

To cite this article: RANDRIANTSEHENO Miahly, ANDRINAMBININA Djohary and RANDRIANALIJAONA Mahefasoa (2025). POVERTY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: AN ANALYSIS OF MALAGASY CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS FOLLOWING COVID-19, International Journal of Applied Science and Engineering Review (IJASER) 6 (5): 47-59 Article No. 246 Sub Id 337

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## POVERTY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: AN ANALYSIS OF MALAGASY CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS FOLLOWING COVID-19

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52267/IJASER.2025.6506>

### ABSTRACT

The analysis of child poverty is complex, as children are seen as dependent on adults and not actors of their own development. Never less, the relationship between children and development has undergone a major evolution since the adoption of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, prioritizing children's well-being and their voice. The aim of this paper is therefore to contribute to the discussions on the fight against poverty, taking into account the children's rights approach. To this end, a case study of Malagasy children's multidimensional poverty using a children's rights approach will be adopted through an analysis of their perceptions following COVID-19.

**KEYWORDS:** Multidimensional poverty, children's rights, child labor, education, perception, Madagascar.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects throughout the world. All sectors have been affected, including both economic and social ones, to varying degrees, with direct impacts on the population well-being, including children (UNICEF, 2020; p2). In Madagascar, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected respect for the rights of children, who are exposed to various forms of exploitation such as child labor, and to various deprivations affecting their well-being and accentuating

their situation of poverty. In the light of these facts, the fight against child poverty is becoming increasingly important, particularly in terms of achieving Sustainable Development Goals and implementing national policy in favor of children. The debate on poverty between a strictly monetary or unidimensional approach and a multidimensional approach has long been, the subject of growing interest in the research community. This debate is all the more controversial when children become the subject, prompting a different analysis from adults, given the particular needs of children (RoelenK., Gassman F., 2008; p4). As for child poverty, its analysis is complex and difficult. On the one hand, the very definition of a child is the subject of many debates, and differs according to the culture of the country concerned. International organizations adopt the definition of a child set out in the Article 1 of International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen. On the other hand, this definition is contested by authors who define the child in relation to work factors, the end of schooling, the beginning of marriage and engagement, i.e. according to the culture of the country (Boyden J., Levison D., 2000; p28).

With regard to the debate on the dimensionality of poverty, measurements of child poverty are difficult, as they often refer to households and not to children themselves, viewing them as passive agents, non-actors in their own development and dependent on adults (Feeny T., Boyden J., 2004; p68). Nevertheless, the relationship between children and development has undergone a major refoundation and evolution since the adoption of the CRC, placing the well-being and voice of children at the center of analysis and considering them as a subject of rights. The CRC is proving to be a landmark in the fight against child poverty (Nolan A., 2020, p2; Redmond G., 2008, p63). So, in a developing country like Madagascar, where 67.6% of children are multidimensionally poor, (UNICEF, 202, p5), the question of to which extent the child rights approach is relevant to the fight against child poverty, is of great interest.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the contribution of the children's rights approach to the fight against poverty. The link between the two concepts will be explained throughout different measures and approaches to poverty, so that for each measure and indicator, the CRC will be the basis of the analysis. The theoretical framework of the study will then be put forward to better situate the empirical analysis. The latter consists of a case study of Malagasy children through a multidimensional analysis of poverty based on the perception of children in COVID-19.

### **1. Unidimensional poverty approach**

Poverty is defined as the state of a person with monetary and material resources below a threshold considered socially acceptable (Kanbur R., Squires L., 1999 quoted by Feeny T., Boyden J., 2004; p7). The monetary poverty approach consists of analyzing the aspect of individual well-being through income and consumption indicators, most often referring to the household level. In relation to these indicators, it

highlights a single dimension of well-being, i.e. the economic dimension, hence the consideration of a unidimensional analysis of poverty (Roelen K., Gassman F., 2008; p9). In this approach, the identification of the poor is based on a threshold, and the first debates around this approach concerned precisely this threshold of US\$ 2.15 per day defined by the World Bank. Firstly, there is the so-called absolute approach, which refers to an absolute threshold. It consists of identifying the poor and measuring a minimum level of well-being necessary for an individual to subsist, and the level is constant over time (Coulombe H., McKay A., p419). As previously mentioned, the absolute threshold refers to the threshold established in most cases by the World Bank of US\$ 2.15 per day since 2022 at 2017 prices. This absolute threshold is contested, as the cost of living differs in time and space. It is therefore recommended to define this threshold by taking into consideration the context. Then, there is a second, relative approach, which refers to an average standard of living in a society that changes over time.

Relative monetary poverty is thus defined as the state of "any individual living in a household whose standard of living is less than 60% of the median standard" (Duvoux N., Papuchon A., 2019; p88). So, whether it's the absolute or relative approach, the unit of analysis is the household, and ignores children, as it measures the number of children living in poor households rather than children living in poverty. However, in the CRC, children are the subject of rights, and any action taken must consider the interests of the child, including in analyses relating to them. Moreover, organizations working on the problems of child poverty consider multiple facets of child poverty that are not captured by the monetary approach, namely non-market goods such as access to basic social services, which conditions the environment that may or may not be favorable to a child's development (Minujin A., et al., 2006; p483). Moreover, measuring poverty in terms of absolute or relative threshold is inaccurate and irrelevant for assessing children's well-being, because on the one hand, there are non-market channels such as bartering and on the other hand, self-provisioning and the informal sectors where most children are employed, and in which the monetary approach fails to take into account because it only considers the formal sector (Harper C., Marcus R., 1999 quoted by Feeny T., Boyden J., 2004; p7). Consequently, income alone does not capture the various deprivations of children, hence the multidimensional poverty approach.

## 2. Multidimensional poverty approach

The development agendas in force today fully integrate these multiple dimensions of poverty, namely MDG1, which highlights the goal of "eradicating poverty in all its forms".

Initially, this approach was born out of the recognition of the existence of non-monetary aspects in the measurement of poverty. Sen and Rawls noted the reductive nature of monetary poverty (Bisiaux R., 2011, p11). Rawls (1971) advances the theory of primary goods, through the principles of freedom and difference, with indicators of equality, freedom, self-respect, life choice, income and wealth. Everyone

must therefore have the primary goods needed to realize these projects, and poverty is thus defined by the lack of primary goods. Primary goods are considered here as means. Sen (1981), on the other hand, advances the capability approach, seen as the capacity to be or to do, so the poor are seen as those who do not possess these capabilities. These approaches formed the basis of the Human Development Index conceived by the UNDP, by linking the individual to his or her capabilities across three dimensions of development. These are, the education dimension by combining the adult literacy rate and the school enrolment rate, the health dimension assessed in terms of life expectancy at birth, and the economic dimension based on the level of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. Based on this non-monetary consideration of poverty, a case study in Burkina Faso highlighted the following indicators of multidimensional poverty in terms of basic needs: access to public infrastructure, comfort and capital goods, human capital through education, information technology and entertainment, nutrition and living environment (Ouaramé A., et al., 2010, p16). In the same vein, a study by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative drew on the child-specific capability approach with three dimensions of analysis: education, health, standard of living (Alkire S., et al. 2017, quoted in, Nolan A., Pells K., 2020, p120). Thus, when considering children, the lack of essential goods, means and capacity at their disposal, are considered as indicators of multidimensional poverty in their regard.

Poverty can also be understood in terms of the multiple deprivation approach initiated by the work of Townsend (1979), and can also be assimilated to the livelihood and social exclusion approach. For this multiple deprivation approach, the environment in which the individual finds himself can be a source of obstacle in his procurement of essential goods, hence the introduction of social exclusion in his approach. In the case of children, UNICEF collaborated with the Townsend Research Centre in Bristol on a study to estimate child poverty in 2003, which is the origin of the name, the Bristol approach (Minujin A., et al. 2014, p9). It is an approach that focuses on the negative aspect of children's situations, through the assessment of the degree of child deprivation, with the seven dimensions that make it up, and enables child poverty to be measured. These dimensions are closely linked to the violation of children's rights through the indicators that make up each dimension. These dimensions are: food, water, housing, health, sanitation, education and information. Thus, a child is considered poor if he or she is deprived of two or more dimensions. The MODA or Multidimensional Overlapping Deprivation Analysis approach, which is also developed by UNICEF, integrates the same dimensions as the Bristol approach with an additional dimension, which is protection against violence, and also makes it possible to determine the overlap of the different dimensions for children, (UNICEF, 2020, p5) Madagascar carried out a MODA study in 2018 in collaboration with UNICEF and the National Statistics Institute. Note that the different dimensions of these two approaches are found in the articles to be respected of the CRC, the concept of poverty itself is very visible in article 27, namely, the right to an adequate standard of living.

In addition, there are two approaches to monetary and multidimensional poverty: an objective approach and a subjective approach. The objective approach refers to the measurement of poverty through observable indicators, conditions and determinants. This measurement is more or less consensus-based, such as indicators of living conditions and wealth, states of health and the environment; these indicators fall within the physical and material domain of well-being (Martin C., Perron Z., Buzaud J., 2019, p2). In contrast, the subjective approach is a self-assessment of feelings of well-being, happiness and life satisfaction. According to Sen, these are satisfactions in relation to income, basic needs and fulfillment, considered as the perceptions of the individual, hence the difficulty of measuring this approach (Sen A., 1985 quoted by Ouarama A., et Al., 2010, p5). In considering children, Save and Children's mindset take this aspect into account by letting children define poverty themselves. The results differ from country to country: for children in developed countries, being poor means being homeless, not lacking access to education and health; for children in developing countries, on the other hand, being poor means lacking well-being, infrastructure and material goods. There are also children who associate poverty with feelings of insecurity, fear for their future, of seeing their family collapse (Feeny T., Boyden J., 2004, p9). Thus, the subjective approach refers to a holistic measurement of child poverty, while analyzing different dimensions of the latter.

### **3. Case study: Malagasy children's perceptions of COVID-19**

According to the 2018 INSTAT survey, 9.4 million of Madagascar's 14 million children live in multidimensional poverty, and 11.6 million live below the monetary poverty line. In the field of education, one in five children aged 6 to 10 and one in three aged 11 to 14 are not in school; on the other hand, one in two children aged 5 to 17 is already engaged in some kind of work. In relation to these data, even if children have not been directly affected by COVID-19, they suffer greatly from the impacts of this pandemic in various areas. Indeed, the pandemic has had a significant economic impact on households. UNICEF estimates that by 2020, more than two million Malagasy could fall below the poverty line as a result of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. This situation will reduce household consumption and impact on children's well-being and the respect of their rights. This case study highlights Malagasy children's perception of the impact of COVID-19 on their well-being and that of their families.

#### **3.1 Research methodology**

The approach adopted in this article consists in a multidimensional analysis of child poverty, adopting a subjective measure, towards children's perception. The study was carried out using the database of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Economiques pour le Développement (CERED) on the analysis of Malagasy children's perceptions following the COVID-19. Data was collected in four regions of the country (Analamanga, Atsinanana, Matsiatra Ambony, DIANA), including urban, suburban and rural

areas, in which 72 focus groups and 74 individual interviews were carried out. For the focus groups, on the one hand, the sessions were separated for both sexes to ensure effective animation and participation by the children, and on the other hand, two age groups were considered (a group of 10- to 13-year-olds, and a group of 14- to 17-year-olds). For the individual interviews, the children chosen were those whose behaviour and/or responses were a little different from the others, or those with visible disabilities. The data collected is qualitative, based on the children's self- assessment of their well-being before and after periods of lockdown, with reference to the following themes: education, health, family relationships, economic situation and social protection (Randrianalijaona M. et al., 2022). In this case study, a comparative analysis between urban and rural Malagasy environments will be presented using indicators linked to education, more specifically to the reasons for dropping out of school and returning to school after COVID-19, and to child labor. These indicators are indeed relevant. On the one hand, they are part of the multidimensional poverty indicators that have a considerable impact on the formation of human capital, a factor in development. On the other hand, they illustrate cases of violation of children's rights, which makes it easier to highlight the child rights approach in the fight against poverty.

The data processing methodology used is inspired by grounded theory, which consists of two stages: codification and coding (Lebrument N., Robertie C., 2012, p174). Coding consists in processing all the ideas brought out by the children during the focus group sessions, and identifying a concept called a "variable" that brings together the ideas for each thematic category. This phase is also known as conceptualization. The variables identified were then enumerated from the data obtained during the focus group sessions, a step also referred to as axial coding. It enables the variables to be treated quantitatively, while retaining the qualitative spirit of the research. This makes it possible to process and analyze the information that defines the ideas collected in variable form, by going back and forth between the data that emerged (Randrianalijaona M. et al., 2022).

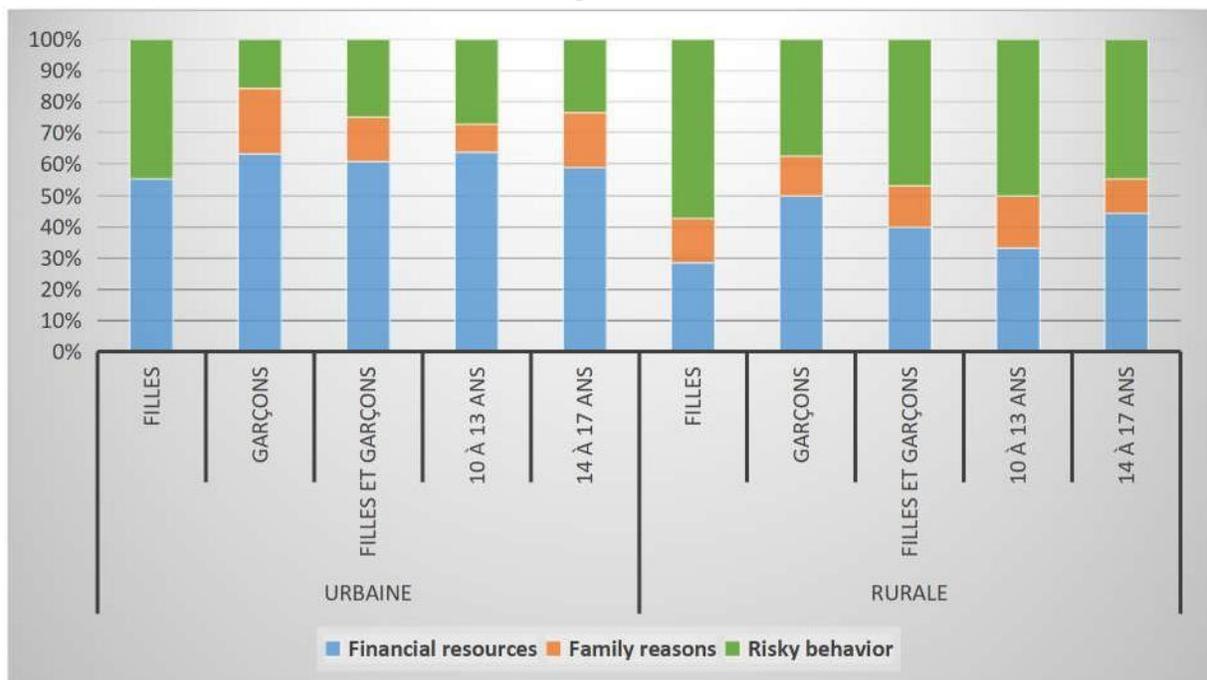
### **3.2 Children's perception of education**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable losses in the field of education, with a drop in upper secondary school attendance from 20.5% in 2018 to 14.5% in 2020, particularly among girls from 22.8% in 2018 to 14.3% in 2020 (UNICEF, 2020, p11). In this case study, this drop in school attendance, seen as a deprivation of children's right to study, will be highlighted through children's abandonment of school after lockdown. This is more common among rural than urban children, especially girls in the 10-13 age group.

The various focus group sessions carried out by the team highlighted three main reasons for abandoning or delaying the return to the classroom after lockdown, as shown in graph 1 below. The main reasons are:

- Firstly, the parents' lack of financial means, an argument perceived more by urban than rural children, especially boys, in the 10-13 age group. Indeed, children perceive their parents' inability to pay for school supplies and fees. Thus, the lack of respect for the right to education is perceived through the lack of financial means, a situation of monetary poverty that is more prevalent in urban areas.
- Secondly, the risky behaviors most frequently mentioned by rural children, especially girls. They refer to addiction to illicit substances, pregnancy for girls, and knocking up a girl and being forced to marry her for boys. These indicators are the manifestation of poverty, and society's inability to protect children from drugs, and thus violate article 33 of the CRC, which concerns the protection of children from drugs, and whose government has the role of enforcing the law on these narcotics. These indicators thus reflect a state that does not guarantee a safe environment for children, enabling them to acquire more productive knowledge for the future, and thus a multidimensional indicator of poverty, for example, it features in the European index of child well-being in the risk and safety dimension (Roelen K., Gassman F., 2008).
- Thirdly, family reasons, which account for roughly the same percentage in urban and rural areas. However, there is a big difference: in urban areas, this argument is not mentioned by girls. Family reasons are linked to changes in family structure, composition and mobility (death, migration, children's professional assistance), most often manifested by children working to help the family. This argument refers to the violation of children's rights, and will be explained further in the indicator: child labor.

**Graph 1: Reasons for children dropping out of school and delaying their return to school following lockdown.**



Source: CERED, 2022

Nevertheless, after the lockdown, the children felt sad because they couldn't get back to school on time, and noted a drop in their level and motivation. Indeed, after the lockdown, children in both rural and urban areas expressed a loss of previously acquired knowledge, and a lack of motivation to get up in the morning and go to school. These feelings echo Sen's subjective indicators of child satisfaction and achievement (Sen A., 1985, quoted in Ouaramé A., et al., 2010, p5).

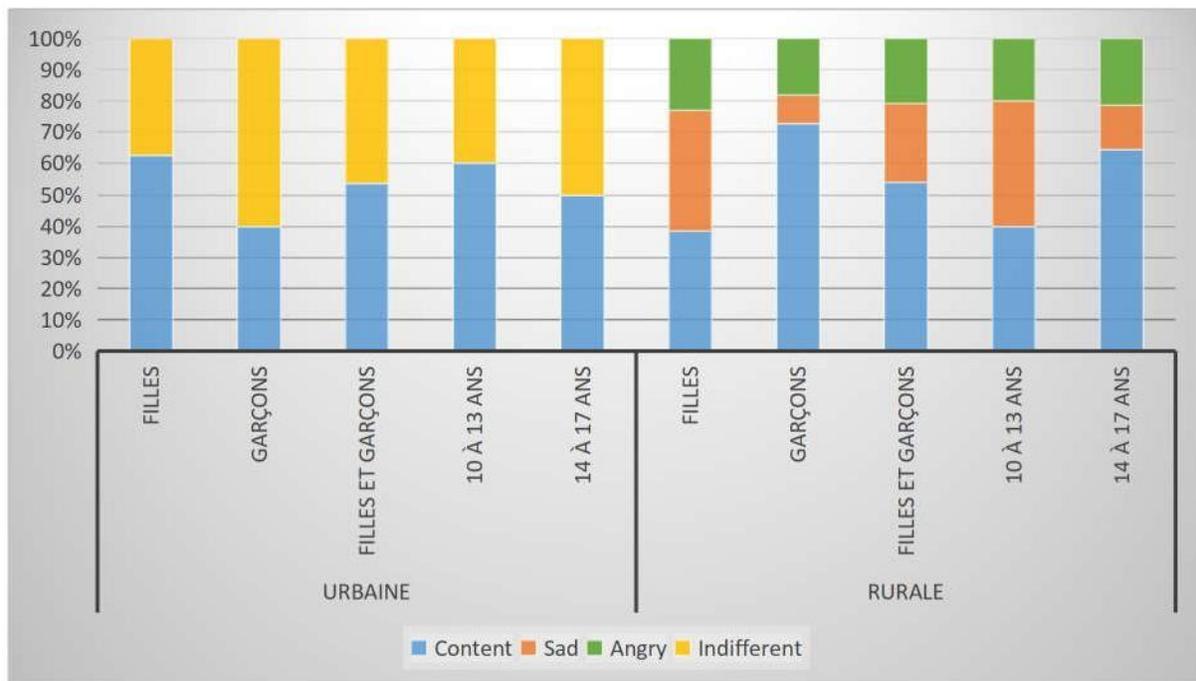
### 3.3 Children's perception of child labor

Several studies support the argument that poverty is the main determinant of child labor (Cavagnoud R., 2014, p218) (Basu K., Van P., 1998, p416) (Lachaud J., 2008, p24). Thus, children's perception of this indicator is relevant to the child rights approach to poverty. Child labor is one of the violations of children's rights stipulated in articles 32 to 36 of the CRC, which protect children from hazardous and exploitative work. There are several definitions and categories of child labor, but for this research, the focus is on the definition and categorization according to Save the Children, which considers "child labor as all activities performed by children for their own or their family's benefit" (Save the children, 2003, quoted by Bhukuth A., 2009, opcit, p28). The different types of work carried out by children, according to their perception, will help to highlight the conditions of poverty in which they find themselves, driving them to work.

From the field focus groups, three main activities are practiced before, during and after lockdown. Firstly, household chores, which account for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of children's activities within the household, whether in urban or rural areas. According to the International Labour Organization's definition, this category of activity does not count as child labour, even though children's perceptions suggest that it is their dominant activity during the day, leading them to be denied the right to play and study. Secondly, help for parents, which is more prevalent in rural areas, as it involves work in the fields, such as watering, ploughing or transplanting. This type of work increased during and after lockdown, as in rural areas, land ownership is an incentive for child labor (Meka'a C., Mbebi C., 2015, p16). Children's work in the fields constitutes both a cultural and an economic motive for parents. An economic motive, with the aim of minimizing transaction costs thanks to child labor, this argument is important in the understanding of child labor within a family business (Boyden J., Levison D., 2000, p15), and cultural with the aim of transmitting know-how to children, this perception corroborates with the consideration of work as a place of socialization for children (Dial F., 2011, p11). Finally, remunerated activities include selling food/products from gathering, fishing, hunting and harvesting for personal use; selling food/products from gathering, fishing, hunting and harvesting to help parents; doing odd jobs such as pulling carts, fetching or drawing water for the day, working as a mason's helper; and carrying out regular activities. These activities are more common in urban than rural areas, and among children aged 14 to 17. Nevertheless, according to the children, poverty

is not the only reason for child labor. There is also a cultural reason, guided by a value of reciprocity between parent and child, and the children's motivation to help their parents in difficulty. The children's feelings bear witness to this.

**Graph 2: Children's feelings about working during lockdown.**



Source: CERED, 2022

Indeed, despite the work they've done, the children express a sense of joy at having been able to help needy parents. In the urban environment, however, the children were indifferent to the work they were doing, as it was all to their satisfaction. Rural children, however, expressed sadness at being tired of working, and anger at being forced to work. Thus, this feeling of sadness and anger at being forced to work is a violation of children's rights, as children's best interests and opinions are not respected, and they are forced to perform activities against their will. Moreover, these feelings relate to the intangible aspect of poverty, according to Minujin and his co-authors, as children perceive a sense of insecurity, lack of freedom and abuse (Minujin A., et al., 2006, p485).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The debate surrounding the measurement of poverty has long been the subject of much research by development economists. Nevertheless, as a first step, this article has been able to contribute to highlighting the debates on unidimensional and multidimensional poverty, by having the child as the

subject of analysis and adopting a children's rights approach. Then, through the case study of children's perception of COVID-19 in Madagascar, two indicators were highlighted, namely the reasons for dropping out of school and child labor. These indicators are of particular interest in this rights-based approach to poverty, as they constitute violations of rights. Thus, they are the manifestation of poverty through children's perceptions.

As part of the CERED study, three periods were put forward to analyze children's perceptions of COVID-19, i.e. before-before-after lockdown. However, in this article, the case study focuses on the period during and after lockdown. Thus, after lockdown, children who had to drop out of school were found in both rural and urban areas. Three reasons were identified in the field: lack of financial means, the latter being an indicator of monetary poverty leading to children being deprived of their fundamental right to study. Secondly, children's risk-taking behavior, which can be interpreted by a government and society unable to guarantee children's safety from activities that impede their well-being. Finally, family-related reasons, including child labor. Activities carried out by children, which are considered to be forms of child labor, come in many forms. The rural environment is dominated by activities to help parents by working in the fields, marking the importance of the still-dominant primary sector, an indicator of a nation still in the phase of traditional society that has not yet been able to begin its development. In urban areas, on the other hand, poverty is seen in children's activities in the informal sector, and in the tertiary sector in the sale of various goods. This form of non-respect for children's rights and a manifestation of poverty, can be perceived by children not only as a problem of poverty, but also as a cultural value of Malagasy children to help each other for the good of the family. However, children's feelings about these activities are mixed. There are those who are happy to help their families, and those who are sad and angry at being forced to work.

These results reveal the determining factors in the non-respect of children's rights in the context of the pandemic. In practical terms, these results could serve as an aid to decision-making for an inclusive and effective national policy for children, since they emanate from the children themselves for their well-being and that of their families. Indeed, according to the results, in the event of shock, children are confronted with education-related problems that push them to drop out of school and go to work. However, education is a development factor and a fundamental right for children, and denial of this right could have long-term consequences for both the children and the country's development. In other words, analyzing the consequences of denying this right offers new angles of analysis, both in the scientific and practical fields.

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