Legacy Report

Young Lives
Two decades of Findings and Future Research Opportunities: Education and Skills

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Young Lives

Overview

Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities is fundamental to children and young people reaching their full potential, as set out in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). Addressing the growing learning crisis involves delivering on every child's right to basic foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy.

Young Lives' unique mixed-methods longitudinal research provides a holistic, life-course perspective to understanding skills development, learning progress and educational outcomes in low- and middle-income countries – from infancy to adulthood – highlighting the compounding impacts of inequality, gender, shocks and crises, such as climate change, conflict and COVID-19.

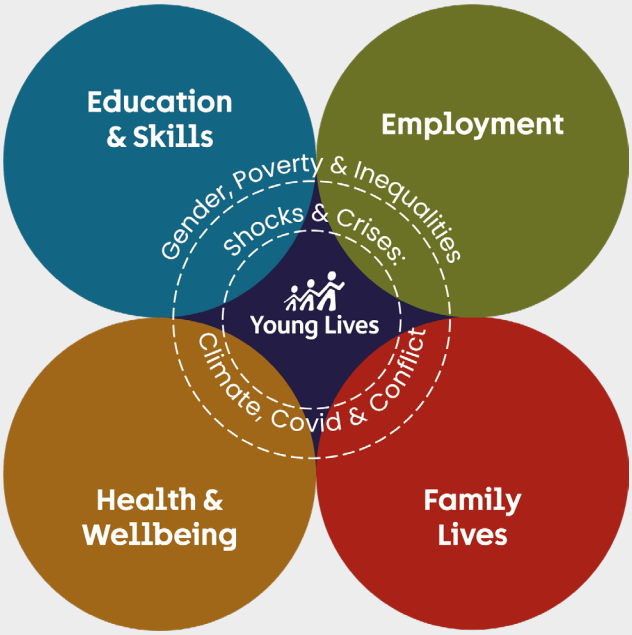
With its extensive data now covering more than two decades, Young Lives is able to examine the causes and consequences of intersecting inequalities on education and learning and the impact this has on young people's ability to find work and start a family, by examining individual traits, skills, school performance, aspirations, family circumstances and social policies. This data is collected through child, household and school surveys, domain-specific achievement tests, computerised tasks, in-depth interviews with children and their families, teachers and head teachers and pioneering research on how cognitive, socio-emotional and job-related skills develop (Mihaylova *et al.* 2025).

This report presents key findings from over 20 years of quantitative and qualitative research by Young Lives on schooling, cognitive skills, socio-emotional skills and the transition to higher education. It also highlights Young Lives' significant contributions to education policy debates, showcases impact case studies, presents the latest trends in education and skills based on preliminary analysis of Round 7 data and sets out unique opportunities for future research.

The Young Lives study

Young Lives has been following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam, from infancy into early adulthood, since 2002. In each country, the study is divided into two age groups: 2,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort).

This report is one of a series of four legacy reports – Education and Skills, Health and Well-being, Employment, and Family Lives – which together provide a comprehensive overview of Young Lives' holistic research and policy findings from the last two decades.



1. What we know: evidence from the Young Lives study

Over the last two decades, there have been significant improvements in access to education across all four Young Lives study countries, with increased school and university enrolment rates and reduced overall levels of student dropout (Cueto, Singh *et al.* 2016; Favara, Chang and Sánchez 2018; Favara *et al.* 2022). Children are staying in school longer and there have been intergenerational improvements in educational attainment, both in terms of an increased number of secondary education graduates and a decrease in the number of people without formal education (Favara *et al.* 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted and partially reversed some of these advancements in education (Favara *et al.* 2022).

Alongside these gains, there is still significant variation in grade progression and school completion across study countries. While starting school at the typical age and remaining in the appropriate grade have become more common for children in India, Peru and Vietnam, with lower rates of over-age enrolment when comparing the Younger Cohort to the Older Cohort, late enrolment and slow progression through grades are still very common in Ethiopia (Bow-Bertrand, Briones and Favara 2018; Favara, Chang and Sánchez 2018). By age 19, most young people in Ethiopia have not completed 12 years of quality education, due to delayed school entry, grade repetition linked to poor performance or absenteeism and intermittent enrolment.

Learning outcomes are also significantly different and their progress is uneven across study countries. Young Lives has measured learning outcomes since the Younger Cohort were 5 years old and the Older Cohort were 8 years old. While vocabulary skills have improved in all four countries, maths skills have declined in India and Ethiopia and only slightly improved in Peru and Vietnam (Cueto *et al*. 2014; Cueto, León, et al. 2016; Bow-Bertrand, Briones and Favara 2018). Nevertheless, according to national standardised tests, 85% of children in Grade 8 in Peru are reading below grade level and one-quarter of students are at least two grade levels behind (Aguero et al. 2021). Conversely, Vietnam has become an international reference point due to its striking performances in the PISA assessments – which are well above expected, given its level of economic development (Glewwe, Krutikova and Rolleston 2017). Young Lives' data reveals that differences in primary school maths teachers' skills explain a larger proportion of the cross-country performance gap between Vietnam and India or Peru, compared to child or household characteristics (Glewwe *et al.* 2021; Dang *et al.* 2023).

Intersecting inequalities have a significant impact on educational trajectories, affecting preschool attendance, grade progression and learning outcomes. Children from the poorest households, those with unstable household compositions, residing in rural areas, with less-educated mothers and from minority backgrounds consistently underperform (Cueto, León and Muñoz 2014; Cueto, Singh *et al.* 2016; Jeffery *et al.* 2020; Reynolds 2022; Parvez, 2024b). This vulnerability often leads to a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, particularly in Ethiopia, as well as a lower probability of accessing higher education and quality higher education in India, Peru and Vietnam (Cueto, Singh *et al.* 2016; Singh and Mukherjee 2017; Favara *et al.* 2022; Thapa *et al.* 2023). Qualitative evidence has further highlighted how inequalities in educational services hinder educational progression and even the transition to primary school for indigenous people in Peru (Ames 2012).

Inequalities in the development of cognitive skills and early learning perpetuate disparities in later educational achievements and employment opportunities in young adulthood (Ford and von Russdorf 2023). Young Lives' longitudinal data enables in-depth assessment of human capital accumulation, providing a dynamic perspective on skills development and highlighting how initial gaps in early-life circumstances are amplified over time (Aizawa 2021). Gaps in cognitive skills emerge even before the start of school and tend to remain fairly stable across childhood (Castro and Rolleston 2018). Although socio-economic inequalities in cognitive skills are observed across all four study countries, the magnitude and persistence of these gaps are particularly striking in Peru (López Bóo 2014).

Cognitive skills at age 5 predict skills development in mid-childhood and adolescence (Sánchez 2013, 2017; Glewwe, Krutikova and Rolleston 2017) and are further associated with enrolment in higher education by age 22 (Sánchez and Singh 2018; Das, Singh and Yi Chang 2022). Access to high-quality early education, alongside balanced nutrition, is crucial for promoting healthy development and reducing educational inequality driven by socio-economic disparities. Faced with poor-quality education and low learning outcomes, children and their parents may choose to drop out of school to work or pursue alternative pathways, such as marriage, which they perceive as offering better opportunities (Kaffenberger, Sobol and Spindelman 2023). Moreover, better numeracy skills at age 15 are strongly correlated with young people still being in education by age 22, delaying the transition to employment across all the study countries (Favara, Chang and Sánchez 2018). Strong cognitive skills are also important in enhancing the likelihood of securing paid employment. **Regardless of cognitive skill levels, young women earn significantly less than young men across all four Young Lives countries** (Perez-Alvarez, Porter and Ramachandran 2023).

Young Lives has generated groundbreaking evidence on the formation of foundational cognitive skills and their role in the learning process in developing countries. Previous evidence on the role of early cognition on later education and employment outcomes in developing countries has been largely based on domain-specific cognitive-achievement test scores (e.g. learning outcomes in maths, reading comprehension and vocabulary). Comparing these test scores in countries with differing language and cultural contexts is challenging. Furthermore, differences in test scores are not necessarily due to underlying differences in cognitive skills as they also rely on schooling and other investments in human capital. In 2013, Young Lives administered a novel and easily administered touch-screen computer application designed to obtain measurements of a set of foundational cognitive skills in Ethiopia and Peru (Behrman *et al.* 2022): working memory and inhibition – both of which measure executive function, a key predictor of educational success – long-term memory and implicit learning. This evidence shows that **late-childhood foundational cognitive skills predict educational outcomes through adolescence and into young adulthood.** Working memory and long-term memory are consistently and positively associated with subsequent educational attainment, including completing lower secondary education in Ethiopia and enrolling in university in Peru, as well as with maths and literacy tests in both countries (Lopez *et al.* 2024).

Skills accumulated during childhood and adolescence, along with individuals' subjective expectations about the returns on education, play a crucial role in shaping future educational choices. In Peru, individuals who develop higher cognitive and socio-emotional skills during their formative years are more likely to enrol in quality higher education institutions leading to higher earnings potential, or to choose majors associated with the highest expected future earnings (Sánchez, Favara and Porter 2021). Similarly, young people from poorer households, who have lower educational aspirations, numeracy skills and self-efficacy, have lower subjective expectations about the returns on education at ages 14–15, which subsequently predicts educational enrolment at ages 18–19 (Favara *et al.* 2021). Moreover, girls have lower earnings expectations than boys at ages 14–15, despite having similar socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, they tend to enrol in higher education institutions or study degree subjects or majors with lower future earnings prospects (Favara *et al.* 2021; Sánchez, Favara and Porter 2021).

Gender differences are significant, though girls are not always disadvantaged. In India**,** girls typically leave education earlier than boys, while in Ethiopia and Vietnam the opposite occurs and, in Peru, there are no significant gender differences (Cueto, Singh *et al.* 2016). In India and Ethiopia, a pattern of low educational aspirations among parents for their daughters appears to have a negative impact on girls' aspirations, leading to poorer performances in numeracy (Darko and Vasilakos 2020) and reading, as well as lower self-efficacy compared to boys (Hossain and Jukes 2023). In addition, maths teachers' stereotypical gender biases favouring boys have a negative impact on girls' maths test scores in secondary schools by fostering a negative attitude towards maths and undermining girls' academic self-confidence and effort (Rakshit and Sahoo 2023). The opposite happens in Vietnam, where the gender bias appears to favour girls with respect to learning outcomes (Dercon and Singh 2012). Despite higher educational achievements, **gender disparities in socio-emotional skills, particularly those associated with empowerment such as self-efficacy and agency, widen during late adolescence,** affecting young women not only in Vietnam but across all countries due to entrenched patriarchal gender norms and other intersecting inequalities (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

In Peru, significant gender disparities exist in access to higher education, even though school enrolment rates for girls and boys are the same. While skills differences explain most of the gap in higher education access between boys at the bottom and at the top of the wealth distribution, the gap for girls remains large even after accounting for skills. Short-term economic barriers disproportionally hinder girls in disadvantaged households compared to boys and girls are less likely to receive the necessary resources to pursue higher education (Molina, Santa María and Yamada

2024). While the government's conditional cash transfer programme (JUNTOS) has promoted gender parity in access to primary and secondary education, it is yet to be effective in narrowing the gender gap in access to higher education (Patel-Campillo and Salas García 2022). Similarly, young women in India face a greater risk of dropping out of tertiary education, particularly if they had lower educational aspirations or were engaged in paid employment by the age of 12 (Singh, Mukherjee and Kumar 2023).

Where gender biases intersect with other inequalities and traditional gender roles are more prevalent, adolescent learning and outcomes are more profoundly affected (Dercon and Singh 2012; Singh and Vennam 2016; Singh and Mukherjee 2017, 2018). Girls who drop out of school, especially in rural areas and among poorer households, are much more likely to be married off early by their parents than those who stay in education. Likewise, early motherhood puts girls at much greater risk of dropping out of school, as well as having detrimental effects on the health of the baby. In India, the time girls spend undertaking domestic work at the age of 12 is a key factor in determining their likelihood of completing secondary education (Singh and Mukherjee 2017). In contrast, boys growing up in poor households in India and Ethiopia have significantly lower school enrolment rates at age 15 compared to girls, reflecting the higher opportunity costs for teenage boys, who are more likely to be required to leave school early to work and help support their households (Dercon and Singh 2012; Singh and Mukherjee 2018). From age 7, rural boys in Ethiopia face significant financial pressures to find work, which reduces their educational aspirations and, in turn, increases their risk of dropping out of school. Overall, children are confronted with complex choices when deciding how to allocate their time. Educational aspirations influence these decisions; however, because these aspirations shift depending on factors such as gender, age, type of work and level of education, children's time allocations also change accordingly (Boyden, Porter and Zharkevich 2021).

Young Lives' longitudinal evidence shows that delays in children's growth can have negative long-term consequences for both education and skills, as well as outcomes in later life. Malnutrition during infancy and early childhood has severe long-term consequences, affecting not only physical growth but also cognitive skills, socio-emotional skills and educational attainment. Stunting has consistently been shown to predict subsequent poor educational attainment and poor cognition (Crookston *et al.* 2011, 2013; Georgiadis *et al.* 2016; Sánchez 2017; Dessie *et al.* 2025). Young Lives' groundbreaking evidence suggests that malnutrition affects educational attainment through its impact on foundational cognitive skills, which in turn matter for learning outcomes (Sánchez *et al.* 2024). However, recovery of growth has been linked with significant cognitive catch-up, with potential benefits shown long after the first 1,000 days (Crookston *et al.* 2010, 2013; Fink and Rockers 2014). Low cognitive and socio-emotional skills have a significant impact on both schooling and employability (Crookston *et al.* 2011; Kowalski *et al.* 2018; Arteaga and Glewwe 2019; Aurino *et al.* 2019; Chang, Favara and Novella 2022; Perez-Alvarez, Porter and Ramachandran 2023; Lopez *et al.* 2024). Lower socio-emotional skills and dropping out of secondary school can also increase the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours (Favara and Sánchez 2017; Mitchell *et al.* 2023) and teenage pregnancy (Favara, Lavado and Sánchez 2020).

Investments in early child development and preschool education services can have a positive impact on skills formation and can help put vulnerable children back on the right track, provided the **service provision is of sufficient quality** (Cueto, Singh *et al.* 2016; Woldehanna 2016; Sánchez, Melendez and Behrman 2020; Arapa *et al.* 2021). In Peru, evidence from Young Lives demonstrating a lack of initial impact of a government childcare scheme in rural areas, 'Wasi Wasi', on children's cognitive development (Cueto *et al.* 2009) led to a complete overhaul of the national early childhood development programme to deliver the strengthened 'Cuna Más' programme. Unfortunately, **access to preschool educational services remains uneven across the four countries, with good-quality early education typically scarce and inaccessible** to disadvantaged children (Cueto, Singh *et al.* 2016). In Ethiopia, persistently low levels of preschool enrolment remain, despite the rollout of the O-class or 'zero-grade' classes since 2015 (Birhanu, Tiumelissan and Pankhurst 2021).

Social protection programmes can enhance foundational cognitive skills and remediate the long-term impact of childhood poverty and early exposure to climate-related shocks during the first 1,000 days (Ford and von Russdorf 2023). In Ethiopia, children from households benefiting from a large public works scheme, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), demonstrated significantly improved working memory (Freund *et al.* 2023). Notably, this impact was more pronounced and statistically significant for children who had previously experienced stunting or early-life exposure to rainfall shocks. These findings suggest that **by addressing nutritional deficits and food insecurity, social protection programmes can reduce educational inequalities by improving cognitive skills** such as working memory and inhibitory control in 12-year-old children in both Ethiopia and Peru (Freund *et al.* 2023; Pazos *et al.* 2024). Moreover, by increasing household resources, PSNP allows families to reallocate children's time to studying, resulting in increased implicit learning, as well as numeracy skills and vocabulary (Favara, Porter and Woldehanna 2019).

In Peru, children from households benefiting from the promotion of school enrolment and attendance through JUNTOS showed significantly enhanced inhibitory control, particularly those who were enrolled from an early age (6 years old), compared to their older siblings (Scott *et al.* 2022). JUNTOS has been more effective in improving cognitive skills in children who began receiving benefits before age 5, compared to those who only benefited at a later age, due to improved early-life health in sensitive age periods, enabled by the programme's health-related conditionalities (Sánchez, Melendez and Behrman 2020). More broadly, evidence from Young Lives shows that JUNTOS has led to a decrease in childhood stunting

(Andersen *et al.* 2015), particularly for boys, and an increase in primary school completion and transition to secondary education (Gaentzsch 2020).

Education systems can also perpetuate existing inequalities, as disadvantaged children often attend low-quality schools and higher education institutions (Krutikova, Rolleston and Aurino 2014; Sánchez, Favara and Porter 2021) **and typically learn less than their better-off peers** attending the same schools (Glewwe, Krutikova and Rolleston 2017). In Peru, the gap in learning and education attainment between children in urban and rural areas is largely attributable to the quality of teaching and schools in these areas (Castro and Rolleston 2018). Educational inequities can be exacerbated through different pathways. For example, higher teacher absenteeism rates are more prevalent in more remote schools (Guerrero and León 2016) and have been linked to a culture of low professional motivation (Moore 2024). Additionally, more-able teachers are often assigned to classes with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Cueto *et al.* 2017). Recent evidence suggests that attending a private school explains learning gaps in maths at age 15 in India, although this effect tends to disappear at older ages, when years of schooling becomes the key factor explaining these differences (Parvez 2024a). Across all four study countries, parents initially have high educational aspirations for their children, but these tend to fade over time due to poor education quality and high poverty rates (Woodhead *et al.* 2009), or limited access to information from schools (Guerrero *et al.* 2016). In Ethiopia, students' progression in one school year can be directly correlated to teachers' skills and education levels (Rolleston, James and Aurino 2013). In addition, continuing education beyond primary school often requires travelling greater distances to the nearest secondary school, putting children from poor households and in remote areas at a particular disadvantage, which can even motivate migration (Crivello 2011).

Nevertheless, schools and broad education reforms can reduce inequalities and improve opportunities and outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Peru, evidence from Young Lives has demonstrated improved educational outcomes and reduced learning gaps across a number of public secondary schools, through a package of reforms (*Jornada Escolar Completa*) to increase both the quantity of schooling hours and the quality of schools and teaching (Aguero *et al.* 2021). In India, evidence from Young Lives on the impact of the Midday Meal Scheme shows the programme's importance to not only incentivise school enrolment, but also to act as a safety net for children, providing large and significant health gains, particularly for children from poor households (Singh, Park and Dercon 2013). Although this evidence is encouraging, it is unlikely that these interventions can fully compensate for early disadvantages.

The impact of shocks and crises (climate, conflict and COVID-19) on education and skills

The young people in the Young Lives study are beginning their adult lives having to navigate the profound economic and social impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the increasingly urgent and growing impacts of climate change due to the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events that typically affect poor countries considerably more than high-income countries. Many Young Lives families in Ethiopia have also been severely affected by ongoing armed conflict (Endale *et al.* 2025).

Young Lives' research has revealed how **childhood exposure to climate shocks** such as droughts and floods **has an unequal impact on children's development, affecting their skills formation and learning progress**, with the poorest children most affected (Chang, Favara and Novella 2022; Freund *et al.* 2023; Pazos *et al.* 2024).

Early-life exposure to rainfall shocks, particularly during gestational periods, affects the future development of children's vocabulary by age 5, as well as their foundational cognitive skills by age 12 (Pazos *et al.* 2024). Longer-term effects on basic maths and socio-emotional skills, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and agency, persist even into adolescence (Chang, Favara and Novella 2022).

Exposure to armed conflict has several impacts on education and skills. Ongoing armed conflict in northern Ethiopia has disrupted short-term education enrolment in the areas most affected (Endale *et al.* 2025). Furthermore, exposure to armed conflict can have long-term consequences. In Peru, Young Lives' longitudinal evidence reveals that mothers' exposure to civil conflict during their childhood and adolescence in the 1980s and 1990s has a negative impact on their own children's socio-emotional skills (agency and pride) at age 8 and 12, and increases their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours by age 15 (Hidalgo-Aréstegui *et al.* 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities in education due to the closure of schools and universities and disrupted classes and is likely to have undone some of the progress made on enrolment, especially in those countries more severely affected by the crisis (Duc *et al.* 2021; Ellanki *et al.* 2021; Sánchez *et al.* 2021; Woldehanna *et al.* 2021; Favara *et al.* 2022). Young Lives' evidence shows that young people from poor households, rural communities and marginalised groups, especially vulnerable girls and young women, were hit the hardest by interrupted education (Hossain 2021; Favara *et al.* 2022). Persistent learning gaps, exacerbated by a digital divide in online learning, have left a substantial proportion of vulnerable young people at risk of being left behind and never returning to the classroom, which is likely to have a profound impact on their future life chances.

2. Policy implications and how Young Lives has made an impact

Young Lives' longitudinal research provides a holistic, life-course perspective to understanding skills development and educational outcomes in low- and middle-income countries, highlighting the compounding impacts of inequality, gender, shocks and crises – such as climate change, conflict and COVID-19. The evidence generated over the past two decades is crucial for shaping policies aimed at achieving SDG4, to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

Young Lives' findings demonstrate that investing in education systems alone is insufficient to meet SDG4, as recovery from early disadvantages may be only partial; creating a supportive and inclusive environment for all children and young people is equally essential.

While policies must be tailored to specific countries and regional contexts, the following recommendations outline broad strategies to **foster more inclusive learning and ensure that all children have access to a quality education and lifelong learning opportunities**, **from infancy to early adulthood.**

These actions should focus on supporting the most vulnerable groups, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as girls and young women, who are disproportionately affected by intersecting inequalities and compounding crises.

1. **Addressing persistent inequalities in education.** Despite overall increases in educational access, persistent inequalities remain in both school attendance and learning outcomes. Inequalities in skills and learning become apparent very early in life, with children from the poorest households, rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds consistently underperforming. A holistic approach is required to understand better how poverty and shocks – including climate change, conflict and COVID-19 – can perpetuate and exacerbate these inequalities over the life course and have a negative impact on skills and learning. Addressing the learning crisis involves delivering on every child's right to basic foundational skills.
2. **Improving the quality of education.** Investing in teachers and schools is essential to improve foundational learning by developing basic literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills. Access to quality early childhood education and pre-primary education is particularly important, as it can have significant long-term benefits for skills development and overall learning outcomes. Building on significant gains in educational access over the past two decades, both local and national education programmes should prioritise improving the quality of education across the entire system, from pre-primary and primary through to secondary and higher education. This includes improving teaching, creating supportive learning environments, investing in continuous professional development for teachers and strengthening school leadership. It is crucial to identify individual

disadvantaged students, or groups of disadvantaged students and provide targeted support to meet their specific needs.

Young Lives' impact: improving the quality of secondary schools in Peru

By matching longitudinal data with national administrative data, Young Lives' evidence shows that Peru's national *Jornada Escolar Completa* (JEC) – extended school day – reform of public secondary schools has had a significant positive impact on students' achievements, including maths, English, reading, information technology (IT) access and sense of self-worth (Aguero *et al.* 2021).

The effectiveness of the programme is attributed to a complementary package of measures implemented in conjunction with the extended school day. This includes improving teaching (pedagogical) resources, providing additional school staff and increasing teacher training and IT resources, alongside a reallocation of students' time spent on home activities. This evidence shows that quality improvements in public education are achievable, with the JEC programme demonstrating significant potential compared to other educational initiatives.

3. **Providing a supportive and inclusive environment for learning and education through social protection.** Young Lives' evidence suggests that social protection – such as cash transfers and food aid – can reduce the negative impacts of early poverty and climate shocks on children's foundational cognitive skills and learning. Foundational cognitive skills – such as long-term memory, working memory and inhibitory control – are malleable throughout childhood and adolescence and can be strengthened by programmes that improve nutrition and enable better access to education and more time for studying. Prioritising sustained support to undernourished or physically stunted children, those excluded from early education and those who spend excessive time on paid or unpaid work can deliver significant benefits for skills and learning and reduce educational inequalities.
4. **Extending and improving school feeding programmes.** School feeding programmes can also help sustain early gains and support children's later development (and provide incentives for school attendance), particularly in areas vulnerable to food insecurity. Young Lives' research shows that children's skills are malleable from infancy through to adolescence, supporting the call to extend school feeding programmes beyond primary schools to include both pre-primary and secondary schools.
5. **Investing in preschool education.** Early investment in children's skills development, including affordable access to quality early childhood development, such as pre-primary education and ensuring children start school at the right age, is important for skills development and foundational learning in later childhood and adolescence – helping to improve basic literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills. This has long-term benefits for school enrolment and grade progression, right through to completing secondary and higher education.

Young Lives' impact: expanding and strengthening pre-primary education in Ethiopia

Young Lives' longitudinal research has directly informed the rollout and strengthening of pre-primary education in Ethiopia, through the large-scale expansion of the O-class before Grade 1. This was achieved through long-term engagement with the Ethiopian Ministry of Education over the past decade, providing evidence and advice on strengthening the training of early childhood development teachers and age-appropriate curriculum.

Enrolment in O-class pre-primary education has increased from a virtually non-existent baseline in 2015 to almost 1.5 million 6-year-olds in 2021/22, representing 54% of children that age. With a further 1.2 million children attending O-classes in 2021/22, predominantly over the age of 6, there is considerable scope for increasing both the number and proportion of children attending at the appropriate age.

6. **Supporting girls and young women to stay in school and continue their education.** Dropping out of school significantly increases the risk of early marriage, particularly for girls living in the poorest households and in rural areas, with longer-term effects on their education and job prospects. Addressing these challenges becomes especially urgent as girls reach adolescence, underscoring the need to support their continued access to secondary and higher education. Challenging social norms that discriminate against girls and women requires engaging whole communities, including in relation to unpaid domestic work, caring responsibilities and shifting gender bias in the educational aspirations of girls and their parents. Providing safe transport to schools and colleges (which are often at a distance from rural communities) and ensuring safe and girl-friendly environments within schools, including suitable facilities for water and sanitation needs, is also essential.

7. **Promoting socio-emotional skills, especially for adolescent girls and young women.** Integrating life skills and socio-emotional skills – such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and agency – to school curricula is increasingly important in uncertain and changing times. Supporting adolescent girls in managing everyday situations confidently and navigating their transition towards adulthood, including how to negotiate relationships with partners, family and friends, as well as accessing higher education and decent jobs, is also crucial for achieving gender equality and empowering women.
8. **Expanding access to quality higher education.** Promoting outreach programmes to target schools in poorer areas and encourage students to apply to quality universities (e.g. through school outreach, mentoring, parental engagement, scholarships and bursaries) can help to expand access to quality higher education. Other measures to develop an inclusive higher education ecosystem could include increasing scholarships and accommodation/hostel facilities, especially for young women from economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised backgrounds.
9. **Advocating for quality and inclusive education at both national and international levels.** This is particularly important for low- and middle-income countries at a time when aid budgets have been reduced or redirected to other priorities. Ensuring that education is prioritised at high-level international fora is essential, including allocating adequate attention and resources to education and building the resilience of education systems and infrastructure, in climate change and humanitarian agreements and funds; for example, the inclusion of education in national and global climate policies, including National Adaptation Plans and indicators for the Global Goal on Adaptation to be adopted at COP30.
10. **Improving data collection and longitudinal research** to measure children's skills and learning outcomes over time is vital to addressing educational inequalities, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where data is scarce. A lack of regular, consistent data collection is a major barrier to understanding and overcoming challenges to learning and skills development throughout the life course. Supporting data collection and longitudinal research is particularly important in the face of recent deep cuts to international funding for data and statistics, which exposes the fragility of relying heavily on a small number of donors and puts essential data collection and monitoring efforts at risk, including in relation to SDG4.

Young Lives' impact: strengthening early child development programmes in Peru

Measuring the impact of education policies over time is critical to informing effective programme design and implementation. Young Lives' evidence showed that the national early childhood development (ECD) programme introduced in the mid-2000s, known as 'Wasi Wasi,' did not effectively enhance key areas of child development (gross motor, language and fine motor skills) when compared to children who remained at home.

This evidence informed the design of Peru's current national ECD programme, 'Cuna Más', expanding accessibility to disadvantaged children, especially in rural areas, with a much stronger focus on early learning, cognitive development and language skills. The most recent government statistics from 2021 show that 60,362 children aged 6–36 months from marginalised urban areas benefited from the Cuna Más daycare service and 116,004 families from rural areas benefited from its home-visit service There is a significant scope for further expanding the impact of Cuna Más, which currently covers only 15% of its target population.

3. Latest findings from the Young Lives Round 7 survey

In 2023–24, Young Lives completed its seventh round of data collection in India, Ethiopia and Peru, surveying the Younger Cohort at age 22 and the Older Cohort at age 29.[1] A series of factsheets provides a preliminary overview of Round 7 data on education and learning, health, nutrition and well-being, as well as work and family lives. The country-specific education and learning factsheets (Cueto and Espinoza 2025; Woodman Deza 2025a, 2025b) present recent trends and changes in these outcomes as participants transition into adulthood.

Preliminary findings indicate a **substantial improvement in the timely progression to, and graduation from, secondary school, particularly in India and Peru.** While Peru has near-universal secondary completion (Grade 11) at 90%, India's higher secondary completion (Grade 12) is 66% and Ethiopia's is only 26%. Particularly in India, long-term disparities in secondary education have narrowed. However, early-life inequalities across the three countries – linked to household poverty, rural residence, maternal education, indigenous background or historically disadvantaged castes – consistently predict lower educational outcomes by age 22.

Gender gaps in secondary school completion differ by country: Peru shows no gender difference, India has closed the gap in secondary school completion, while Ethiopia now has higher secondary school completion rates for young women than men. Nonetheless, women who marry or have children at an early age (often from the most disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds) consistently show the lowest educational outcomes across all three countries, illustrating how intersecting inequalities compound early-life disadvantages.

University enrolment and completion have also improved in India and Peru. In Peru, these gains have primarily benefited students living in the least impoverished households, urban areas and those with more-educated mothers, further widening inequalities in access to higher education. In India, progress has been more equitable. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, tertiary education enrolment and completion have declined, despite gains in upper secondary completion (Grade 12), possibly due to changes in higher education entrance requirements following the 2021 education reforms. The decline in access to higher education has been even more severe among those born in conflict-affected areas of Tigray and Amhara.

Reading skills among the Younger Cohort have not progressed in Ethiopia and India. In Ethiopia, while slight improvements were observed between the ages of 12 and 15, participants typically do not acquire more advanced reading skills between the ages of 15 and 22. In India, reading comprehension test performance showed no improvement from ages 15 to 22, despite increased schooling years and higher completion rates. In contrast, in **Peru, more schooling in adolescence translates into better reading skills**, with improvements in reading comprehension between ages 15 and 22 closely related to educational attainment during the same period.

1 Round 7 took place in the Young Lives study sites in Ethiopia, India and Peru; data was not collected in Vietnam in this survey round due to a change in government regulations for the international transfer of personal data.

4. Looking forward: harnessing the power of longitudinal research

Unique research opportunities in education and skills: Young Lives' latest survey, combined with the extensive quantitative and qualitative data collected and research evidence generated over the past 20 years, will enable a thorough investigation of educational trajectories and skills formation spanning two decades of life and across varied education systems and country contexts in the Global South.

The Young Lives study offers a unique opportunity to conduct policy-relevant research on the following overarching questions, while examining the influence of gender, ethnicity and early-life vulnerabilities as key factors behind the differences observed:

1. the lifelong educational paths and learning of children of the millennium, from preschool to higher education and entry into the labour market.
2. the quality of education and its effect on lifelong learning trajectories and labour market outcomes.
3. the developmental plasticity of skills over the life course and its interaction with nutrition and mental health.
4. the impact of environmental stressors (COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and conflict) on educational paths and skill development throughout life.
5. the role of public programmes in addressing early deprivations and shocks to reduce their effects on educational paths, learning and the development of foundational cognitive skills.

The future of Young Lives

Young Lives' vision to 2030 is an ambitious plan to extend its longitudinal research, creating a unique 'birth-to-thirty' evidence base to track the long-term, intergenerational impacts of global crises on young people's lives. The core goals of this vision include:

- expanding the recently launched Research Hub on Climate Change and Environmental Shocks to generate policy-relevant evidence on the long-term and intergenerational effects of extreme weather events across the life course and across three generations of children and young adults.
- pioneering new research to uncover the profound impact of crises (COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the recent armed conflict in Ethiopia) on mental health, alongside an innovative analysis of cortisol stress levels in hair samples – an approach never before undertaken in the Global South.
- launching a new nationally representative longitudinal cohort study in the Global South. Building on the existing Young Lives study, the SDG Generation study will collect new data on the children of Young Lives participants and their peers, including expanding into new countries where possible. This cohort study will generate groundbreaking evidence on the life trajectories of a new generation born into a time of unprecedented crises, enabling in-depth intergenerational analysis.

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Young Lives is a longitudinal study of poverty and inequality, following the lives of 12,000 young people – from infancy to adulthood – in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam).

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