

# Lien's story

## A profile from Young Lives in Vietnam



*Lien is 13 years old. She lives with her parents, and her brother and sisters in an economic development zone just 45 minutes from Hanoi. Lien's parents both have to work long hours and a long way from home. So Lien does all the cooking, washing and gardening and takes her younger brother and sister to school every morning.*

Lien and her family live in a small house with a vegetable garden. There are two rooms in the house; the front room is the living room with a television and a sewing machine and also two beds. The back room is where the parents sleep. The kitchen and toilet are on the left hand side of the house. The area where Lien and her family live is an economic development zone just 45 minutes from Hanoi. It is well connected in terms of roads and transport.

The current economic situation means that the family struggles to make ends meet. As a result, Lien's parents both have to work a long way from home. Her father is a bricklayer, her mother works in a pottery factory in the local town. Both of them have to leave early for work and come home late. Her mother leaves for work at 5.30 am and her father goes to work at 6am, and 5.30am in the winter. So Lien does all the cooking, washing and gardening and takes her younger brother and sister to school every morning. Because there is not much space in the house she sleeps next door at her uncle's, where there is also a table where she can study.



Lien describes her typical day: "I wake up in the morning, wash my face, brush my teeth, go to school, I come home at noon, have lunch, wash the dishes, go to school, hang around, pick vegetables, cook rice, go to bed."

Her mother knows that Lien has a lot of responsibilities in the house and that it is difficult for her to support her daughter with her homework because she is so tired when she comes home from work. But she doesn't worry about her; she feels she can look after herself and that she gets on well at school. Lien's mother says she has been to the school several times and that they send home the children's marks each month. She says that her daughter talks to her father more than to her. He is the one who makes the decisions about her education.





“Is there any thing makes you worry about her when she is in school?”

*No, she has gained her teacher's confidence, and she also helps her teacher in doing things for her class.*

What do you think makes a child want to leave school?

*If they can't keep up with the class, are too lazy to study at home, or are scolded a lot by their parents.*

What would you do if your daughter wanted to give up studying?

*Encourage her. Scolding is of no use.”*

She is more worried about her youngest son: “I go to work far away from home, so I sometimes worry about my youngest son, he's an active boy. I'm afraid that he might fall into a lake or river.”

Lien says that two people, one a boy aged 5, drowned by the bridge on the road between her home and school and that she too is afraid this might happen.

Lien thinks studying is “important for my future because it brings me knowledge.” She says her parents encourage her to study hard and pay attention to the teachers.

“Which subject do you like most?”

*Drawing, English because I often get good marks in these subjects*

Which subject you don't like?

*Biology.*

Why?

*Because I can't understand biology lessons.”*

The things she likes most in school is meeting her teachers, being with friends and learning new things. She also likes doing high or long jump, and marathons ... but hasn't won any prizes yet. She has a close friend with whom she can share many things. She always welcomes and helps new members in class by advising them to get along with everybody and not to speak ill of anyone.

Lien enjoys looking after the vegetable garden at home. She picks water morning glory and mustard greens with her little brother and sister and they all enjoy this. She says she likes this time “because my younger brother and sister go with me and we can talk to one another while picking.”



She likes to cook rice because this is easy; she just has to plug in the rice cooker. Her elder sister, who taught her to cook, has gone to the city to study.

Lien spends a lot of time with her grandparents. She loves her grandfather very much. He often takes care of her because her grandmother is paralysed. They sometimes give her sweets when she goes to their house.

A year earlier, her grandparents lent her parents money to buy a sewing-machine. It cost a million *dong* (US\$57). In the summer, Lien uses the machine to earn money for her family. She works from 8am to 5pm, with a break for lunch and rests when she needs them. She earns about 20,000-30,000 *dong* a day (US\$1.14–US\$1.71), which she gives to her mother. If she needs to buy clothes, her mother will give her money from these earnings.

Whenever she feels sad, Lien talks to her uncle or aunt. She used to tell her elder sister and friends about things that made her happy. But since her sister went away to study, she talks to her uncle or aunt. When she is sad, her uncle says to her: “Silly! Just don’t do that next time!” These words upset her, but she doesn’t tell her parents.

Her happiest memories are when she was in Grade 8 and she stood in the pouring rain with her classmates and it was like taking a shower, and another time when she was 10 and there was a party and she and her classmates went to their teacher’s house. She says she gets on well with her neighbours and helps them, for example by bringing the washing in if it rains and they are not at home.

*Lien enjoys looking after the vegetable garden at home. She says she likes this time “because my younger brother and sister go with me and we can talk to one another while picking.”*



## Country context: Vietnam

The population of Vietnam in 2007 was an estimated 85 million, divided almost equally between men and women. The population is about 75 per cent rural. However, this picture is changing, as rates of migration towards the cities are high. Rural areas have substantially higher rates of poverty and poorer access to services than urban areas.

- Vietnam ranks 105 out of 177 countries in the 2007/8 United Nations Human Development Report.
- Economic growth averaged 7.5% between 1990 and 2004 and poverty fell rapidly.
- More than half the population is under the age of 25.
- Enrolment rates at primary school are 97%.
- Ethnic minorities account for 39.3% of all poor people, despite representing only 12.6% of the total population.

Vietnam is a low-income country, but the conditions for children have been improving and are generally much better than when their parents young. After a period of slow growth with rampant inflation in the mid-1980s, the Government launched the Doi Moi or 'renovation' programme of comprehensive socio-economic reforms in 1986. The reforms emphasised a shift from a centrally-planned economy based on government ownership to a multi-sector economy based on market principles. They also promoted the opening up of the economy to foreign investment and trade.

In addition to policies aimed at promoting economic growth and trade, the Government of Vietnam has applied a number of targeted programmes addressing poverty and social deprivation. The country has also benefited from significant foreign aid inflows, many of which have been targeted at poverty reduction. Despite this impressive progress, however, gaps in poverty rates by rural-urban residence, by region and by ethnic groups have widened over time.

**Sources:** Young Lives Round 2 Survey Report: Vietnam; 2007/8 UN Human Development Report.

## Economic growth in Vietnam and its effect on children's lives

The effect of the rapid economic growth in Vietnam for Lien has meant that she has far more responsibilities and work in the home because her parents are working long hours far from home. A Young Lives policy paper that looks at the social impacts of trade liberalisation and asks how childhood poverty can be reduced found that one of the micro-level effects of economic policies on children was that children might either be withdrawn from school or, like Lien, be forced to shoulder more domestic work responsibilities (including taking care of younger siblings) to compensate for the greater engagement of their parents, especially mothers, in the paid workforce. The paper continues: 'If trade liberalisation necessitates greater adult involvement in the paid workforce, the quantity and quality of caring time for children is also likely to suffer, especially in the absence of affordable quality childcare.' It also notes that: 'Changes in household consumption are likely to have an impact on resources allocated to children. In particular, the quantity and nutritional content of children's food, and their access to medicine, schooling, educational materials and clothing may be affected. The intensity and specific patterns and effects of these changes are likely to be mediated by intra-household decision-making and resource allocation dynamics. Resource allocation will also depend on how households respond to economic shocks. For example, some households may shield the effects of reductions in overall household income or children's consumption, at least in the short-run, by increasing the labour supply of adults, reducing food consumption among adults or selling household assets. However, this is not the case in all households and they will often discriminate against girls, allocating resources away from girls in favour of boys.'

**Source:** Young Lives Policy Brief 1: *The Social Impacts of Trade Liberalisation: How Can Childhood Poverty Be Reduced?*

Young Lives is a unique long-term research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. By following a group of children over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty, and provide evidence to support the development of effective policies. We are working with 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. The story here is one of a set of twenty taken from the interviews our researchers did with the children individually and in groups. Each child's story has a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that the children are having to contend with, but also gives a wider picture in relation to children's lives. This ranges from child work and education, to migration, health, domestic violence, inequality, gender, and individual circumstances such as being an orphan or being disabled.

The children and their families who are participating in Young Lives willing share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality. For this reason, the children's names have been changed. The accompanying photos are of children living in similar communities in similar circumstances to the Young Lives children. Photo credit: © Young Lives / Pham Viet Anh.

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**Young Lives**   
An International Study of Childhood Poverty