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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preparing, responding and recovering: wildfire disaster and rural youth in Portugal

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Abstract

Background

In the current era of polycrisis, wildfires represent an escalating global threat that disproportionately impacts rural youth through health risks, trauma, and educational disruption. While often viewed solely as victims, young people can play pivotal roles in wildfire prevention, community response, and climate activism. This study explores the multifaceted relationship between youth and disasters, focusing on how wildfire experiences shape long-term civic and environmental engagement.

Methods

The research utilizes a qualitative approach centered on the narratives of 12 young people who experienced the devastating 2017 wildfires in central Portugal. Data was collected through biographical interviews and visual methods between 2019 and 2021, during the participants' involvement in an environmental activism program. The analysis is grounded in agonistic theory, emphasizing the personal and social conflicts that emerge from disaster experiences.

Results

The findings reveal that wildfire experiences deeply influence youth disaster management perspectives through a complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental factors. Participants' narratives highlight a transition from experiencing trauma to engaging in proactive climate activism and fire safety education. The results suggest that "agonistic" or conflict-driven reflections on disaster can

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become a catalyst for community-level resilience and social change.

Conclusions

The study underscores the necessity of moving beyond protectionist frameworks to actively integrate youth perspectives into rural resilience and civil protection programs. Recognizing young people as knowledgeable stakeholders is essential for developing more inclusive and effective disaster management strategies in fire-prone regions.

Keywords
disaster risk reduction: wildfires: rural children and youth; environmental education

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Introduction

In the context of polycrisis (Henig and Kinght 2023), where climate change is on the daily agenda, wildfires are increasingly more intense and extreme, demanding awareness and resilience from inhabitants of fire-prone regions (OECD 2023; United Nations Environment Programme 2022). Recent events in California show that wildfire disasters disrupt not only the physical environment but also the social, economic, and cultural fabric of communities, regardless of their wealth or location. However, even if no one seems to escape, disasters impact people differently, considering their resources for protection.

The context of rurality is crucial to understanding the impact of wildfires on youth. Rural areas, often characterised by such features as close-knit communities, strong ties to the land and a slower pace of life, are also marked by vulnerabilities such as ageing populations and a lack of access to services compared to their urban counterparts (Simões and Erdogan 2024). Rural spaces nowadays are often economically depressed, facing unequal access to public services and deficient mobility and communication infrastructures that further isolate the few people living in them (Camarero and Oliva 2019). These pre-existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated by disasters like wildfires, creating a complex interplay between environmental risk and socio-economic marginalization. For young people, these disruptions occur during critical phases of their personal and social development, such as transitions from school to university or work, influencing their sense of place, identity, and prospects (Cahill and Cook 2020; Bernsen et al. 2022; Farrugia and Ravn 2023). Adolescence and young adulthood are periods of intense personal and social development, marked by the formation of identity, pursuit of education and employment, and development of social relationships. The disruptive nature of wildfires can significantly impact these developmental processes, creating feelings of insecurity, displacement, and uncertainty about the future.

Wildfire disaster risk reduction starts from prevention and preparation and leads to response and recovery. Whilst mitigation involves actions taken before a fire to reduce its potential impact, preparedness includes planning and training for effective response, and response refers to the actions taken during a fire. In the final phase, recovery, communities are rebuilding and restoring, addressing also the social and emotional needs of those affected (Mort, Rodriguez-Giralt, and Delicado 2020). Young people are often overlooked particularly in disaster recovery plans. Yet, they have unique vulnerabilities and needs that must be addressed. Their experiences of displacement, loss, and trauma have long-lasting impacts on their mental health, educational attainment, and social integration.

At the same time, they are also not passive victims; their agency, creativity and resilience can be harnessed to promote community-led recovery efforts (Ribeiro 2022; Neckel and Hasenfratz 2021), but equally, their fervency has considerable potential to bring about change. Due to growing awareness of climate change impact on their wellbeing in recent years, young people have increasingly mobilized to protest against fossil fuel use and global warming, using non-conventional forms and spaces, such as “do-it-ourselves” interventions in museums to express divergent views of lifestyle and future expectations (O’Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018; Pickard 2022), but also resorting to tactics like striking to address their non-representation and exclusion from political decision-making processes around the climate crisis (Gorman 2021). These activities can be seen as an intergenerational conflict, as a challenge to the traditional power dynamics, and as an assertion of their own political agency and subjectivity, even if it sometimes lacks pathways linking present problems to future solutions (Herbert 2021). Disregarding their efforts to be seen and heard in the democratic arenas risks adultocentric and patronizing views on the futures that in fact belong to the youth (Conner 2024; Honkatukia and Rättilä 2023).

This paper delves into the experiences of rural youth in the context of wildfire disaster recovery in Portugal, following an ethnographic study of their experiences with the 15 October 2017 extreme wildfire (Viegas et al. 2019; Garcia 2018; Comissão Técnica Independente et al. 2018). Using qualitative methods, the study examines the ways in which the youth navigate these challenges, contribute to community resilience, and shape their individual and collective futures. It uses an agonistic approach to analyse the impact of wildfires on young people’s mental health and well-being, the role of youth in community resilience and the intersection of environmental justice and social inequalities. The article begins with an introduction to key concepts in wildfire disaster and rural youth debates, followed by a brief explanation of the theoretical framing, based on agonistic analysis of disaster emotions and their potential as political galvanisers. The analysis offers critical narratives that illustrate the different phases of disaster risk reduction, with a focus on the ambivalence and conflictive nature of young people’s views regarding environmental care, prevention and recovery measures in the aftermath of disasters. It then concludes by stressing the main messages from young people’s stories and their relevance for the climate activism and youth studies fields.

Rural Youth and Wildfires: loss, resilience and conflict

Wildfires, increasingly prevalent due to climate change and land management practices (Ribeiro et al. 2020), disproportionately impact rural communities, which often have limited resources and infrastructure for response and recovery

(Brown and Schafft 2019; Asfaw, McGee, and Correia 2022; Camarero and Oliva 2019). Being a minority in communities with aging populations such as those in Central inland Portugal, young people face wildfire disasters differently compared to the rest of the society. Being in a critical period of their lives where values, vocations and future aspirations are formed, they are particularly susceptible to external events (Winker et al. 2024; O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018; Gorman 2021). Wildfires can have a profound and multi-layered impact on rural youth, affecting their physical and mental health, education, social structures, and sense of place (Towers, Christianson, and Eriksen 2019). Exposure to wildfires and their aftermath can lead to significant mental health challenges for young people, including anxiety, stress, and trauma (Sugg et al. 2022; Papadatou et al. 2012). The disruption of daily life, loss of homes and possessions, and the uncertainty of the future further contributes to these psychological impacts (Winker et al. 2024; McKinnon and Eriksen 2021). Furthermore, the smoke produced by wildfires has been shown to negatively affect mental health (Humphreys et al. 2022). Disasters are known to cause severe impacts on children and youth, but understanding their role as victims has significantly evolved to a more nuanced consideration for their agency in the face of extreme events (Peek et al. 2018).

Wildfire disasters often lead to the closure of schools and disruptions to educational routines (Schulze et al. 2020; Hamideh, Sen, and Fischer 2022). This is particularly challenging for rural youth who may already face barriers to educational access (Gottschall 2014; Trahar et al. 2020). In addition, loss of school buildings and equipment further hinders educational opportunities and erodes social networks and communities. For young people, this loss can be particularly destabilizing, as these networks are crucial for their development and support (Cox and Perry 2011; Scannell, Cox, and Fletcher 2017). The displacement of families and community members leads to a sense of isolation and loss, making it more challenging for young people to maintain social connections.

Sense of place after wildfires is significantly altered since landscapes and places to which young people feel connected are no longer the same. The destruction of familiar environments leads to a loss of place attachment, a sense of alienation and a desire to leave, affecting individual aspirations (Berlin Rubin and Wong-Parodi 2022; D'Errico and Hunt 2019). On the other hand, some young people develop a stronger commitment to their community as it is rebuilt (Malafaia et al. 2024; Scannell, Cox, and Fletcher 2017), even considering different capacities to engage proactively (considering autonomy and age, for instance).

The recovery process after a wildfire is complex and long, involving both individual and community-level actions. It is this process of rebuilding that deserves particular attention. On the community level, young people can be active agents, involved in community-led initiatives to rebuild homes and infrastructure - this also promotes a sense of collective efficacy and wellbeing (Kulig et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2012). Leone et al. (2023) describe the experiences of volunteer firefighters from the 2017 fires (a group with low level of youth recruitment), demonstrating how these events provoked feelings of helplessness and fear among the participants. Nevertheless, despite having experienced the violence, the volunteers exhibited high scores of belonging and attachment to the emergency tasks to serve the people. In the context of Portuguese rural aged communities, joining practice schools of volunteer firefighting is often a form of engaging in extracurricular activities for the youth, promoting civic values while keeping children busy, but also enabling youth to embrace higher level of agency and attachment.

Crucially, communities will need to adapt to a "new normal" which involves living with the risk of wildfires. Adaptation may involve community education, better infrastructure, and social programs designed to improve community resilience (Paveglio, Schmidt, and Medley-Daniel 2023; Komac et al. 2020; Molan, Weber, and Kor 2022). Considering this, the period after a wildfire is a "hot moment" for creating fire-adapted communities. It is this time when young people and communities are more willing to adjust be better prepared for the next event (Ribeiro and Silva 2019; Schumann et al. 2020), although according to recent studies, this interest fades with time (Li 2024).

On the other hand, aside such potential for consensus that the disasters can bring, there is considerable potential for conflict for the communities (González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2020; Carroll et al. 2006; Brown and Schafft 2019). As Erikson (1994) highlights, disasters are critical events where inequalities are exposed, leaving those who have less resources at the mercy of its consequences, and those who have the means in a better position to rebuild their lives. Furthermore, such events reveal the insufficiencies of state assistance. Residents lose control over their environment and daily routines already due to the catastrophic events - but there is a further loss of control as external and non-local entities get involved. The imposition of rationalized systems and problem-solving by extra-local organizations during and after wildfire events is sometimes resisted by local actors, in the sense that the disruption of people's lives consists of more than simply economic and shelter issues. In fact, it entails the loss of memories and objects that shape identities, as Brocato (2021) states. Bureaucratic procedures for receiving financial assistance and compensation for lost housing and business destruction can also be a source of distress, as victims may view the rules and regulations as yet another obstacle in their already disrupted lives (Correia 2021; Simões 2018).

Disasters also exacerbate existing environmental disputes, such as those related to national forest management, igniting controversies connected to land use, the distribution of resources, or environmental remediation. These controversies sometimes divide community interests rather than uniting them, leading to insider/outsider cleavages, especially when certain locals are perceived as aligning with outsiders. In fact, the historical geography of disasters demonstrates how they can be used to create an "us vs them" mentality (Mendes, 2016). Different parties often hold conflicting interests and views during or after a disaster, such as local communities and voluntary firefighters and civil protection authorities. To this respect, Paveglio et al. (2015) highlight the clash between the local culture of proactive, self-sufficient action towards fires, and the more rule-oriented, hierarchical approach of the civil protection (CP) system. In the case studied by Paveglio et al. (2015), locals with equipment wanting to contribute to firefighting were restricted by the CP team and ordered to wait. This difference in norms led to frustration, as residents believed in taking immediate action. A further conflict was the perceived failure of the CP teams to understand and prioritize the range of local values at risk, which extended beyond homes and included crops, timberlands and rangelands crucial for the local economy and way of life. Residents felt their attempts to communicate these values were not heeded. This lack of shared understanding about what to protect and how resulted in discontent. Similar conflicts were also quite common in Portuguese wildfires. Furthermore, the local concerns and views were systematically disregarded in the media in favor of more technical reports and approaches, leading to local communities' disempowerment (Figueiredo, Ribeiro, and Fernandes 2024).

Agonistic emotions and its value on analysing wildfire recovery

Agonistic theory offers a valuable theoretical framework for analysing conflicts arising from climate related disasters, foregrounding the role of conflict and emotions as central to political life. Unlike traditional approaches that often seek to eliminate or manage conflict, agonism, particularly as articulated by Chantal Mouffe, acknowledges that conflict is constitutive of the political. It posits that the aim of democratic politics should not be to achieve consensus but rather to transform antagonistic relations between enemies into agonistic ones between adversaries. Adversaries, while holding opposing views, share a common symbolic space and respect each other's legitimacy as participants in the political struggle (Steiner 2017).

When compared with traditional conflict approaches focusing on objective interests, resource competition, or rational negotiation, agonism offers several advantages (August and Westphal 2024). Firstly, it moves beyond a simplistic 'us versus them' antagonism by envisioning the possibility of a productive struggle between adversaries who, despite their disagreements on the causes and consequences of a disaster, can still recognise each other as legitimate political actors. This is crucial in the context of disaster aftermath debates, which can easily become polarised and demonising. Agonism provides a framework for understanding also how people experience climate change effects and respond to these, moving away from an antagonist perspective, where there is no shared ground among parties, to one where conflicting parties recognise each other's claims and rights, fighting to overcome shared challenging circumstances.

Secondly, agonism's focus on the inherent contestability of political meanings aligns well with the diverse and evolving nature of climate change and disaster responses. It acknowledges that there are multiple interpretations of climate change as a problem and a multiplicity of proposed solutions, none of which can claim a neutral or purely rational basis. This perspective contrasts with approaches that might seek a singular scientific or technical consensus as a prerequisite for action (Kakenmaster 2019). More pluralistic approach validates groups marginalized or not seen as worthy of legitimate claims due to ageism, such as young people (Koutsouris et al. 2022). Agonistic theory embraces this plurality of perspectives and examines how different groups articulate their demands and challenge hegemonic understandings of the issue, not necessarily to reach agreement, but to foster a dynamic and inclusive political debate.

Most importantly for this research, the emphasis on emotions in agonistic theory allows for a richer understanding of the underlying drivers of activism. Traditional conflict approaches might overlook the ethical commitments, affective attachments, and senses of identity that motivate individuals and groups to engage in climate action. Mouffe argues against rationalist conceptions of politics that seek to suppress affect, contending that passions are integral to collective identification and the mobilisation of political demands (Koutsouris et al. 2022). Traditional approaches might focus on logistical coordination and resource allocation, potentially overlooking the profound role of emotions in shaping recovery efforts. Agonistic theory acknowledges that emotions, such as anger at perceived injustices in aid distribution or hope for a better future, are integral to political mobilisation for the different groups, and the articulation of their demands (Mihai 2014) in a productive manner. By taking emotions seriously, agonistic analysis can better account for the normative dimensions of politics in a climate changed world, and the diverse ways in which people experience and respond to the issue. Analysing disaster recovery through the lens of agonistic theory - productive disagreement, plural perspectives and emphasis on emotions - offers valuable insights into the complex social and political dynamics that unfold in the aftermath of a catastrophe.

An agonistic perspective helps us understand how emotions can fuel collective identities and drive affected communities to engage in political struggles for recognition and resources. (August 2024). In the context of disaster recovery, diverse

groups with varying needs and levels of pre-existing vulnerability will experience a range of emotions. For instance, feelings of indignation over inadequate or inequitable recovery assistance can lead to the formation of advocacy groups and the public voicing of grievances. Conversely, hope for rebuilding and resilience can motivate collective action and the development of community-led recovery initiatives. Hence, unlike rationalist perspectives of politics that privilege neutrality, agonism shows that emotions are essential to political reasoning and action.

This framework allows us to analyse how different emotional investments shape competing visions for recovery and reconstruction, highlighting potential areas of conflict and negotiation between affected populations, government agencies, and other stakeholders. Instead of seeking a premature consensus, an agonistic approach embraces these emotional expressions as vital for a more inclusive and just recovery process, where diverse needs and perspectives are actively contested and negotiated within a shared, albeit conflictual, social space.

Background, location and methodological considerations

The following analysis is based on the narratives and experiences of 13–18-year-olds in one municipality in Central Portugal. The municipality, situated adjacent to the highest mountain range in mainland Portugal, was characterized by a predominantly rural landscape. The municipality is located inside the Estrela National Park, created in 1976, occupying an extensive area of 2,216 km^2 in the centre of Portugal with approximately 150,000 inhabitants. The geopark is structured around the Serra da Estrela Mountain, the highest mountain in mainland Portugal, the summit of which - Torre - is 1993 metres high. The landscape and its wildlife is diverse. The flora is composed on the ground of plants such as bellflowers, sage-leaved rock roses, saxifraga spathularis and junipers, and on the top, of shady trees such as sweet chestnuts, pedunculate oaks, Pyrenean oaks, maritime pines and holm oaks. This type of vegetation is unique in Portugal, since the percentage of the forest in the possession of private owners corresponds to 87% of the total, and private owners opt for fast growing profitable species. This hinders efforts of conservation and diversification of forestry management (Fernandes and Simões 2024), particularly relevant in most of central Portugal, where such private forestry has led to the planting of monocultures of eucalyptus and pine trees, highly flammable evergreen species (Nunes et al. 2019). Since eucalyptus and pine trees are often pointed as causes of extreme wildfires, the fact that our example occurred in a national park with distinct forestry points to other possible causes, such as insufficient vigilance and prevention measures.

The interviewed young people were affected by the extreme wildfires that occurred on 15–16 October 2017 in the central inland region of Portugal, which includes the municipality where these youngsters lived or studied, hereby designated as Peneda (for anonymity purposes). These catastrophic wildfires were triggered by specific climatic conditions, leading to over 500 ignition points within a single day and resulting in the simultaneous spread of fires across a vast geographical area, impacting multiple municipalities. Collectively, the fires caused 51 fatalities—primarily among over 65-year-olds—and led to extensive losses across industries, businesses, and ecosystems (Comissão Técnica Independente et al. 2018; Viegas et al. 2019).

The youngsters I gathered the narratives and the experiences from were recruited through an environmental citizenship programme led by a local organization. The narratives were captured through individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups for which consent forms were signed. The young people interviewed were participating in an environmental citizenship project devoted to evaluating children and young people's engagement in climate protection, and to capacitate them to do so. The collective questions revolved around their motivation and experiences in engaging in these activities. Individual interviews focused more on their everyday school and leisure routines, their wildfire disaster experience and future aspirations.

The fieldwork was carried out between 2019 and 2020, two years after the major wildfires of 2017. The time that had passed after the events allowed for some safe distance from the potentially traumatic events. On the other hand, memory tends to overshadow aspects of the narrative, hence triangulation with documentary sources was done when possible. The data gathering also included on-site ethnographic observations involving participation at events, photography sharing by some participants to illustrate their routines, as well as interviews with local stakeholders, such as members of the municipality, school directors and non-governmental organisations.

Ethical appraisal was granted by the Ethical Board of the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, with the reference 2019/12.Consent was obtained in written form from parents when necessary (since in Portugal it is considered that at age 16 youngsters are able to decide whether they would like to participate in a study or not), and assent was obtained from all children and young people in written form. The youngsters are referred to by pseudonyms and precise locations are avoided to protect their identities. Three storylines were chosen to illustrate the complexity of emergency management stages, focusing on prevention, response and recovery as main thread to explore the agonistic elements in such lived experiences of the disasters. The narratives were analysed following a thematic strategy (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Mitigating and preparing in the family: Julia's story

Julia, a 16-year-old residing in a village near Peneda but studying in Peneda center, offers a compelling narrative that combines her personal experiences, aspirations, and reflections on community and environmental issues.

Julia expresses a clear preference for her calm, rural life in Peneda, contrasting it sharply with the hectic environment of Lisbon, the country's capital. She notes, "I am not a city girl …", highlighting her discomfort with urban noise, traffic, and densely populated areas. Despite this preference for the tranquility of her hometown, Julia is determined to study law or criminology in Lisbon, since this is where she has family connections.

Julia's narrative is underscored by the ever-present threat of wildfires. She recalls the 2017 wildfire as a particularly traumatic event, "'I remember that a colleague of mine, the day after the fire, spoke to me in despair because she didn't know what to do because her house had burnt down". The disruptive and devastating impact of wildfires on her community prompted her family to create an evacuation plan in 2017, including packing essential items like schoolbooks and her pet cat Fifi. The response of her family to the threat of wildfires shows a clear understanding of the risk. She explains: "My father said, 'Pack up calmly, because we might have to evacuate". Her father's preparedness, partly influenced by his military background, was key to the family's response, and his strategy has instilled in Julia a sense of caution and the need for planning for any potential emergency. This preparedness is not just for fires, but he also told her what to do in the case of an earthquake, "'If there's an earthquake here, you hide under the table […)] or by the pillars supporting the door'. Despite having an escape plan, there's a tension between the family's preparedness and a sense of helplessness when faced with the possibility of evacuation - in particular, the difficulty of evacuating her grandmother and uncle, which reveals the constraints and the potential for chaos even with a plan. She also mentions her stress and fear that the fires were too close: "We could see how everything was full of smoke. I'd get stressed thinking I was too close."

Julia's narrative presents several conflictive themes related to wildfires, primarily concerning the causes, consequences, and community responses to these disasters. Firstly, Julia expresses strong opinions about the causes of wildfires, particularly her belief that many are due to arson. She disputes the idea that fires start spontaneously, stating, "I doubt that in the middle of the mountains, by the work and grace of the Holy Spirit… or on a farm, without lightning having struck and everything being fine, it would start burning out of nowhere… I don't think so." This view of considering arson at the centre of the wildfires in direct contrast with the idea that wildfires are a consequence of fuel, flame and oxygen (designated as the fire triangle). She is critical of the judicial system which does handle also arsonists, but she notes that people who start fires are labelled "mad" and then released, only to repeat the act. Her testimony suggests a conflict between community perceptions of arson and the legal system's handling of it.

Secondly, Julia also identifies the abandonment of agricultural land as a critical problem, which she sees as increasing the vulnerability of the area to fires. She states, "I think that if they took care of the farms that are abandoned, it would help solve the problem". Her observation reveals a sophisticated understanding of the interconnectedness between environmental conditions and socio-economic factors, but it also highlights an critical view on the community/state/municipality recognises and prepares for the risks.

Thirdly, Julia's experience during the fires also informed her view on community safety. She says, "If a fire were to happen, the place where I would feel safest is at school, because I already knew there were adults there and that they would direct me to the right place". However, Julia questions the effectiveness of institutional responses to wildfires and community safety. She recalls how the school only discussed safety measures after the fires, while also doubting the measures taken to prevent future fires. While she acknowledges receiving text message alerts from civil protection (a measure that was put in place after the 2017 wildfires), she wonders, "everything that could be burnt has burnt, where else is going to burn?", rejecting the view that the state has been capable of responding in time and in an effective manner.

Responding in community: Filipe's story

Filipe, a 16-year-old, lives in a village near Peneda that he describes as calm, contrasting it with the city. Despite finding a sense of well-being in the quiet of the village, Filipe acknowledges its drawbacks: "communications here are slower, we don't have… as much information as if we were in a city". Likewise, transportation and access to education are significant challenges for local young people. Filipe explains that the bus route used to have a stop closer to his house. However, the bus now stops near the church, requiring families to take turns driving the students to the bus stop every morning to save petrol.

Despite the general peace enjoyed by living in the country, Filipe recalls vividly how the 2017 October wildfire started and how his family was unable to return home due to the road closures. His father had to fight the fire:

> "My father, since he works at a workshop, he had to fight the fire with a machine, around 2 or 3 days non-stop … he slept around two hours in those days. And we had no one home, and we were worried about our house, and [the firefighters] let us pass to go near our house. We came here, we put on our masks and we started with the hoses, and the tractor … but the tractor has fuel, it may explode, it was all very sudden, we reacted just to try to save things and do something …"

This vivid description immediately highlights a situation where the local community was forced to take primary responsibility for protecting their homes and livelihoods. Further elaborating on the perceived lack of external aid, Filipe expresses his frustration:

> "in those days… I was scared, of course… like all the people nearby who were also suffering, but I felt a bit of… also anger because… the people had to manage, there were no fire engines in… the population had to manage, there was one fire truck… only at night."

Although the fires did not destroy his home, they created a lasting fear: "we always have that fear concerning fires". The 2017 fires also destroyed much of the biodiversity of the area and the forests: "around… 85% of the forest was … devastated". Filipe emphasizes that the fires usually start in abandoned areas, and that fires occur every year. Filipe's personal response to the fires demonstrates resourcefulness and a willingness to act in the face of danger. When asked how the community learns to defend themselves against fires, Filipe replies:

> 'It's like this… I'll be honest with you; my father and I have… we practically have a business… we sell firewood. So, I learnt to ride a tractor … from the age of 12. And… one of the things I thought was that… […] if the fire reached my house, I had to act in some way.'

His practical, locally acquired skills and a proactive, self-reliant approach are born out of necessity.

He also talks about the lack of firefighting training, and that what they had learned to do in the moment was based on intuition. According to him, at the time of the fire, there was no information such as the one provided by "Aldeia Segura (Safe Village)[1] "program and had no training. He concludes: "We've learnt once, now if it happened again… we know what to do". Filipe also notes that schools do not address the topic of fires: "The issue of fires, no… no. Everything was affected and we never had that". He believes that young people should have more knowledge about this topic, indicating a conflict between the local needs and the ineffective state support to meet these needs.

Perhaps the most significant example that Filipe's story brings to light is the way in which disasters disturb shared values, in this case sparking a conflict between individual actions and community habits. He speaks about the community's tradition of helping each other, not just with fires. He notes that people in the village will normally come together to protect each other's agricultural land. However, during the 2017 fires, their priority was to protect their own houses, exposing the need for individual survival at the expense of solidarity. He notes that the destruction of a house would feel like "losing half of our lives here at the village … ", emphasizing the emotional attachment to homes. This prioritization of houses over agricultural lands highlights the severity of the situation, where the intensity of the fires required a focus on immediate personal survival rather than broader protection of the land and the community. He says: "We weren't even interested in the agricultural land; it was more the houses because they were built [hence, had more value]". A conflict arises in this case between the community spirit common in the normal times, and the drive to protect the most important personal property during the fires, which were too overwhelming to have any energy left to consider also the communal land.

Disasters test the resilience of communities, as well as their ability to formulate the agony the situation has brought them. As the communities and the individuals battle with overwhelming change, the means of pushing their agony to the fore in democratic arenas becomes less relevant, suggesting that agonistic theory lacks applicability to a variety of empirical situations.

Recovering in displacement: Sara's story

Sara is a 16-year-old student in Peneda in a vocational course of Socio-Cultural Animation and aspires to pursue a career in cinema or theatre. For that, she is considering studying in Lisbon, where she has family, and where she could have better opportunities. Her narrative offers a poignant and detailed account of her experiences in a village near Peneda, also impacted by the same extreme wildfires in 2017. Her story is rich with themes of displacement, resilience, evolving perspectives, and a deep connection to nature, providing a nuanced understanding of the long-term impacts of environmental disaster.

[1]The 2017 wildfires led to the creation of "Safe Village" and "Safe People" Programs defining various measures, namely awareness-raising and self-protection actions, simulations, design of evacuation plans, creation of shelters, measures to protect goods and buildings in the urban-forest interface. (Tedim, Pinto, and Correia 2022)

Sara's family was displaced by the 2017 wildfires. She recounts how, on the day of the fire, she had to evacuate with her mother from their home in a small village: "the flames were already on… the hill of the next village". This evacuation was a chaotic and distressing event, marked by a lack of preparation: "we thought that nothing was going to happen and then no… we didn't take almost… almost anything". They left with very few possessions: "We took some clothes, we took the computer, but more… almost nothing else". The family was initially housed in center town for two years, a period of significant disruption.

Her original house was destroyed, and while it was rebuilt, she experienced the rebuilt home as "very different. She explains that "There is less space, some of the rooms are smaller …". This highlights the feeling of loss associated with the fire, beyond mere material destruction - even the rebuilt house could not replace the original home: "it is not the same thing as coming back home, is it?". Sara emphasizes the emotional toll of this experience: "We moved from a house that was our home to another house that was completely unknown for two years and then we moved to another house that is in the same place, but it's not the same house anymore… it's another one". For example, she misses the way the sun used to enter her room in the mornings in her old home and points out that this is not the same in the reconstructed house.

The negative perception of the new house, with less space and altered divisions, indicates that the physical reconstruction did not equate to emotional restoration. The rebuilt house lacked the memories of her previous home. This tension points to the limitations of material solutions in addressing profound emotional losses associated with displacement and trauma. Despite the measures taken to make her rebuilt home safer—such as constructing it with cement instead of wood—Sara still feels a sense of insecurity. Her home now has "concrete ladders" and "there is nothing made of wood now". The reconstruction, while providing shelter, did not restore this emotionally significant space, creating an ongoing internal conflict between gratitude for safety and disappointment. The imposed aesthetic and structural changes, like the cement stairs replacing the wooden ones, further contribute to this sense of loss and a conflict with the external forces shaping their rebuilt lives.

Finally, the disaster laid bare a conflict between the need for collective action and the lack of responsibility shown by some community members in relation to fire prevention. Sara notes that not everyone has been clearing their land since the wildfires, an action necessary to reduce the likelihood of fire. "Some do, but most don't. They don't… they don't clear the land, they don't care…". This underscores the tension between the shared responsibility for preventing future disasters and the reality of individual inaction or negligence. Of course, this situation is made more complex by the law that since 2018 establishes mandatory vegetation clearing before the fire season. However, many landowners are too old to do this themselves, and their low pensions make it hard to hire anyone to do it for them.

Considering what she's been through, Sara demonstrates remarkable resilience. After being displaced for two years, she eventually returned to her village when the house was rebuilt, though the transition was not without difficulty. The reconstructed house, although materially similar, did not offer the same sense of belonging. She notes that the experience of the fire changed her perspective: "I evolved a lot" and that "at the end of something bad there is something good", indicating an ability to find positive outcomes despite the devastation she experienced. She feels that she is better able to cope with challenges now than before the fire: "I think I'm much better able to overcome the problems it brings into my life after the fires… now … than before". This exemplifies what is normally termed as post traumatic growth, when an aversive experience makes one stronger (Pihkala 2024).

She recognises this very directly, explaining that prior to the fire, she was a "kid" without much awareness of the world's difficulties. However, the trauma has made her more attuned to the world: "I know there are bad things, but I think I know better how to deal with them". A notable change is her decision to become a vegetarian shortly after the fires. This decision was spurred on by the killing of a pig that was given to her mother after the fire. This had a profound effect on her and influenced her decision to stop eating meat: "I hated it, and since then I stopped eating meat".

Sara also began to be more involved in nature-related activities, joining a local environmental programme, and participating in adventure sports that involve navigating the landscape. This engagement with nature - something she says developed after the fire: "… less than half a year after my house burnt down, more or less …" - seems to be a way for her to connect with the environment that was damaged by the fires and indicates her personal development. She also joined the scouts after the fire, helping clean up other villages that were also affected by the fires. She notes that "we volunteered a few times… in… the villages close by… in the villages that were also affected. And… well, we were also talking to people, we were clearing land, clearing houses…'. She refers to some of the difficulties in this work: "It's very complicated because they have to look for the owners of the land to clear it and sometimes, they can't find them".

Her increased involvement stems from her own experience with the wildfire, which made her engage in such community work and become aware of the difficulties in changing local practices. Apart from insufficient funds, the fact is that many lands in these regions were passed on through generations, and as many of the owners emigrated, they are not aware of

their inheritances or of their duties regarding it. Conflict here arises again between local efforts on the ground and the magnitude of legislative obstacles that make it impossible to enforce private land clearing., rendering her actions useless.

In sum, Sara's narrative offers a detailed and intimate perspective on the profound impact of the 2017 wildfires. Her story highlights the trauma of displacement, the complexities of rebuilding a life and a home, and the transformative power of resilience and adaptation. Through her experiences, she illustrates the interplay between personal loss and community solidarity, as well as the evolving relationship between individuals and their environment. Her narrative serves as an important record of the long-term consequences of environmental disasters and their impact on people's lives.

Concluding notes: from agony to agonistic response

Drawing from the provided narratives of Julia, Filipe, and Sara, and contextualising them within the proposed agonistic framework, several key conclusions can be drawn about the complex interplay of these factors in shaping the experiences of young people in rural Portugal. These narratives highlight not only the specific challenges faced by these individuals but also offer insights into broader societal patterns and systemic issues. The wildfires are not simply isolated events; they are integral to the lived experience of the local youth, influencing their sense of safety, community and self. Living through such agonies does not mean, however, that these youths are mere victims of unfortunate events.

These youths identify grievances and injustices indignantly - and through that, highlight areas where democratic systems are perceived to be failing. This identification is the first step towards demanding accountability and change. The lack of adequate support from firefighting services during the 2017 fires, the lack of adequate training in fire safety, the absence of preventative measures to mitigate fire risks, and the slow pace of reconstruction efforts, reveal insufficiencies in the disaster management infrastructure, placing a disproportionate burden on rural communities, often marginalized by the state and the rest of the society. The challenge to this, whilst remaining also critical of the failings within these communities themselves, suggests that they youths are turning the agony they have experienced into agonistic debates.

Shared experiences of fear and loss, coupled with indignation, can foster solidarity within communities and motivate collective efforts to address common problems. Despite the disruptive and traumatic nature of wildfires, the narratives offered by the young people illustrate how hope and dissatisfaction can fuel aspirations for change. Filipe's account of his and his father's actions during the fire highlight how disaster experiences can push the youths to take responsibility to protect themselves, their families and their communities. Sara's commitment to vegetarianism and involvement in environmental and scouting groups illustrate a proactive stance in response to the environmental degradation she has witnessed. The young people's narratives reveal a profound awareness of their vulnerabilities and an active desire to mitigate the risks. Hence, rather than passive victims of circumstances these young people were active agents seeking to shape their lives and communities in the face of adversity.

The profound changes in lifestyle and worldview triggered by the catastrophic events and the personal experiences of the young people caught in this situation illustrate how agonistic emotions caused by disasters can serve as catalysts for personal and social development, forcing young people to re-evaluate their values and beliefs. Civic practices from learning preparedness to developing self-defense strategies in the face of fire, from volunteering to map clearing areas or participating in reforestation actions, evidence political commitment and change from below that defy political inadequacy.

These narratives pertain to 2017 wildfire disasters, which opened a new period in Portuguese disaster risk reduction. Much has changed since then: a new forest fire agency has been created, new educational programmes instituted, scientific research increased, and new mechanisms of prevention and monitoring put in place, consequently reducing the number of fires from an average of 20.000 wildfires per year before 2019 to 7.000 in 2023 (Agência para Gestão Integrada dos Fogos - AGIF 2024). Nevertheless, the Serra da Estrela natural park burned severely again in 2022, evidencing insufficiencies in terms of organization and procedures on site (Agência para Gestão Integrada dos Fogos - AGIF 2023). Hence, the stories of Julia, Filipe, and Sara and the agonistic emotions they entail still offer a crucial lens through which to examine the intersection of youth, the political and disasters. Powerful feelings of anxiety, fear, grief, indignation and frustration. Arise from young people's deep concern for their future but also from their experiences with disasters, from the perceived betrayal by governments, and a strong sense of intergenerational injustice. Rather than the emotions triggered by the experiences of the disaster being a simple case of personal agony, these youths have translated their emotions to political level, fueling mobilisation and providing significant motivation for change.

Ethics and consent

This research was granted ethical approval by Ethics Committee (Ref: 2019/12). Consent was obtained in written form from parents when necessary (since in Portugal it is considered that at age 16 youngsters are able to decide whether they would like to participate in a study or not), and assent was obtained from all children and young people in written form.

Data availability statement

Restrictions on Data.

Underlying data

The raw qualitative data (interview transcripts) generated in this study are not available in public repositories due to the highly sensitive nature of the research topic and the vulnerability of the participants. The study involved children and young people who experienced potentially traumatic events related to the 2017 wildfires. To ensure the protection of participant anonymity—including both individual identities and specific residential localities—and to maintain strict confidentiality, the data are stored exclusively in encrypted storage formats after undergoing a rigorous anonymization process.

The Ethics Committee (Ref: 2019/12) specifically reviewed the project, "Recovering capabilities: a multimethod exploration of rural youth resilience," and mandated that, given the sensitivity of the themes explored, the collected data must not be shared in open repositories. The Committee determined that these restrictions are necessary to comply with national and international ethical requirements for research involving minors and trauma.

Despite these restrictions, the authors are committed to scientific transparency. De-identified data excerpts or redacted transcripts may be made available to qualified researchers upon reasonable request. Inquiries should be directed to the corresponding author assantos@fcsh.unl.pt. Access will only be granted for the purpose of scholarly review or meta-analysis. Any request for data reuse must be accompanied by a formal proposal and may require additional ethical clearance from the applicant's home institution to ensure continued compliance with the original informed consent provided by the participants and their legal guardians.

Extended data

Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.18936582. (Ribeiro Santos, 2026).

The files "Interview guide for youngsters", "Letter for parents or guardians RECAP project" and "Consent Form for Children and Young People Project RECAP" are available at Zenodo under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

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