

## Young Lives Project: Conceptual Framework

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*YL is designed to analyse a series of distinct but closely related aspects of childhood poverty and poverty-related policy in four countries that are subject to disparate social, politico-economic and policy conditions. In order to bring theoretical, conceptual and empirical coherence to this work, YL research needs to be guided by a comprehensive framework that is informed by theory and incorporates all the key analytical elements, concepts and questions. The Mid Term Review highlighted the need for revision of the conceptual framework and this work is underway. Ultimately, the project aims to devise a conceptual framework for studying child development and wellbeing in poor country (any) contexts that anthropologists, economists, political scientists, psychologists and sociologists can all sign up to. Some of the key conceptual and analytical elements of this framework are sketched out below. However, it will remain subject to further refinement through 2006. The project has evolved a number of key constructs, whose operational definitions are as follows:*

### ***i. Defining the core constructs***

#### **Poverty:**

The project has adopted a multidimensional view of poverty as a starting-point for research. This view places emphasis upon poverty as a complex, dynamic phenomenon that is subject to both contextual specificity and multiple, interacting causes. It highlights the contributory role of risk and uncertainty, power imbalances and abuses, rights violations and insufficiency of assets. Thus, poverty is manifested primarily by diverse material deficiencies, susceptibility to risk, uncertainty and infringement, and constraint on choice. Household poverty therefore means having insufficient assets or resources, experiencing insufficient security and having access to insufficient options to ensure the safety, integration and wellbeing of all members.

In this sense, poverty is understood as a form of human adversity with grave implications for the young. Poverty influences the children's wellbeing in a variety of complex ways and can for several reasons be far more detrimental to the young than to adults. For example, children are normally more dependent on the actions and decisions of others than are adults. But it cannot be assumed that adults will always decide or act in children's best interests, especially in situations of extreme insecurity or scarcity. Hence, boys and girls living in poverty or destitution are often highly susceptible to detrimental treatment by adults, whether through acts of commission or omission, and may be placed in hazardous work, indentured, or otherwise exposed to risk.

But absolute lack of material goods and associated risk of exploitation and abuse is not the only concern. The adverse impacts of poverty in children are understood far more holistically in terms of their survival, protection, developing capacities, 'being' (thinking, feeling, values) and functioning (experiencing, roles, relationships). One of

the most serious threats to the formation of children's identity, pro-social skills and sense of self-efficacy is relative (as opposed to absolute) insufficiency and related experiences of stigma and social exclusion.

This is why the YL conception emphasises thinking, feeling, and values, all of which are subjective aspects of experience that are highly influenced by culture and by relative poverty. The pervasive and detrimental effects of such relative poverty are often most evident in societies with high levels of social differentiation in which wealth is distributed very unevenly and significant sections of the population are excluded from basic public goods and services. Often, relative poverty is more apparent in societies undergoing rapid socio-economic change, where traditional social referents no longer appear to be valid and social integration is weakened. Because subjective views about relative deprivation can play such an important part in undermining protection, capacities, functioning and wellbeing, YL gives as much priority to researching children's perspectives on these issues as it does to assessing "objective" outcomes of poverty.

### **Childhood:**

The YL project takes full account of recent theory and research from across the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Numerous fields of enquiry confirm the respects in which children are recognised as different from adults in all human societies, but with striking variations in how childhood is understood and experienced, and how it is applied to individual and groups of children, in relation to their age, gender, maturity, social status etc.<sup>2</sup> The recent history of ideas about childhood has emphasised that this is a distinctive and universal life phase. Regularities of childhood are seen to reflect shared maturational processes, shared cultural responses to children's protection and development, and shared values for childhood.<sup>3</sup>

Most notable in this regard are the universal expectations that have in recent decades been codified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989(CRC). Acknowledging that the norms derived from this instrument are increasingly used as a basis for analysis in research and policy, children are defined by the project in accordance with the CRC.<sup>4</sup> This states that a child "means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (Article 1). This definition has important consequences for the ways Young Lives conceptualises impacts of poverty, in so far as exclusion from basic health care services, basic education and the like may be judged as a deprivation of

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<sup>1</sup> Woodhead, M. and Montgomery, H. Eds (2003) *Understanding Childhood: an interdisciplinary approach*, Chichester, Wiley.

<sup>2</sup> James, A and James, A.L (2004) *Constructing Childhood: Theory, policy and social practice*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.

<sup>3</sup> Woodhead, M. (1999) Reconstructing Developmental Psychology: Some first steps', *Children and Society*, 13, pp 3-19; Burman, E (1996) 'Local, global or globalised: child development and international child rights legislation', *Childhood*, 3, 1, pp 45-67.

<sup>4</sup> Hodgkin, R and Newell, P. (2002) *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, New York, UNICEF (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

universal childhood entitlements as well as a violation of fundamental needs. Embodied within this broad definition are certain understandings, as follows:

- The ways poverty affects children are understood within a lifespan developmental framework, recognising that children at various ages may be vulnerable (or resilient) to poverty and associated adversities and that impacts may extend throughout adulthood.
- Children are more susceptible to the effects of poverty than are adults, although not all children are equally susceptible.<sup>5</sup>
- Children's relative vulnerability is due both to processes of maturation in young humans and configurations of power and dependence within society, especially bearing in mind their need for security, nurturance and teaching through to (and beyond) puberty.
- Poverty (and other adversities) may impact both directly on the child, but also indirectly through stress or disruption to care systems, family networks, community and other environmental support systems.

While due emphasis is given to universal features of children's development, the project recognises the inseparability of "young lives" from the settings, systems of relationship and cultural processes within which their health, well-being, learning and development is embedded - and the ways their childhood is inevitably socially constructed and regulated, according to socio-economic and cultural context.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, it is acknowledged that children's capacities, functioning and well-being are heavily mediated by societal norms, values and practices that govern the institution of childhood.<sup>7</sup> Although YL follows the increasingly universalised CRC definition which sets the upper limit of childhood as 18 years, it is recognised that in practice the nature of childhood and age of social majority vary widely across cultures, as well as by social group and gender. Indeed, gender, ethnicity and other social distinctions find their expression in all aspects of children's lives, in schooling, work, and informal interactions *among* children and *between* children and adults. For example, girls commonly enter adulthood well before boys and poor children generally take on adult roles sooner than wealthy children.<sup>8</sup>

Social majority may also be determined by many different gender-related criteria, including menarche, marriage, parenthood and/or the assumption of paid work. Moreover, different thresholds may apply to different activities, as where the minimum age of marriage differs from the age of criminal culpability. Recognising the wide variation in social perceptions and cultural practices, the development of education and social policies and services for children and families is nonetheless

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<sup>5</sup> Luthar, S.S. (2003) *Resilience and Vulnerability: Adaptation in the context of childhood adversities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*, Camb, Mass, Harvard University Press

<sup>7</sup> Rogoff, B. (2003) *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, New York, Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Nieuwenhuys, O (1994) *Children's Lifeworlds: gender, welfare and labour in the developing world*, London, Routledge.

increasingly shaped by universal knowledge and expectations for children's development and learning at various ages. Moreover, despite their contextual specificity many ethno-theories share a common understanding of children's development in which a broad distinction is made between early, middle and late childhood on the basis of children's evolving competencies and roles.<sup>9</sup>

Taking account of both the norms and the variations in stages of development throughout childhood is the starting point for YL methodology. It is hoped that by tracking children at 3/4 year intervals the critical thresholds associated with key phases of childhood will be revealed, notably during infancy, at the point of transition to school at 5 years, and around puberty at 12 years. At the same time, through its longitudinal design the project will tease out major variations in pathways through childhood, notably children excluded from basic entitlements (such as to health and education) and children engaged in economic activity from an early age.

Another crucial feature of the YL conceptualisation of young humans is that children are not the passive recipients of experience or victims of circumstances beyond their control but social actors or agents with a role in shaping their own destiny. This signifies that they have the ability to understand, and potentially to intervene in and influence their own condition and circumstances, as well as the situation of their peers, families and others.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the project recognises that all too often children's agency is circumscribed by oppressive circumstances and authoritarian child rearing practices. The project does not seek to discount or underplay the devastating impacts of poverty upon children. Nor does it deny that governments, employers and other adults and adult institutions are the prime duty bearers when it comes to eliminating childhood poverty. Similarly, it is acknowledged that children are dependent on others in many ways that are fundamental to their survival, development, protection and wellbeing. However, the seeming vulnerability of children goes hand in hand with their relative adaptability, and makes for creative adjustment (within and between generations) in the face of changing environmental pressures, opportunities and aspirations, their (and their caregivers') capacities for creative decision taking, physical, psychosocial and cultural reconstruction. This helps explain the extraordinary resilience of many children in many (although by no means all) difficult circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rogoff, B., Sellers, M.J. Pirotta, S., Fox, N., and White, S.H. (1975) 'Age of assignment of roles and responsibilities to children: a cross-cultural survey', *Human Development*, 18, pp 353-369; Punch, S. (2001) Household division of labour: generation, gender, age, birth order and sibling composition' *Work, Employment and Society*, 15, 4, pp 803-23.

<sup>10</sup> Kirby, P and Woodhead, M. (2003) 'Children's Participation in Society' in Montgomery, H, Burr, R and Woodhead, M (Eds) *Changing Childhoods: local and global*, Chichester, Wiley; Boyden, J. and Mann, G. 'Children's Risk, Resilience, and Coping in Extreme Situations.' In Michael Ungar (ed) *Pathways to Resilience*. Sage Publications.

<sup>11</sup> Masten, AS (2001). *Ordinary magic - resilience processes in development*. *American Psychologist*, 56, 227-238.

Recognition of children as social agents is reflected in the project both methodologically, through the approach to research and policy influencing, and in terms of the research findings, as follows:

- children are key sources of evidence within the research
- children are contributors to family livelihoods strategies - through their care and domestic work, paid labour etc.

### **Household, family and community:**

Household, family and community play a fundamental role in mediating childhood poverty, and therefore assume a central place in the YL analysis. As such the project requires standard definitions of all three as a means of ensuring consistency throughout the research.

The YL conception of household draws on the World Bank (2001) definition as: “a group of people who live together, usually pool their income and eat at least one meal together when they are at home. This does not include people who have permanently migrated or are considered visitors”. For YL purposes, those who migrate and stay away from home for a notable period of time, including those who remit income, will be researched through the exploration of wider kinship networks. It is recognised that households are not necessarily cohesive units and that household members may act autonomously of - or in conflict with - each other. Hence, considerable attention will be paid to intra-household dynamics (including possible age and gender distinctions), especially in so far as these affect children’s access to resources and their wellbeing more generally.

YL conceptualises the family as: “a collection of individuals with a continuing legal, genetic and/or emotional relationship who share goals and values, and have long-term commitments to one another. Society relies on the family group to provide for the economic and protective needs of individuals, especially children and the elderly.”<sup>12</sup> Relationships within the family tend to be based on common ancestry, marriage, fosterage or fictive kinship. Although the child and the household are the key units of observation, and childhood the key unit of analysis in the study, it is recognised that family ties and influences are fundamental in children’s wellbeing and stretch well beyond the home. Hence, important family relationships that extend outside the household will be considered, mostly through the qualitative research into alliances and networks.

It is not assumed that the “community”, or the gathering of persons which acts as the basic unit of YL clusters, constitutes anything meaningful in terms of shared interests, values, or lives. Hence, the project has intentionally adopted a restrictive conceptualisation of community that emphasises the physical aggregation of persons in a particular site rather than any sense of social connectedness. Thus the YL understanding of community is: “a group of people who reside in a specific locality,

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<sup>12</sup> American Academy of Family Physicians (1984) (2003)

share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage”.<sup>13</sup> Given that “community” may not mean a great deal to residents of the same locality, the community questionnaires will be complemented by full investigation of children’s and households’ alliances and networks.

### **Policy:**

In the broadest sense policy can be defined as “a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors”.<sup>14</sup> YL considers three broad types of public policies: a) those that are specifically child-focused, such as health, nutrition, education, physical protection and child-focused cash transfers; b) general poverty reduction, development and social policies (including agriculture, trade, infrastructure development, and labour policies) that may not specifically target but do impact children; and c) policies that shape the effectiveness of institutions that are responsible for child-related issues. The project is concerned with the full policy cycle - from the development of policy plans through to the allocation of related budgets and policy implementation over time, simultaneously recognising that the policy process is non-linear and dynamic.<sup>15</sup>

Depending on the degree of administrative, political and fiscal decentralisation in each country, and the balance of power between the various tiers of government, policy may be the responsibility of different levels of government – national, regional/provincial or local. The project aims to analyse policy at all three levels. Because the allowance of adequate finances is crucial in translating policy commitments into action on the ground, budget monitoring is another priority for research. However, governments can develop policies to mitigate impacts on vulnerable groups of the population. As the reach of globalisation expands, regional and international policies will have an increasing impact on children. National and sub-national policies are also likely to be significantly shaped by the priorities and strategies of international organisations such as the UN and World Bank.

The policy focus for each country will be determined through discussions with stakeholders, the aim being to identify issues that are of significance for childhood poverty, help fill knowledge gaps and are amenable to policy intervention.<sup>16</sup>

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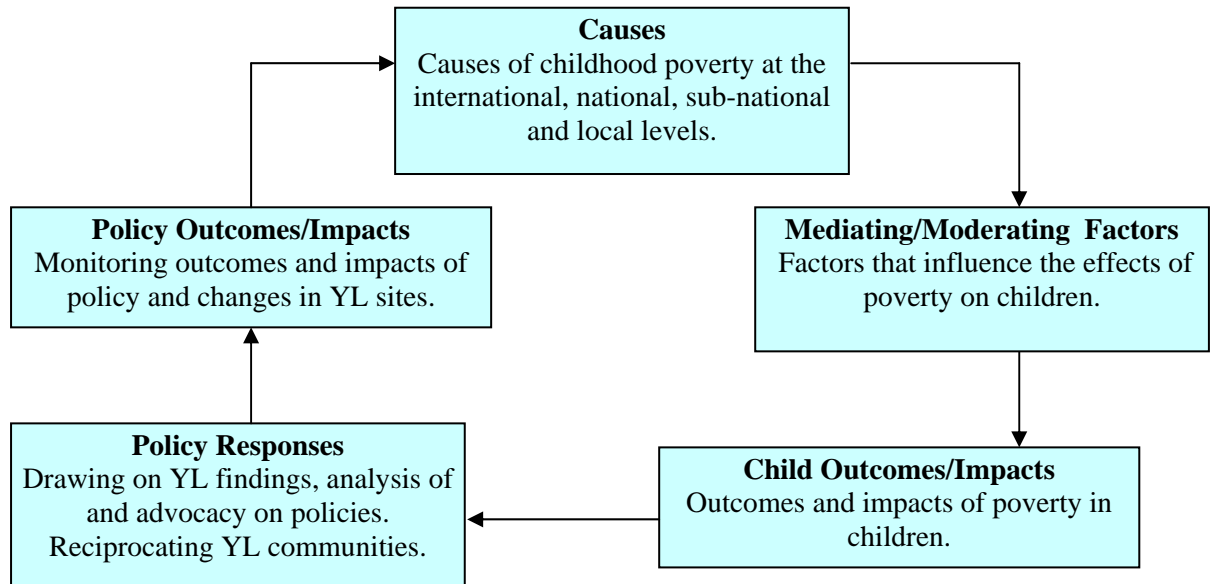
<sup>13</sup> Humboldt Area Foundation

<sup>14</sup> Julius Court, Ingie Hovland and John Young (eds), 2005 (Jan) Bridging Research and Policy in Development: Evidence and the Change Process  
[http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/BRP\\_ITDG.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/BRP_ITDG.html)

<sup>15</sup> Keeley and Scoones, 2003. Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: A Review IDS Working Paper 89, Institute of Development Studies(IDS), Sussex

<sup>16</sup> The 5-year Policy Calendar in Appendix II is an initial attempt to map out these policy priorities. It will be further developed following discussions with YL staff and country-based advisory panels.

*ii. Analytical framework*



As noted, the YL research falls into two analytically separable dimensions, one of which focuses on the childhood poverty effects of policy, and the other, the outcomes and impacts for children of living in poverty. A synergy between these two dimensions is created through an iterative process whereby, a) analysis of trends and policies at the international, national and sub-national levels contextualises findings arising from investigation of YL children and, b) research with the two YL cohorts enables the project to better interpret and understand the childhood poverty effects of policy. The project employs a cascade analysis that considers broad policies and macro level causes of childhood poverty, more localised mediating and moderating factors in communities and households, and poverty outcomes and impacts in children.

**Causes of poverty:**

In accordance with our view of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon we aim to explore causality in its many forms, recognising the critical interplay of socio-political and material forces. Thus, we perceive shortages of material goods - income, assets and other forms of financial capital - as very often being a consequence of power and hence regard power analysis as central to our discussion. In this sense, we are concerned to highlight the effects of violations and extreme concentrations of power. However, much work in economics suggests the importance of recognising the subtlety of power dynamics, especially at the local level: even relatively small differences in power or concentrations can result in large differences in material goods outcomes, often in circumstances where those who are better off have very little evident power.

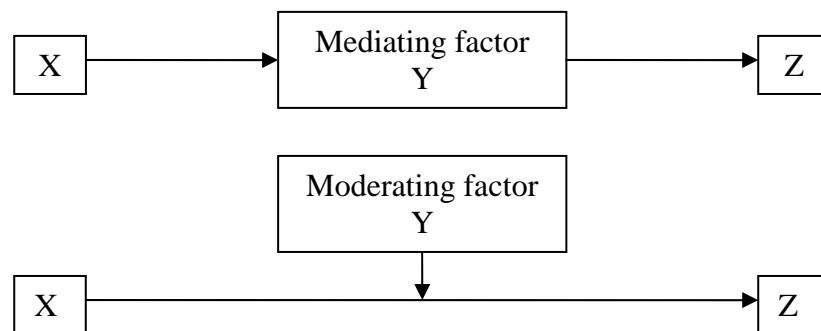
Our analysis includes structural or systemic causes of poverty that operate at the level of entire social groups, as in the case of institutionalised labour market discrimination against people of a particular caste or ethnic status. These structural causes are very often deeply embedded within a society and responsible for chronic poverty that is transmitted through many generations of a population. Development and poverty reduction policies may serve to either reinforce or ameliorate these structural factors, which is why policy monitoring and analysis is so crucial to YL. Causes operating at the level of entire populations or social groups may also be situational, as in the case of environmental or technological catastrophes such as drought or development-induced displacement. Very often populations that are poor due to structural disadvantage are also prone to situational determinants that further exacerbate their poverty, as their social marginalisation forces them to live in areas that are ill-suited to human habitation or work in unregulated economic sectors where accidents are commonplace and informal or formalised support systems are weak. These are the kinds of conditions that we aim to assess through contextual analysis involving key informant interviews and secondary sources at the international, national and local level and more micro-level data obtained from community and household questionnaires, community timelines and focus groups.

Poverty can also be the result of personal circumstances that are distinctive to particular individuals or families. These might include personal crises such as ill-health, death or family separation, all of which can increase susceptibility to economic misfortune, attrition of social networks and safety nets, or income reduction. Certain phases in the life or domestic cycle can also be associated with greater economic vulnerability - as when households have large numbers of very young, dependent children for example. In these kinds of situations poverty can be short term or transient, although in the many societies that lack an effective system of social security and/or insurance such states are not likely to be temporary and often lead to a longer term and more profound downward spiral into destitution.<sup>17</sup> These kinds of micro-level trends are highly amenable to research via panel methodology and life history narratives.

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<sup>17</sup> Dercon, S. "Income Risk, Coping Strategies and Safety Nets", 2002, *World Bank Research Observer*, December, Vol. 17 (2), pp. 141-66, [PDF]; Dercon, S. "Vulnerability: A Micro Perspective", paper presented at the ABCDE Europe conference, Amsterdam, May 2005, pdf

When considering the effects of poverty in children, YL recognises that they are not always obvious and direct but influenced by a range of intervening mediating and moderating factors (see diagram).



The distinction between mediating and moderating factors is important for reasons of analytical clarity but also because different statistical procedures are required to test for them.

A *mediating factor* Y could be explained as a “connecting link” between two variables X and Z. X influences Y, and Y then influences Z. In other words, the influence of X on Z is not direct but *mediated* by Y. For example, the conceptual framework of Young Lives assumes the existence of factors that mediate the link between “causes of poverty” and “child outcomes/impacts”. In other words, it is assumed that the multidimensional causes of poverty do *not directly* affect children’s wellbeing, development etc. in all cases, but often have an *indirect* impact on children’s lives through their effects on community/family/individual factors that are themselves closely related to child wellbeing. For example, it could be argued that structural inequality (a cause of poverty) leads to unequal education opportunities and feelings of relative deprivation among poor children (mediating factors), which in turn contribute to low school achievement (outcome) and unemployment (impact).

Appreciating that the effects of adversity on children are highly influenced by both supportive and destructive elements in the wider environment, we are concerned with the *moderating factors* that influence the outcomes and impacts of poverty for children. These are variables that influence the strength and direction of the association between cause and effect. In other words, moderating factors are factors that *strengthen or weaken* (buffer) the effect of poverty on children. Assessments of the moderating forces that undermine children’s development and wellbeing in the industrialised countries of the North tend to focus on severe family and personal difficulties, such as recurrent maltreatment, parental mental illness, family separation

and divorce.<sup>18</sup> Whether these phenomena also exacerbate the effects of childhood poverty in the YL research sites remains to be seen.

The positive reinforcements in children's lives are often described as "protective factors" or "protective processes." They operate at different levels and through different mechanisms -individual, family, communal, institutional, and so on - and frequently correlate with and complement one another. Their effects are shown only in their interaction with risk. Thus, the presence of at least one supportive adult can have an enormous impact on a child's resilience.<sup>19</sup> Family members and significant others can play a major role in helping children interpret, "process," and adjust to, or overcome, difficult life experiences.<sup>20</sup> Acting as mentors, adults can provide models of and reinforcement for problem solving, motivation, and other coping skills.

Although it is understood that risk is not constructed the same way in all societies, it is generally accepted that the interaction of risk and protective factors plays an important role in the social and psychological development of boys and girls in all contexts. Social markers such as gender and age can also act as moderators. Analysis of these intervening factors provides a dynamic picture which helps give meaning to the variation and complexity in children's experiences of and responses to poverty.

### **Effects of Poverty:**

When it comes to assessing the effects of poverty in children's lives, we distinguish between outputs, outcomes and impacts. Outputs are the products of a particular activity or policy intervention - for example the number of clinics built in an area following a directive to increase health coverage. Outcomes on the other hand are the short-term changes that result from these outputs, in this case the number of children who are healthier as a consequence of being treated at these clinics. The impacts are the longer-term and broader effects. In the case of an intervention such as a clinic, the impacts reflect the intended aims, for example an increase in the performance of pupils at school due to their improved health.

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<sup>18</sup> Garnezy, N., and Rutter, M. (Eds.). (1983). *Stress, coping and development in children*. New York: McGraw-Hill; Werner, E., and Smith, R. (1998). *Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York: Adams, Bannister, Cox.

<sup>19</sup> Werner, E., and Smith, R. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press.

<sup>20</sup> McCallin, M. and Fozzard, S. (1991). *The impact of traumatic events on the psychosocial wellbeing of Mozambican refugee women and children*. Geneva: International Catholic Child Bureau; Punamaki, R-L. (1987). Content of and factors affecting coping modes among Palestinian children. *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives*, 6(1), 86-98; Richman, J. M., and Bowen, G. L. (1997). School failure: An ecological-interactional-developmental perspective. In M. W. Fraser (Ed.), *Risk and resilience in childhood* (pp. 95-116.). Washington: NASW Press; Turton, R., Straker, G., and Mooza, F. (1990). The experiences of violence in the lives of township youth in "unrest" and "normal" conditions. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 21(2), 77-84.

As indicated, our cascade analysis is concerned with indicators, outputs and outcomes in different domains and at different levels. Beginning with the assumption that both policy and community and household decision-making and action are key forces affecting childhood poverty, we are concerned with identifying the outputs from these different domains insofar as they affect children. Policy outputs may be represented through indicators such as service provision, cash transfers, and the like, while household outputs may be gauged through means such as livelihood strategies - for example income or asset diversification. The outcomes of these policies, decisions and actions are considered in the extent to which they actually make a difference to YL children, as for instance in their quality of life and well being. Impacts of policy or household decisions are gauged through evaluation of whether policy or household responses to poverty reduction are having a lasting impact - positive or negative- on children, for example in terms of educational achievement, or occupational skills. As indicated in the following section, outcomes and impacts in children are gauged in terms of:

- Survival and capacities (personal endowments, such as pro-social skills, cognition, health and nutrition)
- Functioning (utilisation of those endowments, such as children's strategies, actions, roles)
- Protection (for example, experiences of exploitation, exclusion and the like)
- States of being (resilience and coping and subjective views, thinking, values and feelings about personal identity, evaluation of self, relationships with others, etc)

Effects of childhood poverty frequently resonate throughout life, with long-term consequences for health and capacity in adulthood.<sup>21</sup> This can be conceptualised as *life-course poverty transmission*, in which the focus is on factors that prevent children's development, with impacts for their adult years. *Intergenerational transmission of poverty*, on the other hand, has an impact on the possibility of poverty being transmitted to future generations, through the experiences and developmental impacts on the current generation of children.

Factors underlying these distinct forms of poverty transmission may overlap, but not necessarily so. As many of the impacts of childhood poverty are long term and many become evident only in adulthood, we acknowledge that YL will focus on outcomes more consistently than on impacts and may only be able to gauge impacts following several rounds of data gathering. As noted, life course poverty transmission will be assessed through the older cohort of children and inter-generational transmission through assessment of their offspring.

*Policy monitoring and analysis* is employed in YL as a two-way process in which, on the one hand, empirical findings on childhood poverty from YL sites are assessed for

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<sup>21</sup> Lockwood, M. (2001) 'Childhood poverty: A conceptual framework and research agenda'. Unpublished YL paper, London. July

their policy implications and on the other, specific policies and budgetary allocations for policy are examined in terms of their consequences for children (particularly YL children) living in poverty. Such investigation takes place at the international, national and sub-national levels, the former two providing a broad contextualisation for YL research and analysis in the four study countries and the latter focusing on YL sites. Where possible, actual policy impacts are highlighted; the local level research in particular being designed to track the consequences of specific policies and policy developments in YL sites.

In keeping with the conceptualisation of childhood poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, a holistic view of policy is employed, in which general macro-economic, social sector development and poverty reduction policies are scrutinised together with policies that focus explicitly on children, such as education, child care and the like. In order to have an impact on policy formulation and evaluations, the sequencing and foci of the policy research work is shaped by the specific policy processes and frameworks of individual study countries. Although this makes for a complex process to manage and represent, it is essential in order to ensure maximum national and sub-national level relevance and impacts.

### *iii. Research questions*

*YL research involves three interconnected questions, the basic elements of which are described briefly below.*

#### **What are the factors (sub-national, community and household/family) that act on children's lives, to either increase or reduce poverty and its effects?**

The first question involves analysis of causal, mediating and moderating factors in childhood poverty, or in other words the forces that act on children to either increase or reduce their poverty and its effects. This question is addressed through the broad contextual analysis of policies and trends at the global, national and sub-national levels that affect YL children and sites (described below) and by quantitative and qualitative research on factors influencing children's experiences of poverty at the local level. This local-level research is conducted mainly through community and household questionnaires administered with the full sample and through qualitative instruments applied with a stratified sub-sample of YL children, and members of their households and communities.

In line with the YL conceptualisation of childhood poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is influenced by a broad array of personal and environmental forces, indicators on these mediating and moderating factors are grouped into the following conceptual domains:

#### *Children's social ecologies*

This component of the analysis provides insight into the values and norms, social relations and structures that are applied in the access, utilisation and management of

assets and resources, and mitigation against the adverse material, psycho-emotional and social effects of poverty. Among other things, it focuses on the economic effects of participation in formal and informal social institutions and networks, such as extended kin groupings and CSOs, and the costs of being excluded. It addresses the values and norms underlying social cohesion and collective effort, as in exchange labour or revolving loan funds, as well as the social losses associated with exclusionary and individualised systems of capital formation.<sup>22</sup>

### *Political formation*

This element focuses on the distribution of both informal and formal, covert and overt, forms of power and the effects of infringements and concentrations of power on children's and households' choices, access to assets and planning more generally. Recognising that there are often major power differences among children within the same household, emphasis is given in YL not just to violations, discrimination and exclusion at the community level, but also to intra-household power dynamics. Intra-household power dynamics will be considered through analysis of decisions in relation to resource allocation, protection, care-giving, and time use. It will encompass carer/dependent relationships, differences between siblings, the nature of inter-generational bargains and obligations, the trade-offs implicit in family strategies for investing in children, and possible "generational fractures".<sup>23</sup>

### *Human capacity*

This is the personal endowment of households and social networks (including peer networks) upon whom children depend/of which they are a part. It includes education levels, social and life skills, roles, attitudes, values and practices. In relation to care-givers and household-heads it also entails consideration of the balance of productive, reproductive, community work, ideas about children's development and child rearing, the nature of familial aspirations for children, and norms that shape the obligations between generations, amongst other issues. It will also involve analysis of the attitudes, values and roles of children who care for younger siblings.

### *Assets*

This component focuses on income, assets and other forms of financial capital which are needed to sustain the household, quality of and access to public goods and services and the status and utilisation of the built and natural environments. It covers elements such as control/ownership and stability of tenure of both private and communal property; credit, savings and income (including remittances); infrastructure; safety; and food security. The focus will be on vulnerability to and

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<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Putnam (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster

<sup>23</sup> Subrahmanian, (2005) 'Childhood Poverty: A Review of Key Issues to Inform the YL Project.' Unpublished. Institute of Development Studies, Sussex

forms and levels of risk and uncertainty in relation to assets. It will also examine risk reduction strategies such as livelihoods diversification and migration.

**What effects do multi-dimensional aspects of poverty have on children's functioning, capacities and well-being during the course of childhood?**

The second research question examines the multiple and changing ways that children experience poverty and the many impacts it has in their lives, focusing on:

- the extent to which early-life inequalities in opportunities relate to inequalities in outcomes in later life
- changes in poverty effects over the course of childhood
- critical transitions and thresholds during childhood and between childhood and adulthood

In this line of enquiry there is an emphasis on understanding how social and personal distinctions among children (notably linked to gender, ethnicity, religion, and birth order) affect exposure to and impacts of poverty. This question draws on information provided through questionnaires administered with carers and the two cohorts of children, as well as through semi-structured instruments applied with a stratified sub-sample of children and a smaller number of in-depth enquiries of a case-study nature. Collective child-focused methods will be used where possible, although this will be constrained by the degree of dispersal of YL sites.

Poverty can affect children's capacities, the way they use their time, their relationships, protection and their integration and wellbeing. The outcomes and impacts of poverty on children are addressed in the YL analysis through investigation into a series of distinct conceptual domains (outlined below), although it is recognised that there is some overlap between these domains.

YL will research the effects of poverty on *children's survival and capacities as follows*. Children's survival,<sup>24</sup> physical health and nutritional status will be assessed at each round of data collection, as will their pro-social skills and competencies and their life skills. Given that cognitive development is known to be fundamentally influenced by culture and valid measures of "intelligence" are controversial and difficult to apply in YL's diverse economic and cultural contexts, the project is for the most part concentrating on "cultural competencies", contextually meaningful skills and abilities that are valued within the culture and will affect children's prospects for the future.

Clearest examples include measures of educational achievement (notably maths and reading at primary level) which are significant indicators for a majority of children in YL societies where basic schooling is already the norm, where universal education is a key policy goal and poverty reduction strategy, and where educational outcomes are

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<sup>24</sup> For technical reasons and because there is already a considerable amount of research on the subject, it was not thought appropriate to examine infant mortality. However, YL does record cause of death for all those children who die during the project's existence.

major determinants of children's long term prospects. But YL takes a broad view of cultural competencies, recognising for example that vast numbers of children in YL countries are initiated early into competencies relevant to a variety of work activities. Assessing children's social skills, for example in relation to peers as well as adults, at home, in school, work and community, provides additional indicators of children's capacities.

More subtly, children's psychosocial capacities are also affected in different ways by aspects of poverty. For example, children's agency, or ability and opportunity to make their own decisions, and their self-esteem will be affected by the differential effects of poverty in their lives. Those who are consistently the poorest of the poor report increased feelings of shame and low self-esteem whereas some children who are able to help their families report feelings of increased self-efficacy. The YL team is developing simple psychosocial measures that can be administered with the full sample. Psychosocial instrument development builds on extensive experience of in-depth qualitative work with children in a range of poverty contexts, for example by inviting children to identify with a series of everyday feelings (about pride versus shame, agency versus helplessness, respect versus stigma) and respond in terms of "how far they sound like you".

Poverty affects the roles and responsibilities assumed by children, their relationships, strategies for managing risk, and way they act or use their time more generally. We have termed this *children's functioning*, which is regarded as reflecting children's agency and adaptation to their environment. For example, many children play an active part in the household poverty reduction strategies, engaging in paid or unpaid work on a daily basis or even migrating in order to remit income. YL will aim to establish how their actions in the world affect children's perspectives and opportunities to escape from poverty. In addition, it will explore how successful are the various strategies used by children and families in helping them to escape poverty.

Establishing the range of children's activities, (including school, domestic, work, leisure activities and assessing their feelings about these activities) will be an important tool for understanding children's positive and negative engagement with aspects of their lives. Child measures are also being designed to capture the subtleties of children's perspectives on their life situation, including for example their perspectives on their parents' valuation of their activities and aspirations for their future. While extensive data on these themes can be gained through full sample surveys, more intensive qualitative studies can provide intensive complementary data on the subtleties of children's lives (e.g. through weekly/seasonal diaries, combined with other time use instruments and detailed interviewing of sub-samples selected to highlight the impact of specific poverty circumstances).

*Children's protection, relationships and integration* are another important area of research into functioning. Future rounds will assess children's own social networks and how these represent additional sources of economic and practical support in times of need, as well as arenas for the development of social skills. On the other hand, there will also be a focus upon the problems entailed in social exclusion. The issue of

social protection is especially important. When families are under severe economic pressure they are often unable to prevent their offspring from being exploited at work or in other contexts. Sometimes, children who are less valued by their families may be indentured or trafficked so as to provide funds to sustain the rest of the household and sometimes when parents or other carers confront the stress of unemployment or debt, children become the butt of their anxiety and suffer abuse.

Given the sensitivity of these kinds of topics, they will be addressed primarily through qualitative methods such as unstructured and semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-sample of children in the older cohort.

YL is also concerned about children's "*states of being*" (thinking, feeling and values). Young people's *subjective views* about their lives and experiences play an important part in shaping their wellbeing and functioning. The social aspects of poverty, including stigmatisation and exclusion are known to be felt particularly keenly by children, especially in middle and late childhood, and impact on their lives in multitudinous ways. For example, boys and girls who are consistently excluded from events or denigrated because of their poverty are likely to suffer low self-esteem, which may in turn undermine their educational performance and coping.<sup>25</sup>

As noted, according to children's own perception, relative poverty is often more important than absolute poverty, especially in settings where there is significant social inequality and concentration of power. In other words, children often experience poverty more through the stigmatisation and humiliation associated with social denigration and exclusion than through lack of resources. In this way, subjective views help provide insight into the psychological, social and emotional outcomes of poverty. Research in this area will be designed with a view to identifying not only factors that impact negatively upon children's wellbeing but also resources that might be drawn upon to positive effect. This will allow us to consider personal resilience as well as suffering.

The identification of protective factors alongside risks is not only important in terms of our understanding of psychosocial wellbeing but it may also provide an understanding of resilience and a basis from which to develop appropriate policy interventions. Semi-structured methods will be used with a sub-sample of children to map their perceptions of risks and resources - material, social, emotional and other - and develop their criteria for wellbeing.

### **To what extent are current international and national policies effective in reducing childhood poverty in the study countries?**

This research question relates specifically to policy responses and impacts and is an essential component of the analysis of causes and consequences of childhood poverty

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<sup>25</sup> Boyden, J, Eyber, C., Feeny, T. and Scott, C. (2004) *Child Poverty, Perspectives from Belarus, Bolivia, Sierra Leone, India and Kenya*. Christian Children's Fund, Virginia, USA.

and at the same time ensures that YL research contributes to key national and international poverty reduction and development policy debates. This work will focus on

- evaluating national poverty strategies (NPS) and their efficacy in holistically tackling childhood poverty (based where possible on the concepts mapped out above)
- child-sensitive local policy and budget monitoring/analysis to assess the outcomes and impacts of NPS policy commitments at the sub-national and community levels
- more in-depth analysis of particular national policies with either direct or indirect impacts on children.

In the latter case, as discussed above three broad policy areas have been identified in consultation with country teams: a) social protection, b) basic services and inequities and c) policies promoting economic empowerment and their intra-household impacts. Specific country manifestations of these policy areas, however, will be decided after undertaking systematic literature reviews to determine where YL can best add value.

The over-arching aim is to contribute to understanding which policy responses are most effective in preventing childhood poverty and avoiding the transmission of poverty throughout the lifecycle and to subsequent generations. The line of enquiry on *national poverty strategies* will focus on the extent to which their content reflects a multi-dimensional perspective on childhood poverty; adequately considers the unintended (and possible adverse) effects on children of poverty initiatives aimed at aggregate household poverty reduction; and includes child-focused indicators that can be monitored and to which governments can be held accountable. Empirical evidence to date suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to poverty reduction often neglects the uneven impacts of development policies on different household members and also among different groups of children. We will be particularly concerned to investigate whether NPS recognise that children in different social categories experience different levels of exposure to poverty and related deprivations due to discriminatory values and practices associated with gender, ethnicity and other social distinctions.

At the sub-national level our attention will shift to the *implementation of specific national and international policy commitments and programmes for children at the grassroots level*. We will be concerned with both the type of policy programmes developed and the resources allocated to them. In the context of national initiatives to strengthen decentralisation and fiscal devolution in all our YL countries, as a longitudinal study YL is well-placed to make a significant contribution in this field. Our sample design provides insight into children's experiences in varied sub-national social and political contexts and reveals how these varied contexts may shape the efficacy of public resource allocation decisions.

The third line of policy inquiry will be concerned with three policy areas that have particular relevance to childhood poverty: social protection, social service equity and quality, and the intra-household impacts of economic empowerment policies. In the

case of social protection, our focus will be on the ways in which childhood poverty is affected by different forms of *social protection* mechanisms in diverse politico-economic contexts. Here we will be able to contribute important insights to growing debates about the feasibility of social protection in developing country contexts. Our research on policies promoting *social service quality and equity* will investigate the implementation of social services at the sub-national level and the institutional mechanisms involved. Social sector policies are central to ensuring children's development and wellbeing and reducing their poverty. However, data on social services tend to be quantitative and focus on access, at the expense of equally important dimensions of equity, equality and sustainability. Complementing quantitative findings with qualitative information on the effectiveness of particular delivery mechanisms along these dimensions is crucial to understanding the impacts of social service programmes on children living in poverty.

Our last policy area of enquiry relates to *policies that promote economic empowerment* (e.g. livelihood diversification, provision of credit, market reforms). Pro-poor growth is a pillar of poverty reduction policies but does not necessarily ensure that all those living in poverty will benefit. It is therefore important to understand the differential intra-community and intra-household effects these policies might have and to highlight complementary policies and programmes that may be necessary to mitigate inequity. While children are often excluded from such debates, policies impacting community and household economies may have a greater impact on the wellbeing of the young than policies directly targeting children.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> e.g. Ansell, 2005; Jones et al., 2005