

Informing early childhood development policy in Ethiopia

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Early childhood is recognised as a critical life phase and a priority for policy development. Exposure to good-quality early childhood education programmes (not restricted to pre-schools) is recognised as one of the most effective ways to improve the preparation of children, especially those from poorer backgrounds, for formal schooling, and contributes in the long term to enhanced human capital. The issue of how best to deliver the potential of early childhood education with the available resources has been the focus of an ongoing stream of Young Lives research. In Ethiopia, rates of access to pre-school programmes of any kind have historically been very low, and almost non-existent in rural areas. In 2010 the government began to engage in delivery of early learning, with schools in all regions now being asked to add a zero grade (O-Class) before the start of primary school. The Young Lives team in Ethiopia have been actively engaged in research and policy development over many years and this year's work has built on that strong base. Specifically, Young Lives staff have been invited to engage with national and regional policymakers to inform and advise on the roll-out of O-Class, drawing on Young Lives' international staff expertise in early childhood to provide a strong comparative framework. The focus on early childhood in Ethiopia has been given additional momentum from new initiatives, particularly the World Bank's Early Learning Partnership (ELP) programme, with which the team are engaging.

In 2014, the core DFID-funded research enabled Young Lives to secure additional funding from the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF). Following initial consultations, the Young Lives team offered direct input into the draft section on early learning within the government's five-year plan for education. We followed on with a series of small, highly-focused, exploratory studies which draw attention to key challenges in delivering national plans for quality early learning to scale, and implementing them in the regions. To date, there has been very limited early childhood development (ECD) research in Ethiopia, so Young Lives' input in this area is critical. Research topics have been negotiated, with the focus on what will be of most practical use to the development of ECD in Ethiopia.

Most recently, Young Lives research has been used to help inform the research priorities of the World Bank's Early Learning Partnership (ELP) programme, which has gained momentum in Ethiopia since August 2016. Young Lives' research and engagement with government has helped to identify and crystallise issues that might otherwise have been overlooked. Specific examples are:

- Young Lives research found that the majority of children using the new O-Class provision, aimed at 6 year olds, were in fact younger than the target age. This has identified the need for ELP and the early learning policy more generally to plan beyond O-Class and consider the needs of even younger children.
- Young Lives carried out research in teacher training colleges and identified that there was a limited understanding of the needs of O-Class teachers; often a lack of suitable training content or approaches, and lack of adaptation of the curriculum to the O-Class model and context; and that the pace of the rollout of teacher training for diplomas and certificates was too slow to meet the rapidly growing need. As a result, in-service training for pre-school teachers will form a core part of ELP.

Young Lives' analysis of children's ages in O-Class was picked up by the World Bank and Ministry of Education, and influenced their decisions on how World Bank GEQIP grants should apply to O-Class. Young Lives has also been asked to provide evidence for the design of the next round of the GEQIP programme, which will include grants to schools for not just primary school but also for O-Class. This evidence will be based on research into what community stakeholders want from O-class and how it fits with their expectations.

“Young Lives evidence that pre-school attendance has positive impacts on primary schooling attainment and achievement encourages the World Bank to explore the possibility to include interventions to support O-Classes in the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP). The value added of Young Lives is in its evidence-based research focus, which compliments the World Bank policy formulation and delivery/operationalization role.”

Thanh Thi Mai, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank Ethiopia

Young Lives exploratory research studies offer a further opportunity to build links with government. Government ECD experts are involved in all research efforts, from study design through to fieldwork. This provides an opportunity to see first-hand what is happening on the ground, and helps to build their knowledge and understanding of ECD and the effectiveness of their role in delivering government plans, as well as exposure to qualitative research approaches to early learning used by Young Lives.

Young Lives made significant contributions to the Education World Forum in 2016 and 2017. In January 2016 Young Lives was requested to brief the Ethiopian Minister of Education, as an input into the preparation of his presentation to the EWF. At DFID's request key Young Lives staff, including the Country Directors for Ethiopia and India, gave an input into an ECD meeting at the same event. In 2017 the Ethiopian Minister

of Education again used evidence from Young Lives in his speech at EWF.

Looking beyond Ethiopia, in 2016 Young Lives was commissioned by the World Bank to revisit our core longitudinal data across all four countries, to examine how pre-school experience affected children's later development. This commission linked well with our ECD work in Ethiopia, and built on Young Lives longitudinal research across all four study countries; it also demonstrates that the World Bank valued the data and analysis. During Round 2 in 2006, Young Lives collected a large amount of data on attendance at pre-school for cohorts who are now aged 15. The continuous collection of data offers the opportunity to assess the impact of early education (or lack of it) on children as they grow up,

in a way that is not possible with most other data sources. It also allows for examining differences between, for example, rural and urban children. By re-examining the data already collected through country surveys, a wide range of outcomes including psycho-social skills and cognitive indicators have been analysed. The draft report is currently being reviewed by the World Bank and is due for publication within a World Bank volume in 2017. A further study on community perspectives is underway, revisiting sites for which the pre-school context was studied in 2008. It will provide important evidence of the evolution of the early learning environment in Ethiopia and how various stakeholders, including local government, headmasters and schools, and parents and community leaders, view the rapid expansion of services taking place.