



# Y Sinh's story

A profile from  
Young Lives in Vietnam

*"He doesn't know the alphabet  
but he knows a lot of songs"*

Y Sinh's neighbour

# Y Sinh's story

Y Sinh is 9 years old but looks much younger. He is small and thin, but already supports his mother by working for money. He lives with his mother and little sister in a small house on stilts. The family come from the H'Roi ethnic minority and speak their own language. The Young Lives interviewer made a particularly detailed report, some of which is shared here.

It took some time to sit down with Y Sinh and his mother because they were both so busy. The Young Lives interviewer met them for the first time in the dark and she wasn't sure they would recognise her the following time they met:

*"When they saw me, both mother and child smiled. I was glad that they still recognised me even though yesterday we had only a quick meeting in the dim light of an almost-out-of-battery torch, which flickered like fireflies. I followed them back to their house: it was a relatively firmly tin-roofed one. Climbing up four wooden stairs, Y Sinh's mother opened the door, took out a small wooden chair and invited me to sit down. I noticed that the floor was wooden, and the chair was not cleaner than the floor and more importantly, there was only one chair in the house. So I decided to sit on the floor with both of them."*

She also noted: "Only after I came here could I understand the meaning of stilt houses. Sitting inside one in a boiling hot day like today, I still felt cool because the wind was blowing up from under the floor and in from all directions. It was really refreshing."

She also noticed that Y Sinh's family and their neighbours were very poor.

*"People here mostly use water from the public well. They wash their clothes and bathe in the stream. The majority of the families don't have toilets and bathrooms. People talk to each other in H'Roi. They talk to Kinh people in Vietnamese. At school, they speak Vietnamese. Most people say that it is not necessary to teach children Vietnamese before starting school, because they learn to speak it when school starts."*

But Y Sinh has only attended school for a few days and so only knows H'Roi.

Near Y Sinh's house there is a large piece of land fenced with new barbed wire, with a hole that people can crawl through. Y Sinh likes playing games here with his friends. The Young Lives interviewer came across him one day picking mangoes. The children's pockets were bulging. She talked to them about computer games and karaoke. She notes:

*"They were singing and laughing loudly, especially when I sang along with them. After that, the talk changed to the topic of love. They teased each other that this one was in love with that one. One pointed at Y Sinh's house and said that, 'Over there, there are two pretty girls, one is already married while the other is this boy's girlfriend.'*

Y Sinh did not feature in the first book of Young Lives children's stories, although we have been following him, like the other children, since 2002.

*They made fun of each other; the one who was teased wore a serious face, threatened the others and swore, while the ones who teased were excited. I said, 'You guys are too young to be in love,' but they argued back."*

Y Sinh laughed along with them. Once, he took the catapult of the boy sitting next to him and shot it a few times. Sometimes, he hugged one of the boys. The children were running and jumping around, joking and poking at each other.

The interviewer also spoke with Y Sinh's mother who says that she had her first child with a Kinh man who left her soon after their daughter was born. Some time later, she had a relationship with Y Sinh's father. When she was three months pregnant, Y Sinh's father abandoned her to have an affair with a friend of hers. So she gave birth to Y Sinh with the support of her mother, sisters and brothers.

Y Sinh's mother said after that she had to work wherever anyone hired her. She went panning for gold and did a number of other jobs. When she was working, her children stayed with their grandmother.

When Y Sinh was around 2 years old, his mother married her current husband. Her family was not happy about it, but she married him because she felt that "living alone was unhappy". Y Sinh's little sister was born in 2005. By now Y Sinh's mother's mother had died and her husband was treating her badly, but she didn't want to divorce him. He had affairs with other women and he drank. He also beat her and her children. Her husband's family then threw her out and she had to seek help from her own relatives. By this time she was pregnant for the fourth time. She had a difficult birth and she had to go to hospital for emergency surgery. She lost the baby.

Her husband continues to be violent and rarely comes home. So Y Sinh lives with his mother and little sister. His older sister lives with her husband's family but sometimes comes back or lives with her aunt because her husband is away in the army and her in-laws are always arguing. She is about 16 years old.

Y Sinh's mother says she doesn't know what she would do without her son, and that he earns money to feed the family. The older he grows, the closer they are. She says:

*"I rely on Y Sinh. If I didn't have him, I would die.*

**He helps you with a lot of work, doesn't he?**

*Yes, he does. When I was tired and could not cut more canes ... I was sick ... he took a sickle and went to cut sugar cane ... He cut 69 bundles of sugar cane in two days."*

But she adds that she would love him anyway because he is her son: "He is my child, so I take care of him, of course. If he is ugly, he is my child, if he is handsome, he is still my child."

The interview with Y Sinh himself is quite difficult because Y Sinh doesn't want to be without his mother and she keeps interrupting. Because he doesn't speak Vietnamese there also needs to be an interpreter. Even the simplest questions are painstakingly slow.

Y Sinh says he doesn't know how old he is, or the name of his village. But he does know how to sing. A neighbour says that: "He doesn't know the alphabet but he knows a lot of songs." In the evening, she hears him singing loudly: "He sings very loudly, all the way from the main

street until he gets home. It seems that he sings in order to overcome his fear [because the lane is very dark].”

His mother agrees that he is a good singer:

*“He knows how to sing karaoke, songs in movies and songs on TV. At home, when I was preparing meals, he often sang. I asked him how he knew how to sing those songs, and he said, ‘You don’t know anything. I can sing.’”*

Y Sinh’s mother worries about what will become of her children if she dies. She says that although she is not very old, her life is over.

*“I think about their future because I am already on the other side of the hill; there is no need to think about my future any more. In the future when he grows up, he can go to work for others to earn money.”*

She says she wants her children to have an easier life than she has had.

### **Ethnic minority groups in Vietnam**

If you come from an ethnic minority family in Vietnam, as Y Sinh does, you are more likely to be poor and less educated, less likely to have access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation, and your children are more likely to be underweight or small for their age than if you are from the ethnic majority.

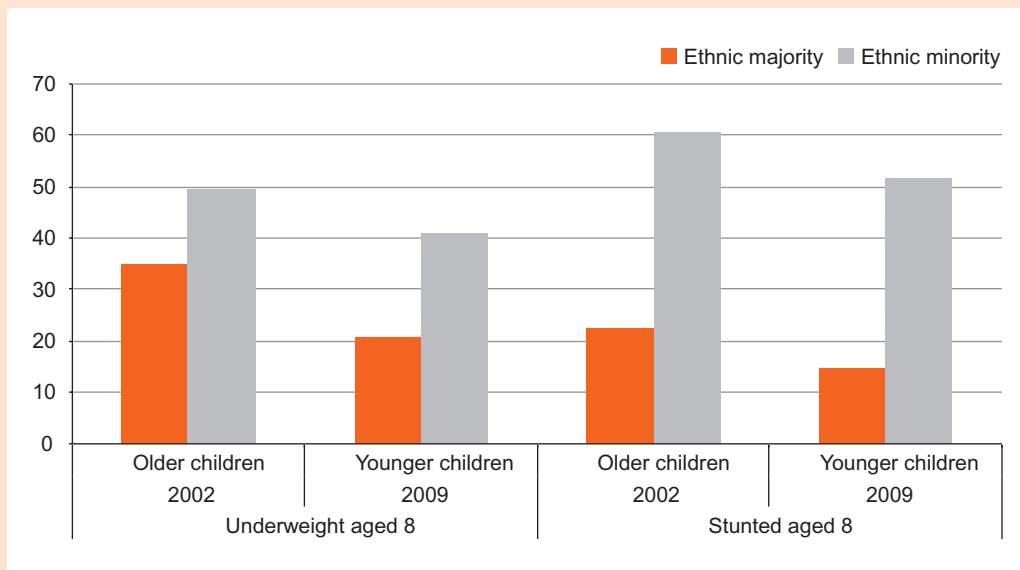
We found that 60 per cent of Young Lives children from ethnic minority groups were poor, but only 17 per cent from the ethnic majority group. The Government has a number of programmes for poverty reduction that target poor communities with lots of ethnic minority inhabitants. Poverty rates among Young Lives children are dropping faster for ethnic minority groups (down 31 per cent between 2006 and 2009) than they are for ethnic majority ones (down 9 per cent), although the ethnic minority communities are also more affected by economic crises.

*“He doesn’t know the alphabet but he knows a lot of songs”*

Y Sinh’s neighbour

## Ethnic minority groups in Vietnam *continued*

### Malnutrition indicators among 8-year-old children (%)



However, if we look at the incidence of children who are underweight or small for their age, we find not only that ethnic minority children fare much worse than those from the ethnic majority group, but that their rate of improvement over the years is lower. Most ethnic minority families live in rural areas, which highlights the need for policies targeted at poor families in these areas and the importance of government programmes aimed at poor rural families.

**Source:** Le Thuc Duc et al. (2012) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report.

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he is still my child.”*

Y Sinh’s mother



## Country context: Vietnam

Over 88 million people from 54 different ethnic groups live in Vietnam. For most, living conditions have steadily improved since the 1990s. Vietnam is now considered a 'medium human development' country, and ranks 128 out of 187 in the United Nations Human Development Index. Average life expectancy is 75.

The Government has been gradually moving the country from being a centrally planned Communist state to a market-oriented economy. It has introduced a number of programmes to address poverty and social deprivation, and much foreign aid has also been targeted at poverty reduction.

The country was badly affected by the global recession in 2009. Food prices increased and exports went down. There are widening gaps between rich and poor, and between the majority ethnic Kinh and the country's many minority populations.

- The number of people living below the official poverty line continues to decline, from 16 per cent in 2006 to 11 per cent in 2010.
- This masks a big gap in poverty rates between majority and minority groups. In 2008, only 9 per cent of the ethnic majority population was poor, but almost half the ethnic minority population.
- Gender discrimination continues to undermine the well-being of women and children.

### Children

- About 2.6 million children are classified as being in need of special protection, including those with disabilities, orphans and those in poverty.
- The Government has made efforts to improve healthcare services for women and children, and Vietnam now ranks 90th in the world for under-5 mortality.
- Among under-5s, 5 per cent are underweight, 8 per cent are wasted (thin for their height) and 32 per cent stunted (short for their age).
- Enrolment rates at primary school are 97 per cent. In Vietnam, boys are more likely to drop out of secondary school than girls.

**Sources:** [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk); UNDP (2011) *Human Development Report 2011*; Le Thuc Duc et al. (2011) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report; UNICEF (2012) *State of the World's Children 2012*.

Young Lives is a unique international study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. By following the lives of 12,000 children and young people over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and provide evidence to support effective policies for children.

The profile presented here is one of 24 taken from the interviews we did with the children individually and in groups. Each one is accompanied by a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that children are having to contend with, but also gives a sense of the wider context of their lives. These range from education and schooling, to inequality, health and illness, violence in school and at home, early marriage, the effects of migration, families' experiences of crises, government schemes to help poor people, and children's views and experiences of what it is to be rich or poor.

The children and their families who are participating in the Young Lives study willingly share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality and ensure their identities remain protected. For this reason, the children's names have been changed here. The accompanying photos are of children in similar situations to the children within our study sample.

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An International Study of Childhood Poverty