

Section 10: Piloting – Testing Instruments and Training Field Teams

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The complex, cyclic and evolving research design of the Young Lives study provides the tools and structures needed to collect qualitative and quantitative data at various levels and from various respondents, and to store and maintain it in a format suitable for longitudinal analysis. This is achieved using a diverse set of instruments, which has changed and expanded with each round as the children grow up and research priorities develop and shift. Piloting tests these instruments and begins training staff to use them.

All instruments in Young Lives are piloted, from panel questionnaires to qualitative toolkits. Piloting aims to:

- ensure that research questions work in the field and are consistent with local situations
- ensure that methods are appropriate to the changing capacities of the children as they develop
- train field teams and learn from their practical experience of fieldwork to improve instrument design
- produce accurate instrument manuals and protocols
- identify and begin to strengthen the skills field teams will need to apply the instrument
- initiate, build and maintain positive team dynamics and mutual respect
- ensure that data collection systems are in place.

Piloting forms part of a wider set of training activities for fieldwork teams. Each country has a committed, long-term study team which includes researchers from different disciplines, survey and data managers, and field supervisors. Fieldworkers are temporarily employed for particular instruments or sub-studies. Although in many cases fieldworkers have returned to carry out successive rounds of the study, the shifting composition of field teams increases the importance of training and teambuilding as ongoing processes. In this way the skills of team members are frequently upgraded through training on each successive instrument or sub-study.

Piloting exercises in Young Lives have varied in scale, format and frequency.

- A year-long pilot stage (2001–02) tested the study's original research design in South Africa, a country outside the study sample.
- The child and household surveys are piloted in non-Young Lives sites in all four countries before each full round of data collection.

- Electronic data collection was piloted initially with the Round 3 survey to assess the possibilities for rolling it out in the following rounds.
- Qualitative research methods were developed collaboratively through piloting and training, and there have been pilots before each subsequent full round of data collection.

Each of these exercises is an essential part of ensuring that all necessary information will be captured and processed effectively during fieldwork. Each has produced lessons to improve subsequent research rounds. The examination below highlights some of the objectives and challenges of piloting different instruments at various stages in a longitudinal study.

Piloting a longitudinal study of child poverty

Young Lives was originally conceived as a longitudinal, survey-based panel study. In 2001–02, over a year, the entire study design was piloted in South Africa (Seager and de Wet 2003). Research questions were selected and survey instruments developed. A training programme for fieldworkers was designed and delivered, and the questionnaire revised and reviewed. A data management system was established, and preliminary analyses carried out. At the end of the year, there was a follow-up round of visits to respondents.

The pilot phase aimed to produce generic research instruments which were intended to form the core of Round 1 of the child and household survey in the four study countries. The child and household questionnaire was the main instrument developed during this phase. The most important objective was to include key measures of outcome variables, such as children's health, nutritional status and cognitive development, and the factors likely to affect them. A multidisciplinary team including epidemiologists, anthropologists, social scientists, statisticians, economists, and child rights and welfare specialists worked on formulating questions with a strong theoretical basis that would also be understood in practice. As the aim was to develop a sound and reliable survey, the challenge was to simultaneously include multiple perspectives on child poverty while also keeping the questionnaire short enough to use effectively in the field.

Full documentation for the pilot questionnaire survey was prepared, including a survey manual, an interviewer manual

and justification documents for questions. Even at this early stage, the culture-specific nature of some questions, terms and variables was flagged as an area of potential difficulty in carrying out the study and a potential limitation for comparative data analysis.

The survey was presented to fieldwork teams as work in progress to encourage discussion and feedback. Fieldworker training, which included role-play exercises and practice sessions, generated debates about the precise meaning of complex questions and translation into local languages. The survey was piloted with children in rural and urban sites. Learning from the experiences of using the questionnaire and feedback from fieldworkers led to further revisions, including reordering questions into more logical sequences, redesigning the layout, highlighting the skip patterns more clearly, and amending questions that the fieldworkers found confusing or culturally inappropriate.

When the pilot survey sites were revisited a year later, an important lesson was that the much higher mobility of the urban population made tracking in urban areas more difficult, and that having contacts outside the child's household was essential for effective tracking.

Piloting Rounds 2-5

It was anticipated from the outset of the study that every Young Lives questionnaire would consist of core and country-specific elements. In addition, in each successive survey round the [questionnaire has also included new questions, and in some cases new sections](#), partly as a response to the changing circumstances and capacities of the children as they grow older.

After Round 1 had established a baseline of core panel data, significant changes and additions were made to the questionnaire for Round 2. For most country teams, this meant splitting the piloting into three or four phases. In Ethiopia, for example, the household questionnaire was piloted first, then the community questionnaire, then the child development section. This phasing allowed staff from different disciplines to be brought in at each stage, using their expertise to develop and test the validity of each section.

Each team also took different approaches to training fieldworkers in applying the questionnaire during the pilot phase. The Peru team, for example, paid particular attention to selecting and training supervisors, working with psychologists to develop training that involved decision-making games and role playing. Experience also showed that significant time should be dedicated to training fieldworkers in the challenging areas of applying cognitive skills tests and completing the income and consumption sections of the household questionnaire.

Having followed slightly different pathways for testing and adapting the Round 2 survey, all four teams carried out a two-week pilot study with the full questionnaire. These pilots followed a rolling schedule, so that each could be attended by a two-person team from the Young Lives UK office which

travelled from country to country. The aim of having some staff working on all four pilots was to ensure continuity of information reported back within and between countries.

While the main aim of the two-week pilot was to test the whole questionnaire with fieldwork staff, it was also an important opportunity to ensure that fieldwork supervisors were provided with adequate information and skills to deliver similar training to their fieldworkers.

The piloting process familiarised supervisors and teams with the study, instruments, and manuals before going to the field. It also allowed spotting any mistakes, checking if questions made sense, and monitoring the skills of supervisors while giving them practical experience in the kind of challenges fieldworkers may encounter. Lessons learned included:

- Feedback sessions are essential to maximise learning from pilot studies, but may need to be carefully facilitated to allow all feedback to be presented.
- The presence of senior research staff in the field helps both team building and capacity building.
- Making sure administrative and logistical tasks are carried out in advance means better use can be made of time spent in the field.
- Managing the changes to the questionnaire that arise from pilot studies needs careful coordination with other processes of translating, editing and formatting, and clear cut-off points beyond which no further changes can be made.

Piloting the Round 3 survey took a slightly different approach, not least because electronic data collection tools were being tested at the same time. Like its Round 2 predecessor, the pilot of the whole Round 3 survey incorporated fieldworker training, but this time there were two periods in the field. As before, it was preceded by a range of testing and training processes as different country teams got to grips with new tools, which included a self-administered questionnaire with its own survey manual, and cognitive tests for siblings.

A challenge in this pilot round was that with electronic data collection, small last-minute changes to questionnaire content created large programming changes which were more difficult to accommodate late in the process. The lesson learned from this was that plenty of time should be allowed between piloting and fieldwork to allow making changes to the programmes and revisions to other important documentation (such as manuals).

Building on the experience of previous rounds, in Round 4 and Round 5, piloting and training followed a three-phase approach. In the first phase, country workshops were conducted with field supervisors and members of the UK team to introduce the new modules (designed by country teams' researchers and other external specialists) and review the whole questionnaire. In reviewing the new modules, the main focus was on discussing their cultural appropriateness and finding better ways of phrasing new questions (including checking they were properly

translated). As part of this first phase, an initial pilot (called pre-pilot) was conducted at:

- the household and individual level (with 12 and 19 year olds in Round 4, and 15 and 22 year olds in Round 5), for household and individual-specific modules.
- the school (for the Younger Cohort) and university/college level (for the Older Cohort), for individual-specific modules that required larger samples to test their validity and reliability (such as cognitive tests and psychosocial scales).

The pre-pilot was carried out using paper questionnaires (previously amended based on feedback collected during the country workshop) since the main objective was to time the retained (core) sections and, for new modules, to test their content in terms of cultural appropriateness and clarity.

The second phase of training and piloting was planned to coincide with the training of trainers (ToT). At this point, the trainers – who are in most cases the field supervisors – reviewed each question of the final drafts of the questionnaires (prepared on the basis of the pre-pilot information) both in paper and in computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), with the aim of mastering the content and checking the flow. Draft versions of the fieldworker manuals were reviewed in tandem so that they were amended with examples, or complemented with further information. The logistics of managing and sharing the data during fieldwork were also designed and established. A second pilot followed the ToT, with the sole purpose of checking the CAPI programmes. Feedback from both training and piloting at this point is crucial to make sure that the programmes were amended in time for the training of fieldworkers.

The third phase coincided with the training of fieldworkers. At this stage, supported by the fieldworker manuals, trainers went over the entire questionnaire with the fieldworkers, explaining the objective of each section and question. This training was complemented with CAPI practice sessions (fieldworkers interviewing one another) to make sure fieldworkers mastered the use of CAPI and the devices. In addition, every two weeks, fieldworkers piloted the questionnaires in CAPI by interviewing young people of the right age and their families in non-Young Lives sites on sections that were previously covered in their training sessions. At this point, feedback was reported back to the data managers in the countries and the UK office to finalise the programmes that will be then taken to the field for data collection.

Training and piloting in the qualitative research rounds

[Qualitative research](#) with a sub-sample of Young Lives children began in 2007, with a second round in 2008, a third in 2011, and a fourth in 2014. Research teams used a range of methods to develop detailed descriptions of the lives of case study children and of the dynamic processes and transitions that underlie their pathways through childhood.

Children's own views and understandings were the major source of qualitative data, but information was also gathered from important adults in their lives. Collecting this kind of data from children requires fieldworkers with very different skills and capacities from those needed by survey enumerators and supervisors, and a research design that balances flexibility and uniformity. Training and piloting reflected these requirements.

Young Lives qualitative research contains much that is new. There is little international experience of carrying out longitudinal qualitative research in developing countries, and of integrating qualitative and quantitative data in longitudinal studies. The need for reflection and consolidation was emphasised, and time for it built into piloting and training plans.

The first round of qualitative work was planned to complement the child-focused aspects of the Round 2 survey (2006), so the development of research questions was based on a thorough knowledge of relevant survey sections. Child-focused qualitative methodology and methods were reviewed and data-gathering techniques drawn from several disciplinary approaches were selected and piloted in Peru in 2006. This led to the selection of a set of useful methods which were fed into a research protocol, which was the basis of the first meeting with all the qualitative researchers from the UK and the four country offices.

This first meeting and a second four months later were significant milestones for both piloting and training. Both were used as opportunities for field research training that focused particularly on using participatory methods, building rapport and conducting fieldwork sensitively and ethically. Lead qualitative researchers and their assistants also received training in using qualitative software and accessing web-based resources.

The first meeting also allowed time for collectively consolidating core research questions and planning a round of pilots in all four countries. These were carried out between the first and second meetings, and teams tested different techniques and adapted them to local contexts and research priorities. Based on the results, each team collaborated with the UK-based qualitative researchers to finalise a country-specific methodology. Comprehensive fieldwork planning was carried out at the second meeting, which also generated a Memorandum of Understanding about the guiding ethical principles of the study which went on to be used in all in-country field team training. Country team members subsequently trained their own fieldwork teams, periodically supported by visits from UK-based researchers.

A lesson from these early pilot studies was that recruiting fieldwork staff could be difficult. Fieldworkers with training in qualitative or participatory research skills and experience of working with children are less numerous than survey enumerators. Gradually, however, most country teams have recruited a core team of fieldworkers who have participated in successive rounds of qualitative research.

By the third round, piloting and training aimed to review developments in the wider study and update teams on changes as well as to test new methods designed to capture information on youth aspirations and transitions, ensure that similar techniques were still age-appropriate for the sample children, and maintain and strengthen basic field skills. Piloting and training also provided an opportunity to engage teams in discussion of how to make the best

possible use of longitudinal qualitative data, and how to effectively manage the growing mass of case-level data.

By the fourth round, new questions emerged reflecting the ages of the young people, including new experiences of marriage and of parenthood. Piloting in this round was therefore focused on these potentially sensitive topics.

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