

## **Young Lives in Vietnam: An international study of childhood poverty**

Young Lives is a unique long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. It has been tracking the same 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) since 2000, using a combination of different research methods, including asking children and their carers for their own perceptions of well-being.

In Vietnam, Young Lives is following the lives of 3,000 children from communities in 20 sites. The children come from two age groups: 2,000 children who were born in 2001-02, and 1,000 who were born in 1994-95. The sample focuses relatively more on poorer groups and ethnic minorities than a nationally representative sample would do, but it has been shown that the data reflects the diversity of the Vietnamese population. In the second round of research, we surveyed a total of 2,966 children from an original sample of 3,000 children (first surveyed in November 2002), including all migrants from the original communities. The attrition rate (numbers of children lost over time) is only 1%, which is very low compared with other longitudinal studies.

The findings below come from the country reports of the second round of quantitative research. At present the research results are still preliminary, but they will be added to by qualitative research over the coming months. This will help to build a detailed picture of what is actually happening to children growing up in different households, communities and localities in each country.

The cohorts studied provide insights into every phase of childhood. Over 15 years we will follow the younger children from infancy to their mid-teens and the older children through into adulthood, when some will become parents themselves. As we are tracking children over time, we are uniquely placed to study the impact of poverty over a significant number of years and between generations. The analysis enables us to pinpoint policy implications for tackling childhood poverty in Vietnam as well as important and interesting avenues for future research.

### **Initial findings**

**The context:** Vietnam is a low-income country, but children's conditions are generally much better than at any time during the last three decades. As a result of the Government's Doi Moi programme of comprehensive socio-economic reforms between 1990 and 2004, economic growth averaged 7.5%, and poverty fell rapidly. Vietnam also made impressive progress in improving child outcomes. However, the Young Lives' research pinpoints a number of areas where there is still room for improvement. Despite rapid progress, specific groups of people, in particular ethnic minorities in rural areas, still face multiple disadvantages.

**Poverty and wealth:** Our data reveals stark inequalities in wealth and consumption. The community a child is born into is one of the most important determinants of their subsequent well-being. The greatest gap is between rural and urban areas and between majority and minority ethnic groups. 19% of 5-year-old Young Lives' children and 16% of the 12-year-olds live below the absolute poverty line, most in rural areas. The average wealth index in urban areas was 1.5 times that of rural areas and the average urban household's expenditure on consumption was more than twice that of a rural household.

The significance of parental education as a factor in the intergenerational transmission of poverty is clearly demonstrated by our research, with deprivations experienced by parents during childhood impacting upon their children and their children's children. Two-thirds of families with maternal education below primary school were in the bottom 20% of the cohort. Even if economic growth allows households to escape from income poverty, poor parental education will continue to have a negative impact on other child outcomes, such as nutrition.

**Education:** Relatively few of the older group of children, now aged 12, have dropped out of school, and enrolment rates, at 97%, remain high. This masks inequalities, however, with only 85% of children from

ethnic minorities still in school by this age. At pre-school too, ethnic minorities are at a disadvantage, with 89% of all children attending but only 77% of ethnic minority children. Overall literacy is high in Vietnam, but disparities in the quality of education has an effect on learning outcomes, with only 82% of the poorest 12-year-olds able to complete a literacy test, and 7% not being able to write a coherent sentence. Again, this has implications for children's future prospects and well-being, with the strong likelihood that they will be unable to escape the poverty trap in which their own parents were caught.

**Nutrition and health:** A finding of particular importance is that illness in the family can have a devastating effect on household resources in the long term. Households affected by severe illness or injury need support to prevent them falling into poverty. We also found that poorer children, ethnic minorities and rural children are more likely to become stunted during the critical period after they finish breastfeeding, when they may not receive adequate nutrition. Stunting among the younger cohort increased from 12% to 25% between 2002 and 2006 (and from 23% to 41% in the poorest households). 60% of ethnic minority children under six are stunted compared to 19% for the majority group. These issues will become increasingly important for policy as processes of privatisation and decentralisation progress.

**Subjective well-being and children's perceptions of poverty:** We are finding that children's own perceptions of life satisfaction are clearly affected by absolute poverty in terms of wealth. But household wealth is not the only factor. Urban children, who are better off in terms of material goods, have lower subjective well-being than rural children. This suggests that focusing on material indicators of poverty alone may not be sufficient to fully understand child well-being. Parental education, even controlling for household resources, also increases child well-being.

**Ethnicity and gender:** Inequalities between ethnic groups and the majority Kinh/Chinese are perhaps the most stark of all our findings. Consumption expenditure of majority households is more than double that of the ethnic minority group. While 10% of the majority group live in absolute poverty, the figure for other ethnic groups is 51%. Among the H'Mong (the largest ethnic minority group in Young Lives research), 90% of households belong to the poorest quarter of the sample. Ethnic minority groups also have less access to basic services than majority groups – for example, while 62% of the majority group have access to sanitation, only 16% of ethnic minority groups do.

There is no significant evidence of disparities by gender. Differences in the occurrence of stunting are likely to be driven by differences in growth patterns rather than gender bias. However, there may be gender biases within some ethnic groups.

**Looking to the future: policy implications:** Vietnam is becoming a middle-income country that is on track to reach its Millennium Development Goals. However, it is clear from Young Lives research to date that there are significant gaps in all areas between rural and urban children and especially between majority and minority ethnic groups. It is also important to note that parental education has a key role to play in the intergenerational transmission of poverty. It is essential that policies to reduce income poverty are complemented by access to quality education for all, if intergenerational poverty traps are to be broken.

The research also has implications for broader economic policy. Vietnam's focus on market-led, export-oriented growth has clearly benefited many of the children in the sample. However, some children and households have been left behind by economic growth. This is leading to inequalities that are only likely to widen in the future. Even as Vietnam's growth continues, pro-poor policies and policies targeted at poor children, in particular ethnic minority children, must be maintained and strengthened.

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