

# Progress Towards the MDGs? Fragile Gains and Deep Inequalities



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**The target date for the Millennium Development Goals is only five years away. Much remains to be done if progress towards achieving them is to be sustained. Young Lives research is tracking 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam to learn about their education, well-being and experiences of poverty and uncertainty. Our work shows that over the period covered by the analysis there was progress towards the MDGs, but that significant inequalities in access to and quality of services and children's outcomes remain. Strategies to support sustained improvements under the MDGs need both to improve overall outcomes, and to deliver most for the poorest and most marginalised children.**

The Millennium Development Goals are a powerful signal of international consensus that more must be done to improve human development. Despite being off target and despite the recent economic shocks, world leaders reiterated their commitment to the MDGs at a review meeting in September 2010. Five years before the target date of 2015, much remains to be done to sustain progress towards the MDGs.

Young Lives is a study of childhood poverty which is following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam and the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, between 2002 and 2015. Two age cohorts of children have been surveyed three times, and in-depth interviews with a smaller group of the children were carried out during 2007 and 2008. The longitudinal design of Young Lives allows examination of changes in children's lives, and what drives these changes over time. The study includes more poorer households (it is 'pro-poor') rather than being nationally representative. In consequence it is well suited to exploring the differences between groups of children and the impacts of government interventions, which can be looked at alongside national trends from other data sources. The younger cohort of Young Lives children were born just after the new millennium and so are the first generation growing up with the promise of the MDGs.

Ensuring children are central to development policy is important not only because of the particular responsibilities society owes to dependents, but because early intervention in children's lives can bring important long-term benefits. Tackling childhood deprivation is key to breaking broader cycles of poverty. The MDGs reflect this, with many of the targets – such as primary school enrolment and reducing child mortality – focusing directly on children. Other targets – for example gender equity – have an indirect but no less vital impact on children.

Using data from the 2002 and 2006 Young Lives survey, this Policy Brief evaluates some of the progress towards MDG targets reflected by the experiences of Young Lives children. It also discusses how a range of shocks – from

economic to environmental – affect children in different families, and how they cope. By examining patterns of both gains and setbacks for different children, we find important messages for policymakers as they look towards 2015 and beyond.

If the MDGs are to be transformational for children they need to help break the transmission of poverty between generations. At the moment we see clear evidence that poverty and inequalities still restrict poorer children's life-chances. Strategies to support sustained improvements under the MDGs need both to increase overall outcomes, and to deliver most for the poorest and most marginalised children.

## Unequal progress towards the MDGs

- Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and Peru all experienced economic growth for much of the decade after 2000. In places this growth was quite fast.
- Among Young Lives households, economic growth was associated with falls in absolute poverty and improved access to basic services, but significant inequalities remain.
- School enrolment rates rose overall, but for 12-year-olds enrolment continues to vary by household wealth level.
- Environmental and economic shocks were common in the lives of all Young Lives children, and most common in the lives of poorer children.
- The global food price and economic shocks that happened after 2006 present a challenge to the MDGs. Since the poorest households are most at risk of shock, this may have increased inequalities. This in turn increases the imperative to deliver for the poorest households.

## Growth, poverty and inequalities

The first MDG target is the eradication of extreme poverty, and the primary aim is to reduce the number of people who live on less than a dollar a day. At least before the current economic crisis, official statistics suggest progress was being achieved, and falls in absolute poverty levels were associated with economic growth in all four Young Lives countries.

Young Lives collects information on wealth levels (using a composite measure of housing quality, consumer durables and access to services) which can be used to understand differences between households in each country sample. Sampling differences mean that wealth levels themselves cannot be compared between countries. Nonetheless, some patterns clearly emerge when we look at the broad direction of change in averages within each national sample. Table 1 shows a positive percentage change in average wealth index scores in each country in the first two rounds of the Young Lives survey.

**Table 1. Changes in average wealth index scores, 2002–2006**

	Average wealth index score across sample (0=most deprived, 1=least deprived)		Percentage change, 2002–2006
	2002	2006	
Ethiopia	0.18	0.22	25.8
Andhra Pradesh	0.37	0.43	15.6
Peru	0.45	0.49	8.3
Vietnam	0.44	0.50	13.6

Although much of the change looks quite progressive (with some of the largest increases experienced by groups starting with the lowest wealth levels), there remain large differences in wealth across the Young Lives sample:

- In all four countries, rural children's households were much less wealthy than urban children's households.
- There is also evidence of pronounced differences in wealth according to region and ethnic group.

Understanding the dynamics of inequalities at different levels is critical for making policy that will serve the poorest households. Although absolute poverty levels have fallen in the context of economic growth, this picture also shows that on-going inequalities between different groups will not be addressed by growth alone. Longitudinal data about Young Lives children can also be disaggregated to the household and individual level, revealing more patterns of difference. Analysing these patterns helps us look beyond the headlines of the MDG targets, towards policies that meet the needs of different children more effectively.

## Enrolment for all, education for some?

The second and third MDGs concern the achievement of universal primary education and the promotion of gender equality, which includes eliminating gender disparities in education. In common with the headline on economic growth, at the broadest level there are encouraging signs of progress towards these goals. For children in Young Lives households, enrolment in primary school was typically high and rising. Across all four countries, the difference in enrolment rates between boys and girls at age 12 was also encouragingly small. A closer look at disaggregated enrolment rates however reveals inequalities of access according to wealth.

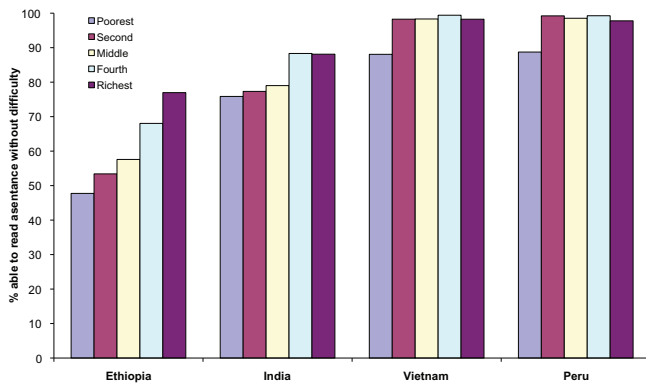
**Table 2. Primary school enrolment rates for 12-year-olds, 2006**

	Sample average	By wealth quintile				
		Poorest	2nd	3rd	4th	Richest
Ethiopia	94.8	92.2	94.5	94.5	94.9	98.5
Andhra Pradesh	88.8	81.6	85.7	85	93.1	99
Peru	99.0	97.8	97.1	100	100	100
Vietnam	96.6	90.5	95.5	97.8	100	99.5

Despite these inequalities, there have been impressive changes in enrolment levels. Given that poorer communities and more marginalised groups have historically had lower enrolment levels, it is often these groups who have benefited from steps towards universal primary education. Nevertheless ensuring that children continue to attend school and learn effectively remains a challenge. To break existing cycles of poverty, education needs to provide children with the knowledge and skills which can equip them for work and later life.

The positive evidence of expanded school enrolment has not necessarily been matched with progress on either attendance or school quality. Figure 1 shows the ability of 12-year-olds to read a simple sentence, indicating clear differences in literacy levels between children from richer and poorer households in each country. Despite rapid and progressive increases in enrolment figures, considerable variations in children's learning remain.

**Figure 1. Literacy and wealth quintile, 12-year-olds, 2006**



Children from poorer households are very likely to be at a disadvantage before they even arrive at primary school. There is considerable evidence that high quality pre-school interventions in nursery care and feeding have the power to improve later performance through cognitive and nutritional improvements. Among the Young Lives children, patterns of participation in pre-schooling mirror those of primary enrolment: they are fairly evenly distributed by gender, but much less evenly distributed by wealth. The benefits of pre-school should be greatest for the most disadvantaged children, but they are the least likely to receive it.

In supporting better quality of education to improve the circumstances of those children who are getting limited benefits from the school system, policymakers need to understand their differing needs rather than simply provide a structure and require them to fit into it. Reducing marginalisation requires both an understanding and response to the reasons why some children experience exclusion within systems or communities. There are different pressures on girls and boys in the ways they prioritise their time between study, work and chores, and there are a range of circumstances which require many children to engage in work.

Many Young Lives children are engaged in work – which may be either paid or unpaid work in the home or on the family farm. While some kinds of work have detrimental effects on children, work is both a daily reality for many children and an important way through which children acquire skills and are socialised into adulthood. In the absence of secure livelihoods, children’s work can also be an important contribution to family income. Against this background, a key aspect of educational quality is how children can be supported to attend school in ways which fit with their lives. Educational policies and institutions could do more to enable children to balance work and education.

## Coping with shock and crisis

Shocks and unexpected events, and the ways families cope with them, are intimately linked to changes in patterns of child work and education. One example of this is Tufa’s story from Ethiopia (Box 1)

### Box 1. Tufa’s story

Tufa is a 13-year-old Ethiopian boy, interviewed in 2007. Though he was initially enrolled in school, he was withdrawn by his parents after a house fire burnt the family home, destroying the roof and Tufa’s school books and clothes along with it. His parents intended to re-enrol him in the future, as he wished to learn and he had older brothers who are in school, but he was herding cattle and doing other work for the family.

Findings from Andhra Pradesh illustrate a similar pattern, showing that being in a household which had experienced an income shock was typically associated with an increase of 2.6 hours a week of work for girls in rural areas (Krutikova 2009).

Young Lives survey data from 2006 illustrate the distribution of economic and environmental shocks across wealth quintiles in each country. Table 3 shows that the poorer households in each sample are more likely to experience such shocks (although other shocks, such as illness and family changes, are more evenly distributed).

**Table 3. Percentage of children in households reporting economic and environmental shocks, 2002–2006**

	Type of shock reported	Average % across sample	% of poorest wealth quintile	% of 2nd poorest wealth quintile
Ethiopia	Economic	48.9	59.3	54.9
	Environmental	44.6	67.1	67.2
Andhra Pradesh	Economic	19.2	20.3	21.2
	Environmental	36.9	19.9	52.8
Peru	Economic	19.1	16.3	26.1
	Environmental	21.4	36.1	38.5
Vietnam	Economic	24.4	34.6	30.4
	Environmental	32.5	48.8	45.7

\*fewer than 20 children affected

The recent worldwide food price and economic shocks, alongside the likelihood of more frequent environmental shocks due to climate change, pose a challenge to the positive gains made towards the MDGs. Young Lives data on shocks from 2006 can be used to help policymakers anticipate how children and their families experience and cope with the current systemic shocks.

Though Table 3 shows the extent, not the effect, of shocks, likely consequences include less food to eat and increased need to work. In-depth interviews with older cohort children in Andhra Pradesh found they reported having to work more, migrating to find work, missing classes, or being pulled out of school (Vennam et al. 2010). Other family responses include the running down or loss of productive assets such as cattle, and taking on debt which is likely also to undermine community development. Often children report that the wider family or neighbours are common sources of support in times of crisis highlighting the importance of informal networks.

## Policy implications

Young Lives findings about changing patterns of childhood deprivation show that while there have been positive steps towards meeting some of the MDGs, inequality persists. At the same time, poorer households are much more likely to experience shocks more frequently. When shocks occur, households' patterns of coping have implications for the way that they are able to access services, reinforcing existing inequalities and poverty traps. These findings are particularly important given the current context of global economic shocks, which may overshadow earlier and future gains. We anticipate that the findings of the 2009 Young Lives survey, available in late 2010, will provide more details on how families are dealing with economic and environmental changes.

Discussions of policy priorities in the run-up to MDG target date of 2015, and of any post-MDG international development targeting framework, need to consider how to encourage both better reach and higher quality of interventions.

- Ensuring economic growth is pro-poor is an important part of harnessing the effort to deliver the MDGs.
- Sectoral policies need to focus on the poorest and most marginalised.
- Delivering to the poorest and most marginalised means understanding and exposing the disparities that already exist.
- Not only are good quality services needed to help children to break out of poverty, but part of this means ensuring that these interventions take account of the realities of children's lives.

There has long been concern expressed that the MDGs address what is measurable, rather than necessarily what is most important. Monitoring changes as they happen is key to making effective policy, and the findings presented in this Brief show clearly that disaggregation is crucial to monitoring and understanding change in children's lives. While some disaggregated data within the MDGs is available around gender, other regional, ethnic, wealth- and health-related differences are usually ignored. Disaggregating data would not require a change to the MDG infrastructure, but different and better reporting by governments and international organisations. Highlighting differences would help move the policy debate on to understand inequalities within countries and the effectiveness of policy in reaching all.

Given both the vulnerability of children to shocks and the speed of the onset of the recent economic crisis, long-term social protection and cash transfer mechanisms which can buffer ongoing individual or household crisis are important.

There is good evidence that well-designed social protection mechanisms have significant potential to support equitable growth (see Young Lives Policy Paper 1. Social protection schemes can shield families against risk, and enable children to stay in school or acquire other useful skills. Crucially, they can also help children balance work and education.

If slower growth means lower revenues for social investments, the fiscal space available to develop social policies is likely to be narrowed. It is important that policymakers do not regard social investment as a luxury in difficult times, but as a route towards stronger, more inclusive, growth and development beyond 2015. Investing in children, and in the circumstances into which they are born, will remain important not only because of their greater likelihood of being poor, but also because of the value and positive returns of early intervention for later individual and collective development.

## SELECTED READING

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

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Young Lives is a 15-year study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and Peru, following the lives of 3,000 children in each country. It is core-funded by UK aid from the Department for International Development (DFID) from 2001 to 2017 and by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2014. The full text of all Young Lives publications and more information about our work is available on our website.

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