

## Section 7: Qualitative Longitudinal Research

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Young Lives conducts in-depth qualitative research focused on a nested sample of the Young Lives children, but also involving their parents/caregivers, peers and other members of their communities. This work consists of two main strands:

- a longitudinal component which tracks 50 children in each study country, documenting their changing life trajectories over time.
- shorter, thematically-focused enquiries on particular topics, such as children's experiences of parental death in Ethiopia and the impact of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India.

In contrast with other components of the study, the qualitative research focuses on the practices and experiences which explain the diverging trajectories of Young Lives children, complementing the survey measurement of various aspects of their lives at particular points in time. Its major strength is that it offers an opportunity to include the detailed, narrative perspectives of children and families about their experiences in a way that is embedded in the longitudinal design of Young Lives. This means that the qualitative research can simultaneously illuminate and draw on the principal quantitative elements of the study, particularly the child, household and community surveys and the school surveys. It also strengthens the capacity of the study to situate the children's experiences of poverty in relation to the people around them, and the social, cultural and institutional contexts that shape their lives and opportunities.

The first plans for Young Lives did not include qualitative longitudinal research; the original research consortium conceived the study with a survey-based panel design. Planned thematic studies to explore particular areas in more depth may have included the use of qualitative methods, but this was the full extent of anticipated qualitative enquiry. However, following the Round 1 survey, an external review highlighted the limitations of a mainly quantitative research design and recommended the inclusion of a qualitative longitudinal component. The main funder of Young Lives, the UK Department for International Development, requested that two rounds of qualitative research be carried out within a relatively short time-frame, so that by the time of the Round 4 child and household survey (planned for 2013), the quantitative and qualitative components would be on a comparable footing.

Planning for the qualitative component began in 2006 with a review of qualitative methods for research with children which mirrored the structure of the Round 2 child and

household surveys (Johnson 2008). A pilot of child-centred, qualitative methods was carried out in Peru six months later, working with seven small groups of children, mostly aged 11 to 12, to test group methods for investigating each of the study's key themes. Qualitative research teams – including anthropologists, education specialists, psychologists, social workers and sociologists – were appointed in the study countries early in 2007.

### Preparing for the qualitative longitudinal research: design process and sample structure

The process of designing the qualitative longitudinal research component was iterative, reflexive and fully inclusive of country-based qualitative researchers' views and expertise. Using the review of methods and Peru pilot as a starting point, the pilot phase relied on successive stages of design, testing and refinement of methods and questions, as well as incorporating [various aspects of training](#). Pilot studies were carried out in a rural and an urban sentinel site in each country in mid-2007. The pilot phase produced a set of refined research questions for Round 1 of the qualitative research, and a toolkit from which country teams could select methods appropriate to the contexts in which they were working.

While a key aim of the pilot phase was to develop the methods that would be used in the first full round of qualitative research, it was equally important to ensure that the design would anchor the qualitative research to the panel survey sample. This was achieved through using the pilot studies, to validate measures and indicators used in the surveys and to address themes that were emerging from analysis of the survey data, but also through the selection of a sub-sample of children who would make up the 200 case studies at the centre of the longitudinal qualitative research component.

In common with the process of selecting the full survey [sample](#), the first stage of selecting the qualitative sub-sample was the choice of field sites. This sought to enable the exploration of variations in location, ethnicity and socio-economic status, so in each country sites were selected:

- from different regions, reflecting the main ethnic or caste groups in the country
- to reflect an equal balance between rural and urban sites
- to reflect an equal balance between sites that had been classified as poor and those classified as less poor.

In India, Peru and Vietnam this resulted in the selection of four sites, but in Ethiopia five were needed to reflect the ethnic diversity of the country and the full sample. In each site, equal numbers of boys and girls were selected from the Younger and Older Cohorts. As well as gender and age, the sub-sample children were chosen according to the socio-economic status and structure of their households, and their attendance at pre-school. Potential replacement children were also identified, who could be included in the sub-sample if selected children were not available either because their families had moved or because the children or their caregivers did not grant permission or time for interviews.

## Qualitative methods for longitudinal research

The overarching question which frames the qualitative longitudinal research component is ‘how does poverty interact with other factors at individual, household, community and intergenerational levels to shape children’s life trajectories over time?’ The qualitative research is explicitly based on the premise that children’s experiences and perceptions are a major resource for providing answers to this question, and the view that children are social actors who offer valid and useful insights and understandings about their own lives.

The methods used are designed to allow and encourage children of different ages to communicate their points of view about the key themes of the study in a way that also allows systematic recording and analysis. The methodology is flexible enough to adapt to different settings and to thematic emphases that vary from country to country, and adequately reflexive to incorporate learning from successive research rounds.

The review of age-specific tools and instruments for use with children that was carried out at the start of the pilot phase gathered information about a wide variety of possible methods. Criteria were developed to choose methods that best met the needs of the study. Selected methods had to be:

- semi-structured, to ensure that core themes could be studied consistently
- applicable in diverse cultural settings
- implementable by fieldworkers with very variable research training, orientation and experience
- flexible enough to allow children to identify themes and issues that are important to them
- able to generate data that can be relatively simply and efficiently recorded, in contrast to recording full focus group transcripts, which can be very costly in time and money
- adaptable, given the variation in educational levels and preferred methods of communicating among the Young Lives children.

The methods selected were tested in the country pilots, adapted and refined, and a final selection was included in the methods toolkit for the first round of the qualitative research (Camfield, Crivello and Woodhead 2013a). Combined with research questions on each of the key study themes – children’s time-use, well-being, poverty and social worlds – this gave each country team a menu of methods that could be applied to fieldwork, rather than a fixed list of tools that had to be used to research each theme. On the menu were individual methods, group methods and observation.

- The basic method for engaging with **individuals** was the semi-structured interview. For each interview, a checklist was drawn up of questions relevant to the respondent, whether child, caregiver or community member. With children, interviewing was often combined with an optional range of more dynamic and visual tools and exercises including games, life-course drawings and social network maps. Interviews with children were also often carried out over more than one session to prevent them becoming tired or bored.
- Tools for working with **groups** were clustered around each key theme. These included drawings, a time-use bucket activity, activity worksheets, community mapping and guided tours for understanding children’s time use; social network maps and a story completion exercise for examining children’s social worlds; and a body map, an indicators of well-being exercise, and a poverty tree diagram for looking at poverty and well-being.
- **Observation** techniques add to the picture of what people say they do with their time. Researchers in the first round spent time sharing children’s daily activities as well as time in the community making observations of the wider environment.

Different tools were selected to gather a range of information which was used to build up a ‘mosaic’ of children’s lived experiences (Clark and Moss 2001). This composite image could then be supplemented and supported by existing survey data.

While each country team had a common point of departure – the collectively agreed set of methods and research questions – the combination and type of methods they used varied according to different considerations. These included country focus on particular research themes, the findings of the pilot studies and the need to use the methods in sequences that would progressively build up relationships of trust and empathy between children and researchers (Ames 2011).

A similar balance between collective frameworks and protocols and country priorities was taken in approaching data analysis. Systematic protocols for data transcription and management were developed centrally and followed by all teams. A meta-framework for coding the data was developed based on the key research themes, to allow for consistency and comparability [across countries and between rounds](#). Country teams, however, elaborated on the coding framework by constructing more detailed codes and conducting data analysis according to their specific research focus.

New tools have been introduced in each successive round of qualitative research, and existing ones revised and refined. Updating the toolkit to ensure that it matches evolving research questions is a key aspect of [piloting and training in every round](#).

Our approach to ethics has been developed collaboratively with our research teams, following fieldworker training, piloting and reports from fieldworkers after each round of visits to our study sites.

## Evolving research questions

The questions which frame the qualitative longitudinal component are closely connected to the key themes and preoccupations of the survey components. In the first round, the enquiry was structured around the three thematic areas which were derived from the overall emphasis of Young Lives. The framing questions derived from these themes for the first round were:

- What are the key **transitions** in children's lives, how are they experienced, and what influences these experiences?
- How is children's **well-being** understood and evaluated by children, caregivers and other stakeholders?
- How do policies, programmes and **services** shape children's transition and well-being?

The first round of qualitative research in 2007 provided baseline information on these three areas and complemented existing household and community-level data on shocks, coping and services (Camfield, Crivello and Woodhead 2013a). The second round, in 2008, followed the same lines of enquiry to begin to document changes in each area. New methods were created and adapted to approach the questions with children who were now a year older (Camfield, Crivello and Woodhead 2013b).

The third round, in 2011, provided another opportunity to document changes, but this time a stronger emphasis was placed on collecting information to understand factors at the household and community level that contribute to diverging life trajectories, and the extent to which children are involved in making the key decisions that affect their lives (Crivello, Morrow and Streuli 2013).

Key questions included:

- What shape have children's life **trajectories** taken, and what are the processes explaining these patterns, including factors related to poverty, intergenerational change or difference?
- What have been the major **transitions** influencing changes in children's life trajectories? How have these been experienced by children and families, including children's own roles in decision-making?

- What have been the main sources of **support** and **risk** to children's transitions?
- How have different transitions shaped children's life trajectories? Have these opened up or constrained **opportunities** for children's present and future lives?

In addition to these questions, three areas of children's life trajectories were prioritised in order to respond to the wider policy and research priorities of Young Lives. At the level of individual case study children, these were changes and continuities in:

- **school trajectories:** transitions through grades, classrooms, institutions, schooling types and locations, including the transition out of school.
- **work trajectories:** capturing the variety of paid and unpaid contributions young people make to their families and to themselves through work, how this supports or interferes with their schooling and with their evolving social identities.
- **social trajectories:** young people's integration into households and communities through their changing roles, responsibilities and identities.

A fourth round of qualitative longitudinal research was undertaken in 2014, building on the findings from the first four survey and three qualitative rounds (Crivello and Wilson 2016).

## Key challenges

Key challenges in the ongoing process of designing and adapting the qualitative longitudinal research include:

- developing methods suited to different cultural contexts, ages and experiences within the same study
- developing methods that are cognisant of power asymmetries between adults and children, in particular children who are shy or reserved due to social exclusion
- encouraging creativity and flexibility in adapting questions and methods to local contexts, while also ensuring comparability of datasets
- a relative lack of tradition in conducting research with children that prioritises their views and accounts of their everyday lives, in cultures where children may not be expected to speak up
- language – not simply translation between languages, but the need to find and agree on words that reflect the concepts in the research questions, but also allow comparison between countries
- maintaining and managing a large, multilingual, multimedia, qualitative longitudinal dataset

- [migration of older children away](#) from research sites for work or education
- developing robust methods for analysing qualitative longitudinal data, where few published resources exist
- making best use of quantitative data in integrated analyses and developing qualitative researchers' confidence and skills in this area
- ensuring that policy concerns and priorities are represented in research planning and execution, and data analysis
- coordinating a conceptually and methodologically complex study using country-based research teams with different disciplinary backgrounds and levels of experience
- balancing the needs and timelines of other project components.

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