

Nutrition, growth and potential for recovery

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Estimates published by *The Lancet* have suggested that 200 million children under 5 years of age are failing to fulfil their development potential as a consequence of early undernutrition, which leads to growth stunting and other severe long-term effects. Undernutrition can have lifelong consequences for health, educational achievement and economic productivity, making it a key focus of Young Lives interest. It is well recognised that good nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life is of key importance. It is also often assumed that the effects of deprivation during this period are irreversible, but evidence for this is inconclusive. Young Lives data are being used to drive research debates about the possibility of some recovery from stunting. Our aim is to strengthen consensus about the importance of the first 1,000 days, while making the case that there are other points in which investments in children's nutrition can have beneficial results. This has been done through working papers and publications whose key messages have been picked up by organisations such as Save the Children, UNICEF and the World Bank, while in Peru Young Lives has played an important part in demonstrating the success of the *Juntos* programme in reducing stunting.

Young Lives longitudinal data on nutrition and its impact on children as they grow up has led this year to several published papers that challenge assumptions about childhood nutrition. Two Young Lives working papers used evidence from the study to highlight important findings:

- Encouraging evidence investments in children's nutrition after infancy and early childhood may remediate some of the impacts of early undernutrition.
- Confirmation that being born to a stunted mother (especially an adolescent mother) increases the risk of the child being stunted and underweight in infancy and through to early adolescence.
- The suggestion that there is a further window of opportunity during adolescence, during which nutritional interventions with stunted adolescent girls might reduce the likelihood of stunting in their babies.

Published papers such as '[Growth recovery and faltering through early adolescence: Determinants and implications for cognitive development](#)' (*Social Science & Medicine*) have promoted these messages.

The first finding is included as a chapter entitled 'Benefits of Interventions at School Age on Growth and Development' in the forthcoming World Bank *Disease Control Priorities* (3rd volume). This book provides the most up-to-date evidence on intervention efficacy and programme effectiveness for the leading causes of global disease burdens, and it is significant that Young Lives evidence that challenges mainstream views is included in a well-regarded publication making recommendations worldwide. The second and third findings were included by Save the Children in their publication '[Unequal Portions: Ending malnutrition for every last child](#)' (2016). In March 2017 Save the Children published a [joint blog](#)

with Young Lives, again making the case for the importance of adolescent nutrition, and timed to coincide with the meeting of G7 'Sherpas' in Rome. The findings were also picked up in a blog from UNICEF, which argued for the importance of what happens during adolescence for child growth. The findings will also form the basis of further engagement with Save the Children, IFPRI and DFID. These achievements show how Young Lives analysis which questions accepted hypotheses is shifting the focus of global debate on how undernutrition can be tackled.

“ We have been delighted to collaborate with Young Lives, drawing upon their unique research to provide evidence about the importance of nutrition, particularly in adolescence, to breaking the intergenerational cycle. We are using this research to inform our new three-year global campaign 'Every Last Child'. In this campaign we are focusing on nutrition, excluded groups and adolescent girls. The campaign will specifically focus on girls, with coordinated activity taking place globally, for which this research will be invaluable. The research also features in the flagship nutrition report for the campaign, highlighting the importance of adolescence as gender issues are examined. All outputs provide political arguments for why Governments and donors should invest in adolescent girls' nutrition. ”

Katherine Richards, Senior Nutrition Policy and Advocacy Advisor, Save the Children

In an article for *Economics and Human Biology*, Young Lives authors and collaborators used the data to identify that food expenditure data (and patterns of dietary diversity) can predict height growth, suggesting the greater potential of food expenditure survey data to support efforts to improve child health. Findings were reviewed in a [blog](#) by Lawrence Haddad (Executive Director of GAIN)



In Peru, Young Lives has been involved with analysis of the success of the Juntos Conditional Cash Transfer Programme. Since 2005, Juntos has made cash transfers to poor families on fulfilment of certain conditions, including that all children under 5 years old are subject to growth monitoring controls. Peru represents a major success story in terms of nutrition, with the country's previously significant problem with growth stunting in children having improved dramatically over recent years. Although not the only factor, Juntos has been important in helping to reduce stunting, and Jim Yong Kim (World Bank President) has specifically highlighted the programme as a success story.

Young Lives has made a major contribution, since it has been able to monitor the impact of Juntos on children followed by the study. In late 2016 Young Lives researchers published 'Ten years of Juntos', a book chapter documenting what can be learned about the impact of Juntos after 10 years of operation, drawing on evidence from Young Lives and other studies which have examined the impact on health and nutrition, schooling, and child work. The chapter was based on a presentation by Alan Sanchez at GRADE's 35 Years conference in 2015, at which Young Lives also led on a debate about what should be expected from Juntos in the future. The analysis was commented on positively by Peru's Vice Minister of Development and Social Inclusion, and incorporated into the chapter.

The main conclusion was that the programme has fulfilled its objective of increasing access to health and education services, and that it has also helped in reducing severe stunting. However, Young Lives researchers also highlighted that the halving of stunting rates seen in Peru over the last ten years could not have been achieved by Juntos alone, and identified a range of factors (better health services, economic growth, a platform to reach the poor population, and a national, multi-sectoral strategy) which helped to achieve this extremely positive result. Understanding and properly documenting what Peru has achieved in this area, and how, is of great importance as it enables the lessons to be of use to other countries where there are still serious stunting problems.