

Young Lives Conceptual Framework – Overview

About Young Lives

Young Lives is a long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. We use both survey and in-depth research methods to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and work closely with policymakers to ensure the development and implementation of pro-poor poverty reduction policies. We focus on children in the belief that better understanding childhood poverty is key to winning the global fight against poverty.

What we do

Our aim is to provide credible evidence for use in policy advocacy on the causes and consequences of childhood poverty. We look at the factors (including policies and programmes) that contribute to breaking cycles of poverty and the inequality that underpins so much of it.

Our central research questions are:

- What are the factors that shape children's lives to either increase or reduce poverty and its effects? How do children in different circumstances experience poverty?
- What impact does poverty have on children's lives, both during childhood and into adulthood?
- What part do pro-poor policies (especially social protection and basic services) play in reducing childhood poverty?

In order to tackle these, Young Lives is tracing the changing lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam over a 15-year period. This is the timeframe set by the UN to assess progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and it is with specific reference to these that we are following our children. Through interviews, group work and case studies with the children, their parents, teachers, community representatives and others, we are collecting a wealth of information not only about their material and social circumstances, but also about their perspectives on their lives and their aspirations for the future, all set against the environmental and social realities of their communities.

We are following two groups of children in each country:

- 2000 children who were born in 2001-02
- 1000 children who were born in 1994-95.

These groups provide insights into every phase of childhood. The younger children are being tracked from infancy to their mid-teens and the older children through into adulthood, when some will become parents themselves. When this is matched with information gathered about their parents, we will be able to reveal much about the

intergenerational transfer of poverty, how families on the margins move in and out of poverty, and the policies that can make a real difference to their lives.

Project design

One of Young Lives major strengths is its innovative and comprehensive methodology. The research integrates quantitative and qualitative methods and draws on data obtained at the site, community, household and child levels. This design enables us to build up a detailed picture of the children's lives, allowing us to learn why some do better than others, as well as tracing ways in which poverty is passed on across generations.

Through our holistic conceptualisation of child development, we identify the links between different aspects of children's lives, such as the cognitive and psychological consequences of nutritional deficits, and work to make sure appropriate policies and programmes are developed. At the same time, through our multidimensional analysis, we are able to demonstrate that being poor is not simply about income shortfalls, but can encompass factors as diverse as land holdings, access to employment or availability of services; hence the need for diverse policy responses.

The breadth of the project design enables us to generate empirical data about how boys and girls of varying ages are affected by poverty while at the same time contributing to a deeper understanding of why poverty persists and how to tackle persisting poverty. The potential to understand causal processes is enhanced by the analysis of a wide range of variables over time, opening up possibilities for researchers to retroactively capture different, possibly previously unforeseen, relationships between factors that affect poverty outcomes.

Our study sites cover a range of environmental, demographic, political, and socio-economic contexts, allowing us to reveal the diversity of children's lives. By focusing on individual children we are also able highlight differences that are due to gender, ethnicity and other social attributes, and information about siblings enables us to examine intra-household dynamics.

Our innovative work on political economy, policy analysis and budget monitoring at national, site and community levels provides evidence on the institutional and political environment that frames policymaking, as well as the reach and quality of basic services, social protection programmes and other schemes. This also enables us to examine children's and their parents' perspectives on services and programmes, whether our households are benefiting from provision, or, possibly, the reasons why they may be excluded.

The fieldwork is carried out by in-country teams of researchers supported by a data manager in each country. Our data management procedures have recently been validated and data quality endorsed through an honourable mention in the prestigious World Bank/DFID Regional Award for Innovation on Statistics for Latin America and the Caribbean (www.worldbank.org/lacstatistics). We are continually reviewing and developing our research tools and methodological framework to ensure that it remains at the cutting edge of international research.

Major themes

The major themes of our research are formulated on the basis of a sound theoretical core and reflect our emerging findings. They include:

A multidimensional view of poverty: Conceptualised as a complex and highly dynamic phenomenon whose causes and characteristics may vary by country and community, household and individual circumstances. Our analysis focuses on:

- **Material and related deprivations:** We locate our sample in relation to the national poverty line (indicative of absolute poverty) and establish what proportion of Young Lives children are living in households in the poorest 20 per cent (relative poverty). This information is complemented by a wealth index (based on a household's access to a standard basket of goods), consumption data, information on productive assets and durables, and access to basic infrastructure and services.
- **Vulnerability to poverty:** We explore the political economy of poverty by examining the political process, the links between poverty, inequality and inequity and, through this, the wider dynamics of disadvantage and social exclusion. Determining vulnerability and/or resilience to poverty also involves assessment of exposure to shocks, such as household illness, crop failure or rapid inflation.

Child outcomes of poverty: Children's development and well-being are viewed holistically as encompassing the material, physical, cognitive psychological and socio-cultural domains. We explore different aspects of children's lives, including their growth and development, roles and responsibilities, and their personal perceptions, expectations and aspirations. We highlight the direct consequences of poverty for children, as well as the life-course and intergenerational effects. Central elements are:

- **Transitions and trajectories:** The diverse outcomes for children associated with the timing of interventions, differential resource allocation, personal or parental life choices (e.g. migration) and personal or social attributes (e.g. gender, ethnicity).
- **Risk, resilience and well-being:** Children's experience of risk, their sense of well-being, and the resources they and their families bring to bear, including social protection and/or child protection schemes.
- **Education:** The factors that determine school attendance, the relationship between external factors and school attendance and performance, the relationship between socio-economic status, ethnic identity and quality/availability of different forms of education.
- **Health and nutrition:** The critical role good health plays in building children's resilience, as well as the long-term effects of malnutrition in early childhood on cognitive development, educational achievements, economic productivity, and increased risk of chronic diseases.

Policies and programmes affecting childhood poverty: This involves on-going analysis and mapping of the policy environment, including identification of key stakeholders and policy processes. This is complemented by site and community level analysis of basic services, programmes and budgets and by questions to the children and their caregivers about the coverage, quality and effectiveness of these services.

Initial findings

The first round of data was gathered in 2002, when the younger children were aged between 6 and 18 months and the older children aged 7 to 8. The survey was carried out again in late 2006 and will be repeated again in 2009 when the younger children will be in the early stages of primary school and the same age the older children were when first interviewed in 2002, allowing for interesting comparisons between the two cohorts. In 2009 the older cohort will be in their mid-teens, a life phase that has been little researched: they are on the threshold of adulthood and some are already parents. The final two rounds of research will take place in 2012 and in 2015, yielding rich data on all phases of children's lives.

Our findings to date highlight that while economic growth in all four countries may have benefited many children in the sample, some children, families and communities are still being left behind. This is leading to inequalities which are likely to widen in the future.

Young Lives findings specifically highlight differences in children's life chances linked to gender, household wealth, region, urban-rural divide, ethnic group and religion. Strong, expected correlations have been found between household wealth, parental education and child health. Malnutrition, which is now emerging as a key indicator of relative deprivation, also confirms patterns of inequality.

Our data also show that many children, particularly those who are more vulnerable because of their poverty, also suffer harm as a result of personal violence, illness and accidents, or work that is too long or too heavy, insufficient time and opportunity for play, personal disempowerment and social exclusion from peer groups.

Furthermore, while a growing number of poor households are accessing basic services, the community they live in and their level of poverty is still an important determinant in the quality and impact of those services. This is strongly demonstrated with regards to education. Despite radical increases in school enrolment, for example, ethnic minority and poor children have lower educational attainment, while children from even slightly better-off families are more likely to be at school than very poor children.

Young Lives is a collaborative partnership of research institutes and government organisations in the four study countries, together with British universities and the international NGO, Save the Children UK. It is coordinated by a team based at the Department of International Development, University of Oxford.

Young Lives is funded by the UK Department for International Development with sub-studies funded by IDRC (Ethiopia), UNICEF (India), Irish Aid (Vietnam) and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Reports from the each country survey from which these findings are drawn, can be downloaded from the website below along with a range of policy briefs, working papers and other publications give more detail about different areas of our work.

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Young Lives, September 2008