

## Young Lives Theory of Change

### Young Lives Overview

Young Lives is the largest and most comprehensive mixed methods longitudinal study in the Global South, following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam for the past twenty years, from infancy to young adulthood. The study is divided into two age groups: 8,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort); and 4,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort). To date, Young Lives have conducted five rounds of comprehensive quantitative survey data, alongside four rounds of longitudinal qualitative interviews working with a sub-sample of 60 individuals in each country. In 2020/21 our innovative Covid19 phone survey comprised five phone calls with each of our respondents in all four study countries, to understand the impact of the pandemic on young people and inform Covid-19 recovery plans

Our unique mixed-methods approach is internationally recognised as one of the only studies to enable a **holistic understanding** of the effect of childhood poverty and inequality on later development outcomes and how different aspects of life interconnect and change over time. For example, the link between early nutrition and learning, which feeds through into later life impacts on skills development and getting a decent job. Our focus in this new phase is on gendered transitions to adulthood of our two cohorts.

Our **vision** is a world where all young people can reach their potential.

Our **mission** is to deliver ground-breaking research that informs policy on how poverty and inequality affect the lives of young people in low- and middle-income countries as they transition into adulthood.

This document sets out an **overall Theory of Change** for the entire Young Lives programme to encompass the full range of Young Lives projects covering a broad range of thematic areas. Logframes for individual programmes will therefore be tailored to ensure they clearly map on to this overall Theory of Change.

### Research Challenges

As the Young Lives cohorts enter into early adulthood we have re-defined the **challenges** that our research is best placed to address, highlighting four key areas to investigate:

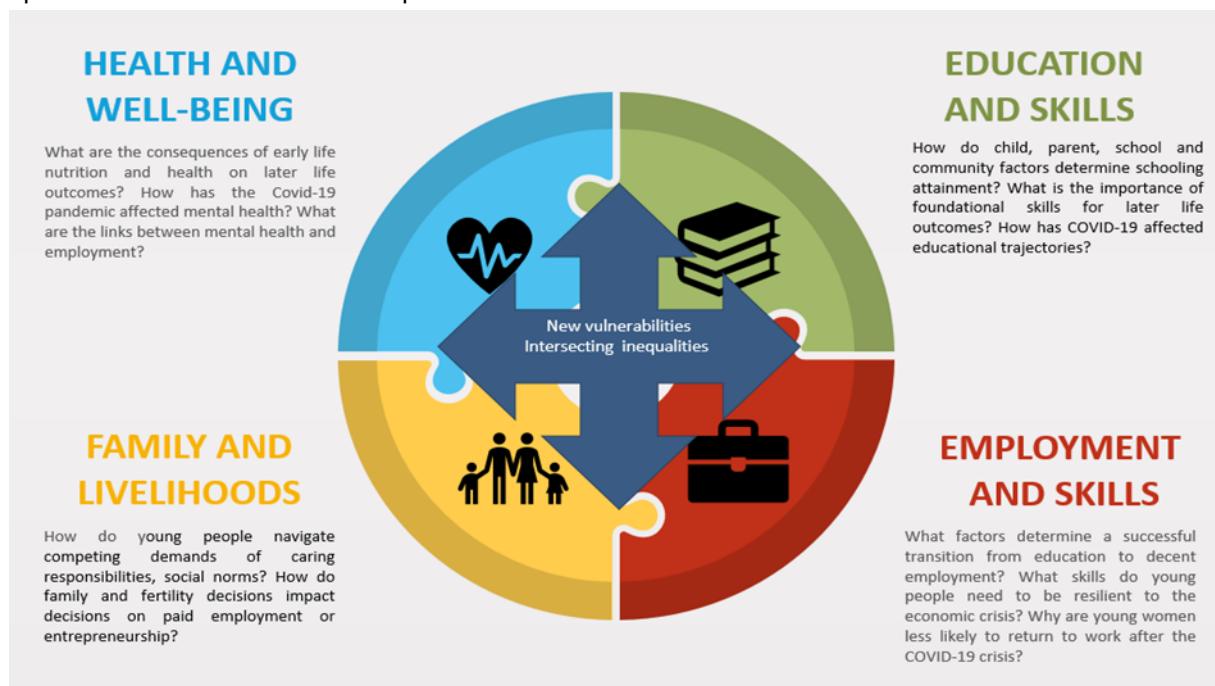
- i. **Health and Wellbeing.** *What are the consequences of early life nutrition and health on later life outcomes? How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected mental health? What are the links between mental health and employment?*
- ii. **Education and Skills.** *How do child, parent, school and community factors determine schooling attainment? What is the importance of foundational skills for later life outcomes. How has COVID-19 affected educational trajectories?*
- iii. **Family and Livelihoods.** *How do young people navigate competing demands of caring responsibilities, social norms? How do family and fertility decisions impact decisions on paid employment and entrepreneurship?*

- iv. **Employment and Skills.** *What factors determine a successful transition from education to decent employment? What skills do young people need to be resilient to the economic crisis? Why are young women less likely to return to work after the COVID-19 crisis?*

All these challenges are underpinned by the **new vulnerabilities** that young people are facing which are unprecedented in the past century, this includes [the three C's] of

- **Climate:** this worsening crisis is now causing intense stress in the poorest communities,
- **Covid-19:** the global health pandemic has caused economic disaster with young people in the global South particularly hard hit in terms of their studying, jobs and increased responsibilities.
- **Conflict** (particularly in Ethiopia). Initial results from our phone survey in 2020 showed that mental health of young people was affected by the conflict in Northern Ethiopia, even for those living outside the conflict zone.

In addition, they will be viewed through the lens of “**Gender and Intersecting Intergenerational Inequalities**”, as a cross-cutting theme. This speaks to the policy agenda set by the Sustainable Development Goals moving from an emphasis on poverty, to the root causes of inequality which ultimately speaks to our intended overall impact. .



The **intended impact** of the Young Lives programme in response to these challenges is twofold:

- Improved understanding of how early experiences of childhood poverty affect later life outcomes, shaped by a range of intersecting inequalities (wealth, location, gender, age and minority status) and vulnerability to external crises that are not of their making, including the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.
- Informing national and international policies and programmes that improve the lives of disadvantaged children and young people, and that are central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

This impact statement, tailored from the previous Young Lives Theory of Change, continues to be the core ambition of the programme and allows us to capture the broad impact that the programme aims to achieve, while keeping a clear distinction from the outcome statements.

### An improved Theory of Change

The Young Lives Theory of Change (see Figure 1) builds on a previous Theory of Change established in 2015<sup>1</sup>, and has been informed by evidence of impact evaluated through a comprehensive external review funded by DFID in 2019<sup>2</sup> in addition to incorporating an expanded research agenda in 2022 to build on our earlier research. The Theory of Change has been developed to:

1. Provide clarity in **differentiating between outputs and outcomes** and demonstrate an explicit **casual pathway** between outputs, outcomes and impact which can be demonstrably reflected in related Young Lives project logframes (including the Young Lives at Work and Old Dart Foundation logframes).
2. Set out clear **underlying assumptions** for outputs to contribute to achieving outcomes and likewise for how outcomes contribute to achieving impact.
3. **Identify risks** to outcomes being achieved as external factors distinct from failures due to wrong assumptions. This is important to reflect the broader contextual factors under which the Young Lives programme takes place.

### Outputs

The Theory of Change sets out the following key outputs based on existing and comprehensive evidence in terms of their contribution to achieving outcomes of the Young Lives programme.

- **High quality, publicly available longitudinal data:** This is a core output of the Young Lives programme and serves as a basis for the development of the rest of the outputs. For it to be impactful beyond contributing to Young Lives producing research and policy outputs, it is essential that this data is of a high standard and is made publicly available.
- **High quality research and relevant policy outputs:** This includes a variety of research and policy outputs in different formats, adapted to the needs of the user in order to reach target audiences.
- **Production of learning tools and resources based on best practice research methods and ethical procedures:** Young Lives places a strong emphasis on capacity building to ensure that researchers can use our data to have maximum impact on wider research, as well as sharing best practice to improve the quality and robustness of international longitudinal research.
- **Multiple channels to disseminate research and policy findings:** Young Lives strives to deliver a comprehensive communications strategy to ensure research and policy findings reach and influence intended audiences. The different channels that fall under this category include academic publications, dissemination through the website, social media and a range of innovative communication outputs (including infographics, animation and digital stories), as well as through attending conferences and media appearances.

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<sup>1</sup> Previous Young Lives Theory of Change (2015) is presented for reference at the end of this paper (see Figure 2)

<sup>2</sup> External evaluation of Young Lives conducted by Ecorys 2019 and funded by DFID; this evaluation proposed a revised Theory of Change based on the COM-B Model developed by Michie et al and adapted to Theories of Change by Mayne

- **Active engagement with policy and programme decision-makers and building research networks:** Active national and international engagement, including in relation to survey design, continues to be an essential component to ensure other outputs reach and influence their target audience. A key determinant in the success of this engagement is the role of the researchers conducting Young Lives analysis, both in the study countries and Oxford, including the pivotal role of the Country Directors, Young Lives Director and Deputy Director. The flexibility to allow engagement to be open and adaptable is key in building sustainable networks and allows engagement to be based on evidence provided by the data and analysis

## Outcomes

The Theory of Change sets out a simplified number of outcomes that the programme aims to achieve by capturing its outcomes in broader terms. This also allows a clearer identification of pathways and allows for flexibility at the analysis stage of what outputs contribute to what outcomes, which is important in allowing different Young lives programmes to demonstrably map on to this high level Theory of Change.

The **intended outcomes** that Young Lives aims to achieve are:

- i. **Positive changes in debate around young people's transition to adulthood:** There is extensive evidence that Young Lives has already contributed to shaping debates across a variety of different thematic areas.
- ii. **Young Lives data is widely used in the development of high impact policy and research:** Strong evidence of Young Lives contributing to impactful policy and programme development is a result of the high quality of publicly available data, relevant research analysis and policy findings and the quality of Young Lives researchers. Active engagement is also essential.
- iii. **Enhanced understanding of longitudinal data amongst researchers:** The production of learning tools and resources based on best practice research methods and ethical procedures are essential to enhance the understanding of longitudinal data amongst researchers, as well as key in building their capacity. Other outcomes have also contributed to this, through increasing the visibility and reputation of the research.

## Assumptions

The following key assumptions have been identified as necessary conditions at each stage of the causal chain for **outcomes to be achieved**<sup>3</sup>, categorised into four main categories: i) reach; ii) capacity; iii) behaviour; and iv) outcomes.

- i. **Reach assumptions:** these represent the necessary conditions needed for outputs to reach their target audience, and include:
  - Young Lives data is high quality and has the recognition of being associated with key, well established and credible institutions in each country as well as Oxford University. This contributes to researchers and policy-makers being assured of the quality of its outputs.
  - Young Lives instruments and quantitative data is publicly archived to ensure that any relevant national or international stakeholder can access it.

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<sup>3</sup> These assumptions were tested during the Ecorys 2019 external evaluation of Young Lives, including through consultations with relevant stakeholders.

- Young Lives engages actively with policy-makers and researchers, which contributes to ensuring that they are aware of the existing data and research outputs.
  - Young Lives adapts its communication channels and research outputs in order to reach their target audience.
- ii. **Capacity assumptions:** these represent the necessary conditions so that target audiences (researchers and policy-makers) have the necessary capability, opportunity and motivation to use the programme outputs, and include:
- Generally, policy-makers have limited time to engage with evidence, therefore it is essential for Young Lives to have a clear and tailored dissemination strategy; engagements in person and targeted policy briefs are often the most effective outputs.
  - Ensuring that research and policy outputs are translated into local languages can increase the opportunity for target audiences to engage.
  - Matching Young Lives data with larger national data sets has potential to increase motivation of national partners to engage with Young Lives evidence and expand impact of findings.
- iii. **Behaviour assumptions:** these represent the necessary conditions to ensure that, given the target audience's capability, opportunity and motivation to change their behaviour, this change does happen. The following assumptions imply that policy-makers and researchers make use of Young Lives outputs.
- There is a demand from policy-makers and researchers for evidence.
  - Outputs are relevant to policy-makers, researchers and practitioners.
  - The research agenda has been set up to be demand driven.

A key consideration in this area is the need to consider the timings of policy-making, and the adaption of dissemination to those timings, in order to increase the effectiveness of the research findings.

- iv. **Assumptions relating to outcomes:** these represent the necessary conditions for Young Lives' target audience's change in behaviour to lead to Young Lives data and findings influencing research, policy and practice, and include:
- By producing new, robust evidence and effectively engaging with research, policy and programme stakeholders, Young Lives can influence decisions to strengthen policies and programmes aimed at improving young people's transition to adulthood.
  - The full range of evidence produced by Young Lives is used, and not only the evidence that backs pre-conceived ideas.

A final assumption in order for Young Lives outcomes to lead to the intended **impact** is in relation to time:

- **Time** is necessary to capture Young Lives' impact in improving understanding of childhood poverty and informing policies and practices to reduce childhood poverty. This is because the time lag associated with longitudinal studies means that the full impact of Young Lives cannot be assessed until many years after the last data are collected.

Risks to achieving outcomes

The following key risks to Young Lives achieving its intended outcomes have been identified, each of which are mitigated through adapting the research approach as much as possible.

- Research and policy engagement can be destabilised by political instability, armed conflict or other external crises. This risk has been significantly demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ethiopia, with the Young Lives programme responding through the rapid design and implementation of the new Covid-19 phone surveys, both across our full cohorts and at school level.
- Respondents are unable to be surveyed over the duration of the Young Lives study (high attrition). This risk is mitigated through an increased effort into tracking the respondents and adjusting field protocol on how to approach the respondents using all the contact information available from previous rounds of data collection (including through social media when possible).
- Changes in donor thematic and country priorities poses a key risk to achieving the intended outcomes of the programme, given that outcomes generally longer term and rely primarily on stable funding.
- Changes in perceptions from donors and the wider international community on the value of longitudinal studies is a risk that affects future funding, as well as the use of the data and findings.
- Changes in funding landscape of donors. This risk is mitigated through a comprehensive Fundraising Strategy and frequent monitoring of progress and funding opportunities.
- Young Lives operates in a multi-actor environment, with several influences behind changes in policy/practice. Governments and other actors are often unwilling to acknowledge external influences on their decision making, and it will be difficult to know the extent of Young Lives' influence in any change.

#### External influencing factors

Finally, the following potential external influencing factors have been identified that may contribute to the achievement of the programme outcomes and, ultimately, the intended impact of the programme.

- INGO advocacy work on childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood is a factor that contributes to influencing debates and global and national policies. Building partnerships is important for enabling a wider reach and stronger impact.
- Countries in the Global South experiencing changes in government that lead to a change in priorities to align with the findings from Young Lives research, or the priorities of donors changing, and this resulting in an uptake of Young Lives evidence.
- Countries in the Global South aiming to align their policies with donor priorities, regardless of Young Lives influencing and dissemination of research.
- General demand for open data to show progress on achieving the SDGs and the 'leaving no one behind agenda' driving the momentum for evidence-driven policy-making.

Figure 1: Young Lives Theory of Change 2022

