to crises. The example of the MTST's Solidarity Kitchens, which have evolved into a public policy, illustrates how the pandemic catalysed discussions about integrating the work of reproducing life and the domestic economy into public services, demonstrating progress in valuing and institutionalising these essential activities for social well-being.

> *Recently, the community garden also got a project from the town hall. They're paying the salary of the person who lives in the occupation and used to look after the garden, watering it, taking out what's no longer there. He already harvests, leaves it at the gate for the families to pick up. So today we've received a notice that they're paying the salary of this worker. Can you imagine how wonderful that is? He works and gets paid properly. So we're looking for partnerships to guarantee daily bread for everyone (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro – MSTC).*
>
> *Part of the baskets we were receiving came from the Cidade Solidária program, created by the City Hall. This was a very nice thing, but this initiative wasn't something that came from the government. I think it came from these other sectors of civil society, from which there was this demand, there was this dialog, in order to strengthen relationships and create other formats (Instituto Fazendinhando).*

The **Cidade Solidária Program** was created in the municipality of São Paulo in response to the challenges of food and nutritional insecurity, especially during the pandemic. According to an interview with a representative of the program, the distribution of basic food baskets and lunch boxes was initially performed in a standardised way, which did not take into account the particularities of each beneficiary. Recognising that emergency solutions were not enough, the Municipal Secretariat for Human Rights and Citizenship developed a more comprehensive policy, with the aim of providing more effective assistance to vulnerable populations.

The program began with the distribution of basic food baskets through civil society organisations, but faced logistical and control difficulties to ensure that the food truly reached those in need. Data from the interview indicated that the pandemic accelerated the creation of an emergency model based on an administrative act issued to officially recognize a severe crisis that compromises the public administration's response capacity (named decree of public calamity). Such measures allowed for rapid action, but also exposed limitations in the organisation and accountability of the organisations involved. These difficulties led to the need for more centralised and efficient management. Thus, the Municipal Secretariat for Human Rights and Citizenship began collaborating with the Municipal Secretariat for Innovation and Technology to improve the distribution and management of the programme using the official service channel of the São Paulo City Hall (called Portal 156) to register and organise partner associations.

Recognising that the pandemic would not be a short-lived emergency, the program was structured to be continuous and sustainable. In addition to the distribution of basic food baskets, the *Rei Cozinha Cidadã* project was implemented. It offered packed lunches and served various communities and homeless people. New initiatives were created, such as the Kitchen School Network and the Solidarity Warehouse, which aimed at strengthening local infrastructure and generate employment by training and hiring staff. These initiatives not only expanded food distribution capacity, but also promoted community autonomy by integrating partnerships with small businesses and offering training in food services and urban agriculture.

According to the *Cidade Solidária* Program Information Panel, more than 9.8 million food baskets were distributed since its implementation, with more than 1.1 million in 2024 alone. In addition to providing food, the program sought to strengthen the social support network, ensuring that initiatives continue to meet the needs of the population even after the end of the pandemic emergency. However, the dialogue with the organisations revealed a series of criticisms that need to be considered in order to improve it.

Interviewees revealed how the context of the **dismantling of public policies**, combined with the political crisis, led to a significant disorganisation of flows and a lack of transparency about the resources allocated to food, exacerbating the vulnerability of professionals on the front

line. Educators and other civil servants who already dealt directly with families in need were disproportionately affected, as they took on increasing responsibility without proper support and clarity about the available resources and distribution criteria. This scenario of precarious relationships and weakened public policies not only compromised the effectiveness of initiatives to combat hunger, but also increased the workload on professionals, who faced an increasingly adverse and challenging situation in meeting the needs of the community.

The testimonies therefore point out that considering the serious situation of food insecurity in which young people and their families live, solutions for dealing with adversity included adopting sustainable and integrated income distribution policies, aimed at jointly promoting social protection, especially in emergency contexts. This is fundamental, since although solidarity practices were essential at the most critical moment of the pandemic, they could not be sustained over time. In addition, the autonomy of families in purchasing food must be accompanied by greater investment in policies to promote nutritional health, establishing price controls on food and regulating the sale and distribution of foods with low nutritional value.

With regard to the distribution of basic food baskets, it was very difficult. They arrived at the school in a much smaller quantity than the number of students, less than a third of the school. There was already a list from the regional directorate of who we should deliver the basket to. And we would ask, "What is the criterion for this person to receive the basket and the other not?" And then the education sector would say that it was social assistance that made the list. Then the person arrived at CRAS and they said "You have to ask the school". It was a game of push and shove that made it very difficult for us, who were on the front line, distributing. This aggravated the distance between the school and the student's family, because the person gets angry (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

The city implemented a card with a monthly sum to contribute to food. In 2020, which was the year of the municipal election, the card was implemented only for some students who had a record, received a family grant or something like that. In the second semester, in October or so, with the election being in November, it became universal for everyone. In the week of the election, 200 cards arrived here for us to hand out to the community (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).

The money from the CCA that was earmarked for food was the same money they bought in basic food baskets for us to distribute to families. Everything that came in as a donation we put into the project, into UNAS. Then a family asked us for help and when we went to visit, they were cooking over wood. Then, you know, a movie plays in your head, of everything that used to happen, of how we fought to have these public policies within the community, within the favelas, and you see them going backwards (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA)

4 Impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's access to play and leisure in vulnerable territories and related adaptations

4.1. The absence of play and leisure from the public policy agenda

Playing is recognised as a right by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) in the Brazilian Constitution. However, access to leisure is unequal in the country. There is a general **lack of access to leisure spaces in low-income neighbourhoods**, since investment in leisure facilities is concentrated in central tourist areas and those with higher incomes (Andrade et al., 2021). Access to such facilities for those living in peripheral areas is also a challenge due to precarious urban mobility, including high public transport fares, frequency and travel time (Pellanda; Frossard, 2022). Playing in deprived and low-income neighbourhoods mainly takes place in the street, in schools and in nurseries (usually in playgrounds), as these neighbourhoods predominantly lack spaces for children and young people to have fun. In this context, access to play and leisure during the Covid-19 pandemic was even more restricted in these areas.

> *Incredibly, children don't have much leisure time in the community. It's always just a little square with a court" (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).*
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> *There are no public facilities in Jardim Colombo, there's just a soccer field, which is a private initiative. Because of this precariousness, this lack of public facilities, the absence of green areas, the young people had no option but to take part in a dance, something like that. In fact, the only court in Jardim Colombo was closed (Instituto Fazendinhando).*

The city is completely privatised. Those who have leisure time are those who have money. Even in a public park, it costs money to go: there's the transportation to get there, there's the food, which is expensive, there's a series of excluding factors so that the peripheral population doesn't enter these places, even when they're close by. For example, there's Shopping São Caetano very close by. It's very rare to see a boy from Heliópolis inside Shopping São Caetano, because there's a whole cultural issue, a question of prejudice, of police violence. Access, which is seen as leisure, is actually a place of violence. The street is still not a street. The streets of Heliópolis are not possible for children. There are too many cars, not enough space, they can't play. They find their own way, they climb up on the slab. I have to repair the school roof every week, because they go up there every weekend to fly kites (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Historically, in order to make up for the lack of spaces and initiatives through public policies, many **community initiatives for access to leisure** were launched with the support of local organisations involved in social projects. These activities were related to the construction of open spaces designed for play, such as parks and squares, but also events that involved different local potentialities.

We understand what demands the area has and we build projects together with the residents. One of these projects is the Pantaneira Festival, which takes place once a year and works to enhance local culture. We bring together artists from the area, call the women who sell products and food in the region, close the street and set up a mini stage for the artists to perform. In the past, we inaugurated a naturalised park inside Jardim Helena Park, which is a park built with elements of nature, tree trunks, stones, leaves, you know? So it's also a leisure space that was built inside Jardim Helena Park, which is already a very large park and which the community is really taking ownership of, right? (Espaço Alana).

Every year we have a Culture Festival, an agenda with cultural, socio-environmental, recreational and artistic activities for the children at Fazendinha, which somehow enhances the space (Instituto Fazendinhando).

Ensuring access to play for children from working class families, especially in open, green and safe spaces, is strongly linked to school and education. The testimonies revealed the **nexus between play and education** in highlighting the importance of schools as multifaceted hubs of support for young people. For example, physical education class was repeatedly mentioned as crucial to the well-being of pupils, especially the younger ones, who value it because it offers a

space for freedom and playfulness in the midst of a school routine full of rules. The **school's role** as the main leisure and socialising space for many young people was also highlighted, especially given the centrality that the school space occupies in their daily lives. In addition, the school acts as a mediator for cultural experiences outside the neighbourhood, broadening young people's access to important cultural spaces.

> *There's a culture at school where students really enjoy PE class. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's a very well taught class, that the teacher is a wonderful teacher of everything. But it's that class where the students leave the classroom, go onto the court, move around more freely and "play", play soccer, or do something else, play something else. It's that more playful moment. If the PE teacher is absent, the students almost revolt. "Oh no, let's go to the court?" (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).*
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> *There are friends of mine whose only leisure time was at school, because their mothers and fathers wouldn't let them go out. At school, I think your first interactions with people happen, your friendships, food, everything starts at school, you know? I missed that at school. I only have friends who are from school and I don't see them outside of school (Fala Jovem).*
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> *We played a game with the students and, before we started, we asked them "What do you know about the city of São Paulo?". And they say, "Oh, I've been to the Portuguese Language Museum, Ibirapuera Park, the Pinacoteca". "How did you get to know them?". "Because the school took me". Most of the students have a leisure experience beyond the neighbourhood, because the school takes them. Look at the role of the school, right? It ends up being this place, this wider socialisation agency that allows them to get to know other places. So you can imagine what it was like in the context of the pandemic. Everyone's leisure time was affected (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).*

Some previous **government policies**, such as the Comprehensive Education policy and the More Education Program (2007-2016), proposed extending the school day for students by carrying out activities at school and in the surrounding areas; these were recognised as learning territories (Lecler; Moll, 2012). This program included investments in restructuring school sites, but was discontinued in 2016. Recent data shows that around 80% of Brazil's 40 million students only spent 4 hours at school in 2023 (Instituto Natura, 2023), resulting in very limited opportunities to play safely.

There have been very few initiatives to promote and encourage play and leisure since 2016, which has included very limited investment in play equipment in schools. A survey by the Instituto Alana (2020) in 2020 found that only 40% of pre-school buildings have playgrounds, 33%

have open playgrounds and 24% have green areas. Among the schools that underwent recent renovations, 73.4% invested in renovating classrooms, while 26.6% focused on sports courts (Brasil, 2022). This confirms that leisure has not been a priority in recent policies, further affecting children and young people living in deprived environments.

As a result of the closure of school buildings, play and leisure activities were therefore significantly and further impacted during the pandemic. During the so-called red phase, the period with the highest Covid-19 transmission levels, many Brazilian cities closed public spaces, such as parks, to contain the crowds. Squares were fenced off and walled off. Some states and municipalities also adopted curfews as a measure to contain the movement of people (Bertoni, 2021). The need for social isolation as a defence against the virus drastically affected the daily lives of many children and young people (Silva et al., 2022a).

The experience of schools in marginalised communities revealed the need for public policies that support the flexibility of educational institutions to keep these spaces accessible, even in the face of administrative and structural challenges. Therefore, by reinforcing the relevance of these spaces for leisure, the pandemic highlighted the need for community policies and initiatives that integrate leisure and culture with education.

When I got there, it was a school full of railings, but all crumpled up. "Guys, why is there a railing here?", "Because people jump", "Oh, but they won't stop jumping because there's a railing. Let's tear it down!". My effort during this period has been to open up, take down the fence, take down the gate, and I'm leaving the school playground open at weekends, which is difficult, because I get there on a Monday and the playground looks awful. The PE teacher has a lesson at 7am and the cleaning lady arrives at 6.30am and can't manage. So there are a series of conflicts that arise from trying to open the school. We've been talking to the neighbours, but it's something that takes time (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

So how do we work on this lack of leisure spaces? By transforming this issue into an educational neighbourhood. Shall we talk about leisure? Do you have the right to leisure? Who guarantees you this right? If this right isn't effective, who can we demand it from? (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).

4.2. Adaptation during the pandemic and transgression strategies

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions on social interaction affected children and young people, and the Internet became the main vehicle for communication and so-

ciability, with increased use also for leisure activities (Rodrigues; Santos., 2020). Social isolation culminated in greater consumption of apps and games among children and adolescents (Bússola, 2021). Faced with confinement, children expressed a desire to be in open and public spaces of collective use, such as squares, parks and shopping malls, while they also expressed signs of anguish, irritation or boredom (Silva et al., 2022b). They emphasised the need to be able to move around, whether inside the house (such as the yard, terrace or balcony) or outside (such as a sports court, building entrance, street or square). Interviews revealed that restricting movement exacerbated the difficulties faced by children and young people in the **absence of adequate structures** to guarantee leisure activities and well-being on the outskirts of large cities.

It wasn't right for the children to stay at home. Even the only court in Jardim Colombo was closed. They had to go back indoors, and when they couldn't, the place they stayed was on the streets, in the alleys, outside (Instituto Fazendinhando).

I think it was difficult for the children. We always leave a very open space for them at the CCA to play, run around, have fun, to be children. They didn't have this assistance at home. So it was one room for four people. Staying with that person all day ends up creating friction. The family didn't have the money to give the child an activity, they didn't have a toy, they didn't have anyone to leave the child with when they went to work. So the child was left alone at home all day (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).

There are different experiences, from what they tell us. There was one young man who was really locked up at home for a year and a half, without going out. Sometimes his mother would go out to get some money, but he himself would be locked in his room. Sometimes with an internet connection, sometimes not. I think there's a large group who experienced this, the rest were living normally. They stayed out, went to visit their friends, had a social life in the community, but didn't go to school, because the school was closed. There was a large group of people who left the community, people who said, "Since I'm not working, I don't have the money to pay the rent, I'm going to live there with my cousin and send my son to Minas at his grandmother's". A lot of people went to other states (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Here in the occupation, as it's an open space, they can play. Of course, as much as possible. It wasn't the same as before, because various activities were suspended. But it was possible for them not to be so isolated indoors (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro – MSTC).

Social isolation was not felt in the same way by all the children and young people. Issues of overcrowding, lack of backyards and individual spaces inside homes or their inadequacy in peripheral communities (Tebet; Abramowicz; Lopes, 2021) led to the constant presence of children and

young people on the streets and in public spaces. This is also justified since culturally, the boundaries between public space (i.e. the street) and private space (i.e. the home) in the most underserved territories in terms of urban infrastructure do not manifest in the same way as in middle- and high-income neighbourhoods, where outdoor public spaces can function as sociable spaces.

Even so, the use of public space for play activities in Brazilian *favelas* were replaced by space inside the house or in the backyard (Locomotiva; Data Favela, 2021), noting the very small size of the latter. In addition, civil society initiatives that were already working with children and young people in these areas sought to adapt to the restriction on movement by creating activities in the virtual model and carried out actions such as distributing play kits with educational materials for families to use (Mayer et al., 2021).

Many of the **social and cultural projects** that were already working in these territories developed activities that could offer a more playful dimension in the pandemic context, especially for children, while respecting social distancing guidelines. For example, book kits were distributed and reading activities were adapted to an online format, allowing people from different locations to take part. In addition, kits of manual activities and recyclable toys were created to help children entertain themselves at home due to the lack of access to quality materials and internet. These kits included materials needed for the activities, ensuring that children could participate and be entertained even with limited resources. These initiatives were also a recognition of the importance of maintaining the bond with the children and families served by the projects.

We also made some book kits, with the books that are usually distributed by Itaú, in the Read to a Child program. We thought that this kit would take into account the reading mediations that we had stopped doing, which are in person at schools. We did a lot of online slams, with cash prizes. And it was something that made it possible for people from other states and countries to take part in too (Rede Litera Sampa).

We always asked questions related to mental health, but also to play. We created recyclable games, with what they had at home: lids, bottles, paper. And we also gave this family a subsidy when they went to collect the food parcels they made. We got a lot of feedback from the children, who would come up and say "I did the activity". In some way, the toys helped the children at home to distract themselves (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).

We used to draw up an activity for each week, and send the children the ready-made kit. If in week 1 we're going to make a trolley out of a PET bottle, then we'll send them the PET bottle, the scissors, the glue, and then they'll make the trolley, because they'll have all the materials. And then we'd ask them to take a photo, make a video and send it to us via Whatsapp. Whoever could do it, whoever couldn't, that's fine" (Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento – CPCD).

These collective spaces, which offer the strengthening of community ties through cultural workshops, were the ones that provided these adolescents and young people with an exchange and a welcoming care at that moment. So the community centre itself, a partner of CEDECA, which was closed for almost a year during the pandemic, did all the preparation for the delivery of educational materials. We ran workshops on recyclable toys and instruments with very few children and very divided schedules. There were five children, we placed the mat two meters away from each other, everyone wore a mask, the material came in a bag, and each child only handled their own material. Snacks weren't provided there, they were in bags for them to take home and eat. So we took great care and preparation to create these spaces for children and teenagers to attend, even if only once or twice a week. So these details were thought out very carefully, with a lot of responsibility (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).

Many community-based projects in *favelas* and other urban communities aim to engage citizens through music and cultural dimensions. *Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis* was conceived by a young musician from the *favela* who had moved there with his mother after they escaped a conflict situation in another neighbourhood: "I felt Paraisópolis like a mother," he said. The idea came from his life-changing experience of participating in social projects in the community, which allowed him to experience different opportunities abroad. His testimony shows this desire to promote transformative educational experiences for other young people in similar situations and how this gave him a sense of purpose and empowerment: "I feel that I am the protagonist of my own story, that I am doing what I wanted to do." In response to the massacre of the police operation at a ***baile funk*** in Paraisópolis that left nine young people dead, he finally started his own cultural project in 2019. Despite the frustration of the interruption of face-to-face activities and the challenges of dealing with social isolation, he pointed out that the project played a key role in easing the young people back into their daily routines after the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted, seeking to provide relaxation and relieve stress and anxiety. When, upon their return, the young man realised that everyone was more psychologically vulnerable, his project aimed to provide a calmer and lighter approach, with longer breaks and time to talk about other issues.

The importance of cultural projects during and after the pandemic in supporting young people and mental health was also demonstrated by the *Geração Portela* project. This organisation is run by the consulate of the Rio de Janeiro samba school and aims to help young people strengthen the memory of African music in Brazil. Online meetings during the pandemic brought families closer to the project and many parents have pointed out that these meetings have helped young people stay connected with each other. One of the project's educators said that young people developed greater empathy and concern for the problems of others. At the same time,

young people struggled with shyness and low self-esteem after the lockdown period. This is in line with a study by Samji et al. (2022) which considered that social capital was an important mechanism for improving mental health especially for women, young people and the low-income population. They argued that the greater the support and insertion of the subjects in a network of trust were, the less fear and stress they felt.

Another important strategy for socialising and having fun in the context of social isolation was engaging in community action. Becoming part of a collective in favour of practices to combat Covid-19 was also a way of being part of something and moving a daily life often dominated by idleness or the lack of leisure alternatives.

> *I think it's also a reason for wanting to take part when they say: "Oh, I'm going to stay out, because I won't have to go and stay, I'll have to put up with certain things at home". But it was more in that sense, because I think that if there were some spaces, other leisure alternatives. But, really, as there was absolutely nothing, it was complicated. Sometimes we'd create small groups and try to have fun in our own way. Everyone together eating a pizza, watching a movie. So the leisure part was more geared towards that, but it wasn't related to a public space or a green area, it was more internal activities, things between us, that we tried to do, to somehow also take our minds off everything that was happening, to make it a little lighter (Instituto Fazendinhando).*

In the absence of leisure alternatives during the pandemic, many young people turned to the **intensive use of digital devices**, such as cell phones and tablets, for entertainment and socialising, with an increase in consuming games and online content, such as streaming platforms. From an adult perspective, the early engagement of children and young people in social networks was both a consequence and a reason for worsening disinterest in education. "Cell phone addiction", highlighted by many of the adults, was perceived by one of the people interviewed as a 'sequel to Covid-19', something that also appears to be related to greater violence in the school environment.

> *I remember it was at the height of these dances on platforms like Tik Tok and Kawai. So the teachers, both street dance and ballet, would record the choreographies the children had to do and set them challenges (Uneafro).*
>
> *Many young people began to rely on mobile games and the internet. The boom in live streaming was also huge (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).*

Children would appear in line with their tablets when we went to distribute food parcels. They were playing, using the internet to play games, watch YouTube and do other things. I wouldn't put internet access as a problem, I'd put it down to leisure, that's for sure. What were many children and teenagers doing to distract themselves? It was the cell phone, the tablet. It was another way they found to occupy their minds. They were consuming content from the internet, consuming a lot of fake news, consuming, in short, everything that was accessible on the internet (Instituto Fazendinhando).

They became addicted to their cell phones, because they couldn't go out, they couldn't go to school, they couldn't go to the playground, they couldn't go anywhere, they had no contact with their friends. What did they do? They got into an addiction that they still haven't stopped. Their father warns them, their mother warns them, their grandmother warns them, but they still have this Covid after-effect (Projeto das Cozinhas Solidárias do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST).

They didn't use the tablets to study, they used them for other things, they downloaded the game. Young people and children had more classes only on their cell phones during this period. The face-to-face classes sometimes took them away from the device, because they had direct contact with the teacher, with the other students, even to play. Young people don't just practice one thing. When you give them a tool like this, they'll dig in. I don't know if all this that's happening today with these young people isn't caused by this pandemic disaster, because they've had more time on their cell phones and computers (Associação de Moradores do Jardim Pantanal – AMOJAP).

I think there's a spectacularisation of violence that comes a lot from these teenagers who are immersed in this deep internet that we don't really know, in Instagram groups, TikTok, WhatsApp. There's a culture forming there that is very difficult to dismantle, because now everyone has a tablet, a cell phone. If back then we had the challenge of people not having a connection, now somehow they do, but they're using it in a way that isn't beneficial (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

Although the intensive use of screens was an element that generally permeated the experience of young people during the pandemic, groups living in peripheral areas also sought other transgression strategies as a means of leisure. These movements, which also constituted resistance movements, must be seen in the light of **intersectionalities**, since the experience of these individuals was crossed by social markers such as class, gender and race.

When we think about this peripheral context, we need to understand and not be hypocritical. Like, a very small house, lots of things going on, open violence happening. One of the strategies for surviving this were meeting spaces that weren't legalised and that started to happen. People got together a lot to party, to meet up. Children started playing out in the street a lot more. These were strategies to survive mentally, to avoid the social death that I think happened, in addition to the physical deaths. These clandestine places of entertainment were also very important – very dangerous – but very important for people to be able to take a little care of their mental health (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).

Children, even in such adverse conditions as the pandemic, didn't stop playing, they didn't stop relating to the territories, to their homes. We know that there's a very important class response here, because many families who can afford it moved in with their grandparents or relatives, or moved to areas with backyards and open spaces (Instituto Alana).

The young people didn't meet anywhere, they couldn't go outside. If they met in a park that was closed off from the street, for example, they would be beaten up. There's a story about a friend of mine who, bro, was at home and decided to exercise because, like, he was getting sedentary, you know? He's black. He went for a run in the street and the policeman stopped him and sent him home with a fine because he was running without a mask (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).

Thus, in addition to the lack of leisure spaces in the peripheral territories of Brazil's big cities, police repression was also prevalent in these spaces. In the context of the pandemic, **peripheral and Black culture** continued to be a form of resistance to the challenges of reproducing life. The interviews pointed to ***slam***, the maintenance of flows (an informal name for funk dances) and the practice of flying kites by children and young people as strategies for **adaptation through transgression practices**.

I was a very closed person, I didn't like talking, I didn't like anything. And slam was an activity that opened doors. I was able to bring my writings, which seemed to be meaningful only to me, and I realised how meaningful it was to other people who were listening too. And this is a very interesting slam process, because you realise the degrees to which this space gives meaning to these young people. Making this connection between slam and literature: they think their poetry isn't literature yet, but it's already a literary form of printing. So we brought up this issue of the importance of these writings. Today, we know people who took part in slam when they were teenagers and are now doing their academic training, for example (Rede Litera Sampa).

Like, one thing that's very popular is baile funk. Generally, children didn't go to baile funk because, like, they were at school all day and baile funk was at night, you know? The kids didn't have the energy for baile funk or anything. And then, for the first two weeks, all the streets were, like, empty, everyone really stayed at home, the establishments had to be closed. So they ended up having this conflict of, like, not having any leisure activities to do, you know? Like, you couldn't play ball in the street, you couldn't do anything. Children, like, 12 to 14 years old, start going to baile funk more. You can see, like, clearly, that these kids start drinking and going to dances. When we do research, we try to use this harm reduction logic as a counterpart. We've done things at dances like "In exchange for you answering a survey for me, I'll give you a condom, water and a sweet". And then, from the perspective of what? Like, if you're going to the dance to have sex, you'll at least have a condom. Whether you're going to use it or not is another story. You're going to drink water, so the more hydrated your body is, the less alcohol you'll drink, because you'll feel less thirsty and the less the alcohol will affect your body. The same goes for sugar. And there's this ballad we used to do, which was a non-alcoholic ballad. Where the kids would come and, like, have fun. And all without alcohol, you know? And then we'd have various attractions at the ball, costume games, who could dance the best (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).

Normally, here in the neighbourhood, kite time is school vacation time. So July and December are kite time. It's been like that ever since we were kids. But 2020 was the year of the kite, because the students were kind of out of school, they weren't going to school. So I remember that April, May was already kite time. August, September was kite time. And I'm saying this because it's one of the leisure options we have here. It's a cultural thing. So the pandemic affected the kite calendar in the neighbourhood. The students ended up having a bit more downtime, because even if you had online activities, you weren't going to sit in front of a computer all afternoon. So you had some downtime. And kite flying is something you can do in social isolation (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Jardim Pantanal).

However, these transgression movements should not be perceived without the tensions and even **conflicts** they evoked. Especially with regard to *baile funk*, the testimonies pointed to this space as an important opportunity for socialisation and escape for many young people, reflecting a structural lack of public infrastructure and adequate leisure opportunities in the communities. In turn, several testimonies highlighted how younger children were more frequently present in these spaces during the pandemic, which added to the increase in the consumption of alcohol and other substances in the face of the "lack of things to do".

At a time when everyone was badmouthing the Baile Funk, saying, "Dammit, the police have to come in, they have to kill, because everyone who's here is here to use drugs, to steal and everything", we launched a survey that shows that, like, people go to the baile funk to have fun, they go because of a lack of leisure. They go to dance, to relate to other people, to kiss on the mouth and so on, and this shows that, like, the police action is not justifiable (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).

There's a class issue. In our city, leisure is paid for. The people of Heliópolis have very little free public leisure space. The facilities such as CEU Heliópolis remained closed during the pandemic. So there were no facilities there. You have a few soccer fields. You don't have a park. And there's the flow, which is where everyone goes, and which is also another very problematic issue within the community, because it's a place of a lot of violence, in many ways. Children go there from a very young age, I have students aged 10, 11 who already go to the flow. And that involves child labour, sexual abuse, drug addiction, as well as the health of those who live on the street where the stream is located. You have families who haven't slept for years because there's an influx on that street, and who can't sell that house because nobody wants to buy it. They can't leave, they can't fight, because there's a parallel power issue there too, so they're not going to get into trouble with people they can't. And they can't sleep, their children can't sleep. And she can't sleep, her children are living with that violence. So this problem of leisure is very serious, what is meant by leisure there (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

There's a lack of leisure space. I think the thing I hear most about leisure, and that people complain about a lot, is baile funk, which is a big problem here. What do we do? I don't have the money to go out. Here, a 700ml glass of drink is 10, 15 reais. If I go out, it's 40, 50 reais. We talk a lot about this issue of dancing, especially because it increased during the pandemic. The dance has changed location, the way it works has changed and people complain a lot about the noise, but there's nothing to do about it. Young people want to party but there's nowhere to do it" (Fala Jovem).

In the **post-pandemic context**, many community organisations re-evaluated and adapted their services and spaces for the resumption of face-to-face activities with the aim of meeting new demands and offering ongoing support to the most vulnerable families. Along with the reopening of schools and the suspension of social distancing measures, there was a gradual transition from online activities to face-to-face events, reflecting an increase in the population's demand for opportunities for social interaction and the promotion of mental well-being. This phenomenon was particularly relevant considering the difficulties faced by young people in reintegrating into everyday socialisation processes, leading to strengthening community relations and a growing interest in cultural activities, such as workshops and music courses, as strategies

to facilitate this resumption. However, this generation of children and young people developed much of their social interactions during the pandemic, largely mediated by digital devices. Reports of adaptation difficulties are common, not only affecting the spaces, but also the teams and the young people themselves.

> *We're getting organised again, because the demands change over time. Today, we're not taking out loans, but the space is open from Tuesday to Friday. A lot of people say, "Wow, I didn't know this library existed, I saw it open and came to find out about it". And then we explain how it works. There are many other collectives that come to the library to organise activities, and we provide support for the organisation and also take part in these activities. I think that in this return, one thing that has become very strong is this issue of other collectives requesting the space, and then they organise activities very similar to ours, debates, watching a film and then having a discussion, soirees and other scenes as well. This return is very much characterised by these activities organised with the territories (Rede Litera Sampa).*
>
> *Now we're gradually getting back to face-to-face activities. First, we went into the spaces we have in the communities and homes, doing more specific activities, because people were still getting closer little by little, building up courage. Then they started telling us to do things in person, because nobody can stand it anymore. Then the vaccine thing started and we went back, boosting relationships, improving the mental health of those who were there directly in the territory (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).*
>
> *Music is something that, like it or not, is also a form of leisure. After the pandemic, statistically speaking, I think the demand for our music courses increased. Many mothers wanted to sign up, realising that their children were very anxious at home, or only on their cell phones, and that this was a big problem (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).*

4.3. Impact of the pandemic on children's and young people's perception of mental health

Although this study does not focus on mental health issues, dialogues with organisations repeatedly highlighted the perception that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on this dimension for young people and their communities. The interviews partly attributed this context to the perception of increased **domestic and sexual violence** during the pandemic, exacerbated by confinement and unemployment, leaving many victims exposed to such violence without adequate support. The emotional burden and lack of resources to address the needs of

children and young people were raised by different organisations, revealing a fragile protection system and the need for more effective interventions. In this context, the influence of social media in normalising violence among young people was also mentioned, as well as the difficulty in deconstructing this culture as a challenge in combating violence in contemporary society.

> *I believe that all the layers leading to violence became much clearer during the pandemic. Violence arises from an unmet need (Centro de Excelência em Primeira Infância – CEPI).*
>
> *The issue of domestic violence also came up during the distribution of food baskets. There were several houses where we entered, and at times, women would hide to avoid showing their faces (Espaço Alana).*
>
> *I felt that violence increased significantly during the pandemic due to these relationships. What I see is that an escape for young people used to be the support of a friend, sometimes sleeping over at a friend's house, finding a way to get out of the house (Instituto Fazendinhando).*
>
> *We received many cases of children who suffered violence and sexual abuse during this period because they were alone at home, not in school, unsupervised. Many reports involved children who faced violations by neighbours, close relatives, and others living in the same neighbourhood (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente – CEDECA).*
>
> *There were multiple cases at school of girls who were sexually assaulted, and I reported them to the Child Protective Council, the Specialised Social Assistance Reference Centre (CREAS), and all the legal institutions available. But they never get called for support. So, you have a girl suffering from depression, with anxiety crises, and still being abused; still trapped in that violent context. The abuser often hasn't even been removed, and you can't get assistance for her. This also affects the school staff, the administration, and everyone involved. The sense of helplessness makes us sick, too (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).*

The interviews highlighted **support strategies** aimed at creating a safe environment where young people and families felt comfortable reporting abuse and violence, emphasising the need for empathy and a non-judgmental approach. The organisations stressed the need to strengthen reporting channels and train professionals in the protection network to better identify and address rights violations as key actions to address the increase in cases.

> *We work closely with the Child Protective Council, which informed us about the alarming rise in the number of children who were victims of sexual violence. So, what did we do? We set up a working group to develop an awareness campaign to fight this issue. This effort includes various professionals helping us, and it is a direct consequence of the pandemic (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).*

Young people need to trust us enough to open up about issues like 'I am experiencing physical abuse or sexual violence,' 'I am starving,' or 'I don't have sanitary pads or diapers.' And how do we handle this? Without judgment. Because sometimes we receive stories that make us angry. 'How can this be happening to you?' But we can't say that. So how do we support them while also guiding them toward escaping these abusive situations? We try to bring them into safe spaces and direct them to support services (Pró Saber).

Our main concern as coordinators here is strengthening the reporting channels and raising awareness about rights violations and violence. We need to create a clearer picture of reality and align our future actions accordingly (Coordenadoria de Políticas para a Criança e o Adolescente da Prefeitura de São Paulo).

We have a partnership with Vanen, a project called 'Violence Does Not Enter Here.' We work on social vulnerability related to all types of violence: physical, psychological, verbal, and domestic. In this project, we help children identify when they are experiencing violence. There were times when I even climbed onto a truck to speak about domestic violence against women because cases here increased as well (Centro da Criança e do Adolescente – CCA).

The interviews revealed a significant increase in reports of **mental distress** among children and young people during and after the pandemic, and not only related to cases of domestic violence, but also to the effects of social isolation. According to the organisations interviewed, the lack of activities and interaction with peers, combined with material survival challenges amid crisis and precarious conditions, led to worsening behaviours such as shyness, withdrawal, and aggression, raising collective concerns about reintegrating young people into social life.

Today, young people tell us how their mental health has worsened. Girls in particular open up more about this; they were stuck at home, taking care of younger siblings, cooking, cleaning, and unable to go out. They had no activities, no motivation to do anything different. They had no access to anything, their lives just stopped, and they were locked inside their homes. When restrictions eased and mask mandates ended, I had many teenagers who refused to take off their masks because they were embarrassed about their teeth or their appearance. 'Everyone met me wearing a mask, they'll laugh at me.' Imagine a child who was in fourth grade when the pandemic started and suddenly returns in sixth grade, barely literate, without connections to classmates, going through puberty. It's overwhelming (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis).

It's like when floods happen, families' homes are submerged, and even after the water recedes, the damage is done. After the pandemic, I saw that children and adolescents we were working with had suffered severe mental health consequences. It got much worse (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).

We started receiving many mental health-related cases, especially young people who were becoming excessively idle and destructive. So, we focused on emotional literacy to address this, not only working on the body, but also on the mind and emotional connections. We are now incorporating comprehensive care: providing food, physical health guidance, prevention strategies, and also focusing on mental health, emotional intelligence, and spiritual well-being (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).

I noticed a drastic psychological shift in students. Many returned more withdrawn, interacting less. This was one of the biggest challenges we faced in the project, as many came back with a shyness they didn't have before. I believe this is because they were isolated for so long. Parents even told me that if it weren't for the project's classes, their children would be much worse off because they were at least able to distract themselves with music lessons at home (Geração Portela).

When someone loses their means of survival, they also get sick. I saw many young people and their parents fall into depression, suffer panic attacks, and struggle with extreme need. Mental health in the periphery was severely affected. In fact, people here started talking about mental health much more during the pandemic (Rede Ubuntu).

Many organisations mobilised to address mental distress among children and young people, developing new support initiatives focused on **active listening**. Some of these noteworthy efforts included partnerships with universities providing psychological services in communities, promoting outdoor play, memory-related projects, and creating discussion spaces and dialogue circles. The collected testimonies illustrated how diverse strategies were adopted by community organisations to promote emotional well-being and strengthen social bonds.

What we did was to establish partnerships with universities, which was the only real breath of hope we've had at this moment. We managed to build strong connections with UFABC, PUC, and USP. In this sense, we have been able to provide support for some girls, for example, through PUC, whose social psychology team visits once a week to offer assistance (Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental – EMEF, Heliópolis)

We have been reflecting on how we can contribute to the mental health crisis affecting children and young people. Within the Children and Nature program, we believe that outdoor play, the freedom and empowerment children experience when playing outside with their peers in an autonomous and independent way, is a powerful strategy. Of course, it is not the only one; we will need to employ multiple strategies. But we strongly believe this is one approach that can help address this crisis (Instituto Alana).

I noticed that people were more psychologically vulnerable, stressed, and deeply affected for various reasons. So, when we resumed our activities, we had to change some things; our approach had to be a little calmer, with longer breaks so that people could breathe and talk to each other (Instituto Unidos de Paraisópolis).

We had a workshop to discuss memory and also to provide mental health support for those at the Observatory. We realised that working with data and confronting this social reality is very difficult for young people, especially during the pandemic. So, we developed sensitivity to this issue and provided psychological support (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).

We have a centre, which was created specifically to address mental health issues. The centre was established slightly before the pandemic, with a focus on people engaged in social movements. It expanded its role during the pandemic by offering medical follow-ups to monitor people's conditions regarding Covid, as well as psychological support (Uneafro).

5 The protagonism of children and young people in context of crisis

Despite all the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the lives of children and young people living in peripheral territories in Brazil, their invisibility persisted, particularly in public policies. The right to participation, as established by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), was not enough to prevent the State and civil society from failing to create spaces where the voices of children and young people could resonate and drive transformations which met their needs and aspirations.

Dialogue with organisations indicated recent weakening of the few existing structures that supported youth participation, such as student councils and organisations. This was reflected in several testimonies that revealed young people's **discouragement** in engaging in community life, driven by a sense of abandonment, which culminated in the stigma of the so-called "lost generation". Additionally, as discussed previously, mental health emerged as a central concern, underscoring the need for greater support for this group within communities and organisations. These participation spaces could have been strengthened during remote learning to prevent many of the rights violations that occurred.

> *Many people were left alone without knowing how to act or whom to turn to for help. I'm not sure if the right term is "traumatic"; I don't know how much they absorbed, how much they understood, or what the outcome will be (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).*

However, it is essential to highlight the strength of **youth leadership** through actions that resisted this scenario of neglect, silencing, and invisibility. Young people played a crucial role in

local mobilisation in many communities during the pandemic, organising themselves to distribute food, masks, and health information, actively contributing to promote well-being. Their participation not only underscored their capabilities, but also strengthened community bonds and heightened awareness of the importance of solidarity and collective care. This was evident in several testimonies indicating that the pandemic fostered a more empathetic generation, willing to take on significant roles in necessary actions and to lead in addressing their own challenges.

> *I want to highlight the importance of the work carried out by young people in this process. They have enormous energy. When we went out into the streets, even those who were sceptical or resistant would lower their guard when approached by young people, accepting the materials we were distributing and agreeing to wear masks. I believe they played a fundamental role in the community (UNAS Heliópolis e Região).*
>
> *Young people were the ones who mobilised the most during the pandemic, taking the lead in frontline efforts. I think they had this sense of responsibility, thinking, "My grandfather, my grandmother shouldn't be going outside; the risk for them is much higher, but for me, it's lower, so I'll step up, I'll do whatever I can to improve the situation." It was truly beautiful to witness this network being created; this collaboration and structure that emerged among them. And in most cases, it was completely spontaneous (Instituto Fazendinhando).*

This protagonism is linked to the work of community organisations that, even before the public health crisis, recognised the importance of youth agency within their structures and established **formative spaces** to incorporate their demands into projects and initiatives. Various initiatives in the city of São Paulo have been highlighted throughout this work, aiming to include children and young people in decision-making processes related to safety, transformation, and the care of collective spaces, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility toward their communities. This scenario reinforces the strength of youth participation through emerging and strengthened **networks** in vulnerable territories, particularly during times of crisis and state neglect.

> *Parelheiros is a territory with a predominantly young population that actively participates in community actions. These young people are increasingly engaging in political advocacy, expressing sentiments such as, "I want to stay in my community, I want it to be the best place in the world to be born and live, but I need to work for it." They have been mobilising and strengthening other youth, advocating for collective social empowerment and emphasising that personal empowerment is not just for individual success, but also for the broader transformation of their communities (Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos e Apoio Comunitário – IBEAC).*

The young people coming to the Observatório are often very young, some as young as 15. The project has evolved from being solely a research initiative to a program focused on citizen formation. We strive to expose these youths to different realities, much like what happened to us when we first had the opportunity to visit other universities. We began to see a reality completely different from the Heliópolis bubble. And when we realised this, we saw that we could reach further places (Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada).

Fragmented initiatives and an **absence of policies** encouraging youth participation made it difficult to sustain and ensure the effectiveness of many actions and projects. This highlights the need for more effective intergenerational dialogue to strengthen these voices and ensure organised participation. It is important to remember that the limited presence of spaces for youth participation and leadership is often linked to an adult-centric perspective that fails to recognise them as qualified subjects capable of making decisions about the future (Gouvêa et al., 2019). In this context, the construction of an educational project that goes beyond the classroom and aligns with a collective desire to address community needs emerges as a powerful pathway.

There was a significant fragmentation among students, including challenges in understanding how to organise and participate. They greatly needed connections with other networks and organisations to occupy spaces. It was an organic and informal process with difficulties in maintaining continuity over time due to a lack of funding, institutional relationships, and even basic organisational structures for resource mobilisation. Everything was highly voluntary. These were all challenges we identified during the pandemic (Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação).

5.1. Dialogues with the young participants in the study

A series of participatory workshops were conducted with 44 young residents from the communities of Heliópolis and Paraisópolis between June 2023 and November 2024, as well as students from the University of São Paulo. These meetings took place within the respective communities, with support from local organisations such as Pró Saber-SP and Observatório De Olho Na Quebrada (UNAS Heliópolis e Região). Among the 44 participants, aged between 9 and 29 years old, there were 27 girls, 16 boys, and 1 non-binary/transgender individual. In terms of racial identification, 28 participants identified as Black, 14 as White, 1 as Indigenous, and 1 chose not to disclose. Additionally, four young participants reported having disabilities.

These activities aimed to deepen reflections on youth agency, adaptive capacities, and emotional responses to crises, emphasising the value of local knowledge and co-created solutions to address future crises. We present a brief synthesis of these dialogues below, structured around the three central themes of the study, to highlight the generational perspectives on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on society.

Education

I was happy because the school reopened. How could we be happier? (Young resident of Heliópolis).

"You should have learned this before" - this is a phrase that discourages me (Young resident of Heliópolis).

School deceived me about life, it delayed my transition to adulthood (Young resident of Heliópolis).

At my school, at least, teachers teach with complete indifference. If you learn, great. If you don't, great. Either way, you pass. Their salary will be paid regardless of whether you learn or not. That's what they tell us (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

My mother pressured me a lot to study. She would say, "Son, you have to do the homework the teacher assigned". There was a WhatsApp group where the teacher sent assignments for specific deadlines. Then my mother started arguing with me, saying that I had to do the activities because my future was at stake. So, I did them (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

I suffered a lot of bullying at school. The pandemic was a relief. Being alone does me good because I can organise my thoughts (Young resident of Heliópolis).

Everything I had learned, I forgot with online classes. There were things I hadn't studied before. I watched the online classes, but it confused my mind. I paid attention, but I didn't learn. Later, I had to go over everything again and relearn it to succeed (Young resident of Heliópolis).

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the educational trajectories of young Brazilians living in peripheral areas, exacerbating existing challenges and educational inequalities. Many young people reported difficulties adapting to remote learning, facing obstacles such as digital exclusion and a lack of psychological support. Changes in school environments, transitions between educational stages, and social distancing further reduced opportunities for socialisation and weakened already fragile bonds with teachers, affecting students' motivation and academic performance.

The lack of access to educational and technological resources was further aggravated by precarious housing conditions, where many students lacked an appropriate environment for studying. Overall, institutional unpreparedness and insufficient protection for young people in socially vulnerable situations were cited as major obstacles to continuing their education. In this context, the presence or absence of support networks played a crucial role in either safeguarding students or exposing them to additional emotional and academic challenges.

The disruption of in-person learning underscored the importance of schools as spaces of social interaction and support, particularly in communities with limited leisure and food security options. Many young people emphasised that schools fulfilled needs beyond formal education, such as providing meals, reinforcing the link between education and overall well-being. The closure of schools led many students to reassess their aspirations and skills, resulting in changes to their educational and career plans.

Young participants expressed the need for a more inclusive education system that is relevant to their social and economic realities, incorporating practical skills for the labour market. The lack of representation and active participation of young people in school decision-making processes was highlighted as a key issue that needs to be addressed to improve their educational experiences.

Their testimonies underline the urgent need for public policies that provide educational, emotional, and financial support to young people, their families, and communities. They also emphasise the importance of recognising education beyond the school setting, adopting an intersectoral approach that focuses on local action and territorial engagement.

Food

The government must ensure that people do not die of hunger. But they don't. They think they are doing enough by giving families R$400 or R$500. They don't know what these families go through to survive. Some have five or six people living under one roof. They say the aid is sufficient, but it's not (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

I was never someone who helped much. I was a child who received everything handed to me. When the pandemic started, it was a huge shock. Suddenly, I had to help my family. My mother told me, 'I'll get the food basket, and you will deliver it.' I asked her, 'What do I have to take? I don't know how to do this. I don't think I'm ready to help others.' I went, but always with a family member. I was really afraid to leave the house. Now, if another pandemic happens, I already have experience. The fear would still be there, but I think I could help more (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

There is an NGO near my house, literally next door, called G10 Favela. They distributed meals, food baskets, and hygiene kits. You saw a lot of young people helping with the deliveries, carrying food baskets, and making sure everything got to those in need (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

Because I was always someone who went to bed early to wake up early. But during the pandemic, since there were no classes, I relaxed so much that I spent the entire night playing games. I would sleep all day, have lunch at three in the afternoon, and dinner at around ten at night. It was something that wore me out, I had no energy for anything (Young resident of Heliópolis).

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on food security for low-income populations in Brazil. Many young people reported substantial changes in their eating patterns during this period of crisis, facing limitations such as reduced consumption of fresh foods, increased intake of ultra-processed foods, and financial difficulties in maintaining a healthy diet.

Food price inflation and declining household incomes further contributed to replacing more nutritious foods with cheaper, less healthy options. As a result, meat was often substituted with eggs, sausages, and hamburgers, while fruits and vegetables became less frequent on family tables. This phenomenon reflects a pre-existing structural reality that was exacerbated by the health and economic crisis.

Difficulties in accessing food were also worsened by the inability to attend open-air markets, which are considered sources of fresher and more affordable food. Many families became entirely dependent on supermarkets, where prices were higher. Changes in daily routines and schedules further impacted eating habits, with some young people reporting irregular meal times and the development of eating disorders due to anxiety and social isolation.

Although food insecurity was not a new issue in Brazil, the pandemic intensified this challenge, pushing millions into extreme poverty and forcing them to rely on food donations for survival. Young people recognised that social vulnerability and institutional unpreparedness in addressing food insecurity were partially alleviated by mobilised community support networks, including neighbourhood associations, churches, and schools, which distributed food baskets and prepared meals. These support networks played a crucial role in protecting young people and their families from hunger, with many youths voluntarily engaging in food distribution efforts, demonstrating a strong sense of community solidarity.

The suspension of school meal programs, often the primary source of nutrition for many students, highlighted the broader role of schools beyond formal education, reinforcing the connection between education and physical and emotional well-being. The presence of these com-

munity support networks was central to safeguarding young people and their families from hunger. Many young people took an active role in food distribution efforts, further underscoring their commitment to community solidarity.

The testimonies underscore the urgent need for public policies that ensure food security and nutrition, particularly during times of crisis, by promoting access to adequate and healthy food for young people and families in Brazil's peripheral communities. The accounts also emphasise the importance of recognising food as a fundamental right and adopting an intersectoral approach that considers economic, social, and cultural factors in designing actions to combat hunger and promote healthy eating.

Furthermore, it is essential to strengthen income transfer programs such as the ***Bolsa Família*** and ensure that they are adapted to the realities of families facing social vulnerability. At the same time, policies which encourage local food production can serve as effective tools to reduce reliance on ultra-processed foods and promote consumption of fresh and nutritious options.

Play/Leisure

It's really frustrating because I missed the entire process of starting university. I went to only one university party in my entire life. One of my greatest joys was going back to in-person classes. And there's a big irony in this because now I don't even know if I'll be able to afford transportation (Young resident of Heliópolis).

My leisure was depression. I stayed in a foetal position because I mostly lived alone during the pandemic. I really value the people at the Observatory because they helped me on days when I wasn't doing well (Young resident of Heliópolis).

I simply couldn't take it anymore. I even started getting into fights in the streets. Just for some reasons that... well, let's not go into details, but it was like stress, you know? (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

I spent most of my time during the pandemic far away, in the countryside (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

One of my best forms of leisure during the pandemic was playing games. I kept going out to play soccer, but I was afraid something bad would happen (Young resident of Paraisópolis)

Even during the pandemic, I didn't stop going out because I didn't have internet. So, I went to the baile funk parties (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

I played video games to make it my reality, to make new friends since I couldn't do it in person. So, I made virtual friends to escape loneliness (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

We had to schedule our time: I played Free Fire, then on my phone, then Free Fire again, then charged my phone, and played Free Fire again. Some people here got really hooked. I had friends who were seriously addicted, even spending a lot of money on it (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

My cousins forced me to watch this anime. Consequently, I became a K-popper and an otaku (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

Most children lost their childhood because of cell phones. Some people use their phones as a refuge, but unfortunately, children didn't really know how to enjoy their childhood. Technology 'helps' in some ways, but there is content that children shouldn't be exposed to. Phones kind of slow kids down (Young resident of Paraisópolis).

The accounts regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on play and leisure reinforce the limited attention given to this age group, particularly in urban peripheries, and highlight society's negligence toward these rights. Testimonies reveal a deep sense of loss, of both experiences and of the very moments of childhood and adolescence, as young people found themselves restricted from one of the most defining aspects of these life stages. Unsurprisingly, this sense of loss among youth and adolescents was often associated with accounts of psychological distress, typically framed through the lens of medicalisation and with premature adultification resulting from early assumption of responsibilities.

The lack of a coordinated health policy which prolonged the virus spread, and consequently the social restriction period, generally led to various disruptions in friendships, either because there were no conditions to maintain them or because many families relocated during this period. These moves reflected attempts to cope with worsening social vulnerability, often involving migration to lower-cost areas or to relatives' homes. In some cases, children and adolescents even ended up living with other family members, without their parents. In turn, a redefinition of spaces, moments, and relationships simultaneously emerged. For instance, housing, childhood and adolescence itself, and family structures were reinterpreted in new ways.

Another issue that predates the pandemic is the lack of adequate spaces for play and leisure in peripheral areas, often linked to urban inequality. Schools stand out in these contexts as the primary alternative, followed by soccer fields, primarily for boys, and public squares. Since many of these public spaces were closed as a health measure to curb the virus spread, children and young people were even deprived of these limited options. This led to two main consequences: first, leisure was confined to the domestic space, not only resulting in a quantitative and qualitative reduction, but also a shift in its very meaning due to the limitations of housing and the need to share space with other family demands; second, young people sought to circumvent the

restrictions in an attempt to maintain social interactions and physical activity. Reports describe increasing sedentary behaviour and perceived changes in mood and body image.

Finally, a distinct generational identity emerged from these childhood and adolescent experiences during the pandemic. Children and young people identified themselves as "YouTubers," "gamers," "otakus," or "K-poppers" on multiple occasions. This seems to not only be intensified by the growing role of social media in contemporary society, but also because devices such as TVs, computers, video game consoles, and smartphones became even more central in their daily lives as their play and leisure activities were confined to the home. The content and practices mediated through these technologies became an essential part of their identities. Two key connections can be drawn from this: first, the excessive use of screens led to reports of attention difficulties; and second, virtual communities provided young people with a sense of belonging, sometimes replacing the role of their own physical communities.

While perceptions varied across age groups in terms of alternatives, a common trend was the increased use of social media, communication apps, and electronic or virtual games, including multiplayer games as a form of socialisation. However, making play and leisure dependent on internet access created an additional barrier to rights in peripheral communities, either due to limited connectivity, poor infrastructure, or financial constraints preventing families from purchasing electronic devices or mobile data plans. In some cases, for those who did have internet access, leisure even transformed into opportunities for learning or new habits, such as learning how to cook or increasing reading time.

5.1.1. Among masks, abilities, and reflections: a personal account

We present a brief yet comprehensive account written by a young resident of Heliópolis about his experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. This excerpt is a fragment of what was shared by the young participants throughout the study. In Figure 6 we share a ***visual web*** exercise created by the young participant during the research – a tool inspired by the studies of Kraftl et al. (2019). This method employed a visual language to capture young people's individual and subjective representations of urban challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the visual web, we can observe how elements such as capoeira, fear, and the challenges of navigating the city shaped his memories of this experience.

> *The pandemic began when I was around 15 years old. I was in my first year of high school, and I remember having huge expectations about socialising more and going out. I had always struggled with social interactions, and I wanted to change that. Then, everything shut down for 15 days, and the lockdown kept extending.*

I had a family situation from the year before the pandemic. My grandmother had passed away in 2019. Before that, she and my aunt had opened a small shop selling sweets and snacks. After my grandmother's death, I made it my mission to help my aunt with the business, mainly to support her since she was the daughter who had the closest bond with my grandmother. So, my routine for a long time was: attending fragmented online classes until around 11 a.m., but I couldn't grasp much information that way, and to this day, I don't know basic physics; then going down to my aunt's shop, where I would stay until 7 or 8 p.m., delivering tapioca, washing dishes, greasing cake pans, cracking jokes, and trying to cheer her up.

I always wore two masks whenever I went out because I had heard that a single mask blocked 40% of the virus. So, I thought that by wearing two, that would go up to 80%. Add another 40% from the other person's mask, and I wouldn't catch it. Since I was delivering to a hospital, I wore three masks just to be sure. I would ride the bus without touching anything, balancing as if I were surfing. I would use a plastic bag to press the stop button, and then throw the bag in the trash before getting off. My extreme fear came from having chronic bronchitis. I had been hospitalised multiple times due to respiratory issues, so in my head, if I got Covid, I was going to die.

I developed a strong desire to practice capoeira during the pandemic. I was fascinated by the jumps and movements, I thought they were incredible. I had issues with my body; I felt weak and incapable, which affected my self-esteem. It was like my own body was working against me. At that time, I spent long hours inside, lying down, completely sedentary, very thin, with my joints constantly cracking. Then I thought, "Why not try capoeira, even if just through the internet?" The only available space in my house was the rooftop. It was perfect; open, spacious, empty, with a beautiful view of Heliópolis (at least in my opinion). For a long time, when I wasn't working at my aunt's shop, every day at 1 p.m., I would go up to the rooftop, practice some capoeira moves I had learned online, stretch (which stopped my joints from cracking all the time) and soak up the sun. I would breathe deeply. I felt more alive. Back then, I truly believed that capoeira and the sun were my best friends. Later, by continuing to practice, I managed to feel better about my body's abilities.

Looking back, I think it was a period of forced maturity in many ways. It made me reflect on what it means to feel alive while constantly facing the idea of death. During my deliveries, I would pass by the morgue and the emergency room of Heliópolis Hospital. I always saw someone crying over the loss of a loved one. It wasn't just people who died during the pandemic; places, institutions, and everything else seemed to be falling apart. The world felt sick, broken, and helpless. And hope? Hope felt like stepping outside with only a mask on.

(Testimony of a young resident of Heliópolis)

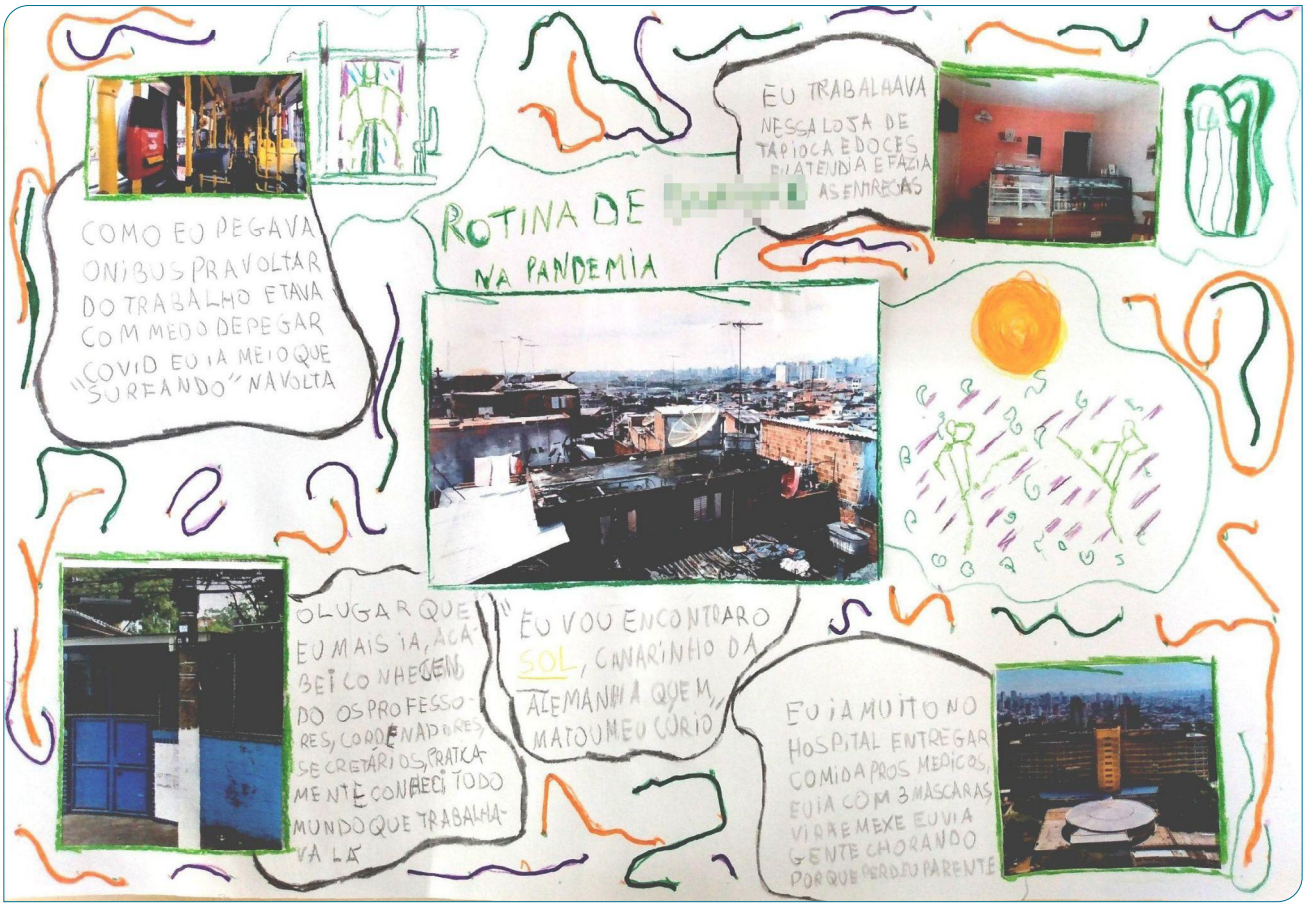

Figure 6 – Visual web from a research participant

Caption: Routine During the Pandemic. Photo 1: Since I was afraid of catching Covid while taking the bus home from work, I kind of "surfed" my way back. Photo 2: I went there so often that I got to know the teachers, coordinators, secretaries - basically, I met everyone who worked there. Photo 3: "I will find the sun, little canary from Germany, who killed my curió?" Photo 4: I used to work at this tapioca and sweets shop, where I served customers and made deliveries. Photo 5: I often went to the hospital to deliver food to doctors. I wore three masks, and every now and then, I saw people crying because they had lost a loved one.

Source: Research archive.

5.2. Intergenerational dialogue between young people and organisations participating in the study

At a workshop held at the School of Public Health of the University of São Paulo in February 2024, young people, community organisations, social movements, and public sector collaborators of the PANEX-Youth project gathered to engage in dialogue and develop recommendations for public authorities and organisations to ensure the rights of young people and their communities in potential crisis contexts, considering the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of the meeting was to contribute to the systematisation of strategies and policies that

support actions for crisis response and recovery in facing possible health and socioeconomic crises (Figure 7).

The discussions highlighted criticism of the **institutional dismantling of the state** during the pandemic, emphasising the lack of coordination among different levels of government, the impact of fiscal austerity policies, and adoption of a hierarchical and non-participatory communication model. Key points among the recommendations for addressing future crises included ensuring the continuity of public policies, adopting an intersectoral work model, promoting digital inclusion, modernising communication channels, and encouraging popular participation in developing and evaluating policies. The pandemic exposed hunger and challenges in providing education as central bottlenecks in multiple crisis scenarios. Therefore, the discussions suggested prioritising public resources for these areas, including income generation policies, labour rights promotion, and student assistance programs. The debate also highlighted shortcomings in the timeliness and bureaucratisation of state responses, recommending territorial listening and greater integration between the public sector, private sector, and civil society as an important path forward.

The **resilience of *favelas*** during the pandemic was emphasised, revealing their ability to adapt and seek internal solutions to challenges. Local mobilisation demonstrated the strength and determination of residents in difficult times, underscoring the importance of knowing the people in the community to address problems more holistically. Social institutions and religious centres played a crucial role at the local level in peripheral areas where state presence was limited, forming partnerships to fill gaps in public policies. Care and empathy were key elements in local action, and community work through solidarity networks proved fundamental for ensuring the effectiveness of communication and crisis response actions. Additionally, innovative entrepreneurship-based projects emerged within communities during the pandemic, highlighting the potential of utilising local resources. This "necessity-driven entrepreneurship" became a reality for many young people in peripheral areas, leading to an increased interest in training programs and support for formalising businesses. Furthermore, the leadership of women in grassroots community movements was evident, with many women seeking financial independence and labour market inclusion.

Combating fake news was also highlighted as a crucial action by community organisations during the pandemic, with strategies such as information curation and collaboration with other institutions and professionals to verify them. Investments in communication channels, such as community radio stations and local media initiatives, were also fundamental in strengthening community self-representation, using social networks to construct counterarguments and challenge external and stereotyped narratives about *favelas*.

Education was raised by the majority of young participants as the most impacted dimension during the pandemic. The discussions pointed to several criticisms of schools and public policies, particularly regarding the difficulties faced by school staff in adapting to remote learning and transitioning back to in-person education, as well as weaknesses in communication and support for families during the pandemic. Young people emphasised the impact of remote learning on mental health, with many students experiencing discouragement and a lack of motivation to learn. This was also associated with a loss of socialisation skills and fear of interacting with others upon returning to in-person classes. Key points among the recommendations included increasing student support while prioritising guidance over excessive demands; developing psychological support tools in schools, such as partnerships with primary healthcare units and strengthening child and youth protection networks; encouraging student organisation to provide mutual support and overcome challenges; promoting digital inclusion by advancing digital literacy and ensuring free internet access, combined with flexible policies that recognise the specific needs of families in need; and not only prioritising education promotion within schools, but also through community organisations, integrating it with other rights.

The issue of **food security** was raised by most representatives of participating organisations as the most critical dimension during the pandemic, given the worsening hunger crisis and the importance of nutrition as an essential element for physical and mental well-being. The food crisis led to changes in dietary patterns for many young people, mainly due to difficulties in accessing certain foods, exacerbated by financial constraints and rising unemployment. The pandemic also disrupted access to school meal programs, a key source of balanced and nutritious meals for children and young people in peripheral areas. Among the recommendations, emphasis was placed on expanding food assistance programs, creating food distribution networks, and supporting local food production initiatives.

The discussions regarding **leisure** highlighted the need to expand recreational spaces beyond schools, ensuring that young people in peripheral communities have access to public spaces and recreational activities in different locations. It was suggested that the concept of leisure be broadened to include other social interaction spaces beyond schools. Additionally, consumption as a form of leisure was recognised as an important source of entertainment in peripheral areas, which should also be encouraged and facilitated. Among the recommendations, it was emphasised that leisure promotion policies should receive greater governmental priority and that more comprehensive policies should be adopted to address the diverse needs of peripheral communities. The importance of leisure time, including within the school environment, was also highlighted.

Finally, the dimension of **mental health**, particularly among children and adolescents, gained prominence during the pandemic. Several factors contributed to challenges in this area,

including interruption of school activities, the lack of recreational spaces in communities, and family conflicts arising from confinement. Therefore, the crucial role of institutional support in promoting youth mental health, collective practices, and specialised individual treatments were highlighted among the recommendations.

Figure 7 – Graphic facilitation of the meeting held at the School of Public Health, University of São Paulo

Source: Research archive. Elaborated by Ingrid Batista Vieira.

Final Considerations

Sometimes we felt choked up and didn't have the opportunity to speak. Through this research project, we started to reflect, to remember, and we had the chance to let it all out. (Young resident of Paraisópolis)

The pandemic was just seen as a disease, a phase. No one ever asked what it was like to stay indoors for a year... It was always about how the pandemic affected the population's routine. But they never asked for our perspective—how we experienced it and how we coped with it. (Young resident of Heliópolis)

The Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil unfolded in a context of public policy dismantling and setbacks in rights, all under a federal administration marked by denialism. Amid multiple crises (health, economic, political, and social), food insecurity quickly became one of the main challenges for many families, exacerbated by the rise in mental health issues among young people. In response to the state's inaction, peripheral and urban communities mobilised to form extensive care and protection networks, ensuring essential responses in the areas of education, food security, and leisure.

The collaboration between organisations already active in these territories and mobilisation of new social actors strengthened local social capital, enabling a more effective collective response to the challenges faced. This capacity for institutional transformation was driven by strategic investments in communication, essential for securing resources, attracting volunteers, combating misinformation and amplifying the impact of actions. Experiences of community self-organisation highlight the power of solidarity and creativity in overcoming crises, demonstrating that resilience is a collective process rooted in local knowledge and practices. In this context, youth leadership, especially in intergenerational initiatives, played an important role in building stronger and more inclusive communities.

The pandemic experience underscored the importance of local knowledge in crisis management, reinforcing the need to incorporate what Lipsky (2019) called "street-level bureaucra-

cy" into public policies, ensuring greater alignment with the diverse realities and specificities of different territories. Thus, some adaptive community practices have managed to expand a few years after the beginning of the pandemic, while others have not been sustained, largely due to the difficulty of maintaining volunteer work for long periods and the drastic reduction in donations. The sustainability of these initiatives remains a challenge, requiring new support and funding models to ensure continued service to the social group of this study. The depletion of resources and overload of volunteers highlight the urgency of more structured strategies to guarantee continuity and effectiveness of these practices.

The closure of schools during the pandemic had a profound impact on the lives of children and young people, reaffirming the central role of public schools as essential spaces for socialisation, relationship-building, and access to public policies and rights (Silva et al., 2022a). Given the challenges generated by the pandemic, particularly a deepening of pre-existing inequalities and the impact on students' mental health, it is essential that educational policies consider active participation by young people. Strengthening relationships between students and teachers, alongside increased community involvement in school decision-making, emerges as a necessary path toward a more inclusive education system that aligns with the needs and potential of local territories.

Crisis preparedness and resilience-building involve strategies which go beyond emergency response, incorporating continuous and structural formative actions focused on care and promoting autonomy. This transformation in the education field is guided by humanistic, intersectional and emancipatory principles, avoiding transitions that reinforce oppressive and militarised models. In this context, the school reaffirms its role as a central space in young people's lives, especially in addressing urban and social crises. Its closure, as occurred during the pandemic, did not only signify a loss of formal learning, but also a disruption of support networks, socialisation spaces, and leisure opportunities. While the growing dependence on technology has enabled educational continuity, it has also introduced challenges that require critical analysis, such as the exacerbation of digital inequalities, gaps in sociability and fragmentation of the educational experience. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure that adopted solutions strengthen participation, equity, and the dignity of affected communities.

The pandemic intensified food insecurity in Brazil, disproportionately affecting children and young people in peripheral areas and revealing a dismantling of public policies, along with an increasing reliance on community solidarity networks. Civil society organisations played a central role in mitigating the impacts of hunger, mobilising donations, distributing food, and implementing innovative strategies such as community gardens and solidarity kitchens, which strengthened local resilience, economy and autonomy. Despite the importance of emergency assistance,

the absence of sustainable and integrated constitutional public policies for social protection, combined with rising food prices and disorganisation in resource distribution, reinforced the urgency of strengthening social protection and ensuring food security in a structured and lasting manner.

The need for social distancing, coupled with the lack of access to play and leisure in the researched territories, reinforced the central role of schools in socialisation and well-being, while also exposing structural inequalities in the distribution of public spaces and urban mobility. Community initiatives sought alternatives from the closure of schools and recreational facilities, adapting cultural projects to virtual formats and distributing play kits, while children and young people resorted to transgressive strategies, such as occupying streets and organising clandestine events to minimise isolation. The intensive use of technology redefined leisure and socialisation forms, but also brought challenges, such as digital dependency, increased exposure to online violence, and educational impacts, making the return to in-person interactions more difficult. Furthermore, worsening of mental distress, intensified by rising domestic violence and the loss of social spaces, mobilised community organisations to create support strategies, advocate for psychological care policies, and promote outdoor activities to mitigate these effects.

The children and young people of this study faced invisibility in public policies and difficulties in accessing participatory spaces during the pandemic, yet they demonstrated resilience by engaging in solidarity actions, such as distributing food, masks, and health information. Despite state neglect and the discouragement generated by this absence, the crisis strengthened collective awareness and youth mobilisation, driving many to assume leadership roles in their communities and advocate for greater participation in decisions affecting their lives. Strengthening community networks and valuing the active participation of children and young people are fundamental to building decision-making spaces and fostering social transformation, ensuring the protection of rights and the full development of this generation.

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