



Capturing a Picture of Change

How does Young Lives use research
to engage with policy?

Introduction

This booklet gives an overview of how Young Lives uses research to engage with national and international debates and policies on child poverty. And it gives concrete examples of how our research is used for this purpose.

Research evidence informs policy thinking and processes in a number of ways. It generates new knowledge, but it can also add nuance to analysis. Data can both confirm what we know (ensuring that decisions are based on solid evidence) and challenge long-held assumptions about children's lives and their place in the family or their role in a community. Researchers have an important role in working with policymakers to make the case for evidence-informed policymaking and in building the case for gathering better data. They also have a role to play in improving the knowledge and understanding of policymakers or organisations.

The policy process is messy and often unpredictable. It is a complex system in which the same piece of evidence can have no effect, or a major one, depending on the timeliness of an idea and the politics of place. A specific piece of research can be used to influence a policy or programme, but research can also influence the way people think about an issue.

Young Lives focuses on fostering trust, building relationships, and developing policy-relevant questions to frame our analysis. This takes time, and sometimes policy 'successes' are serendipitous or attribution is difficult. For this reason Young Lives has invested long-term in working with networks and alliances in our study countries and internationally, sharing our data with other researchers and policy organisations, and using the media and other channels to raise awareness in order to keep child poverty firmly on the policy agenda.

Young Lives: the policy context

“ The Young Lives publication on inequalities and children was one of the top five submissions to UNICEF’s global thematic consultations on the SDGs. It meant that we were able to offer some solid evidence of the damage done to children by inequalities. It is a significant part of the process that helped the goal on inequalities come into being. ”

Richard Morgan, Director, Child Poverty Global Initiative, Save the Children and former Head of Policy at UNICEF

The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focus clearly on the eradication of poverty as ‘the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.’ They also pledge that ‘no-one should be left behind’.

And yet children and youth are often neglected in policy processes, invisible in social statistics, and overlooked as a source of evidence in research. This is despite the fact that they make up 47 per cent of those living in extreme poverty and that adolescence in particular is a time when inequalities become entrenched.

Young Lives aims to address this neglect. It has been following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam for 15 years and believes that children’s views and experiences are key to understanding childhood poverty and helping to identify effective policies and practices to tackle it. It aims to contribute to a reduction in child poverty by understanding the causes and consequences of poverty, as well as strengthening the links between international and national policies and children’s day-to-day lives.

Why is Young Lives in a good position to influence policy?

“ Although there are other large-scale studies that look at poverty and health and education, most give a picture at one point in time. The best part of Young Lives is that it captures a picture of change and what is happening over the years. ”

Professor R. Govinda, Former Vice Chancellor of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, India

Young Lives has five main elements that make it uniquely placed to address the ‘no-one left behind’ agenda of the SDGs.

First, the fact that Young Lives undertakes research in **four different countries on three continents** allows it to explore similarities and differences in relation to the long-term effects of poverty, the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and the unequal outcomes of economic and social development for children and young people. Undertaking research with children and families enables Young Lives to track the effects of specific social policies over time. For example, in the three countries now categorised as ‘middle-income’ (India, Peru and Vietnam), despite overall economic improvements, Young Lives data shows how inequalities are becoming entrenched.

Second, Young Lives is a **longitudinal survey** – which means that it has studied the same children over a period of 15 years. This is generating a wealth of evidence on which policy decisions can be based.

Jillian Popkins, former DFID Girl Hub Country Director in Ethiopia notes: *“Young Lives is becoming increasingly critical to Girl Hub’s effectiveness as the cohort enters adolescence and we are looking forward to working with the team further, as we formulate baselines and seek to track the longitudinal impact of our work on adolescent girls.”*

Third, Young Lives has **two cohorts of children**, one born in 2001-02 and an older cohort born in 1994-95. This holds major opportunities for policy influencing, because it means that by comparing the younger and older

children at the same age it is possible to see what has changed over a period of time. In India, for example, Young Lives showed that although the numbers enrolled in school had increased as a result of the Right to Education Act, there had been a decrease in learning levels between the two cohorts. In Ethiopia and India, there was a decline in the quality of education in terms of mathematics results between the two cohorts over seven years that was not seen in Peru and Vietnam.

Fourth, it is what is known as a '**pro-poor**' study, in that the children it is studying are in the poorest sectors of society, which means there is a real opportunity to see what works in terms of improving the lives of those living in poverty.

Fifth, Young Lives generates **qualitative as well as quantitative** data using a variety of interview methods and designs – from household surveys, in-depth interviews with caregivers and the children themselves, quantitative data on the children in the different rounds of the research, a school survey and a community survey. This makes the evidence academically rigorous and gives key insights into the children's daily lives – as Professor R. Govinda explains: *“The value lies not merely in terms of the figures they generate but that it is about real children whom we have been meeting for many years.”*

What works when it comes to policy influencing?

“ Good research should have a role in influencing policy. The most useful research challenges assumptions and prevailing views that are often taken for granted. If it doesn't change the paradigm at least it can begin to recast the questions. ”

Alula Pankhurst, Country Director for Young Lives in Ethiopia

Research is a crucial element in a long process of bringing about change for children and young people – one which also involves campaigns and advocacy work to generate political will and shape policy agendas; accountability and good governance; adherence to human-rights standards; resource allocation by ministries, donors and international organisations; and change in communities and individuals themselves.

Robust evidence

Young Lives knows that the **robustness of its evidence** is paramount. This is recognised by a wide range of stakeholders with whom it is involved, for example, Sindhushree Khullar, Secretary of the National Institution for Transforming India, who noted how impressed she was with the 'academic rigour' of the study. Richard Morgan, former Head of Policy at UNICEF also noted that the solid evidence provided by Young Lives had had a 'subtle but deep' effect in policy circles.

This solid base and reputation means that it is possible for Young Lives to challenge some of the prevailing assumptions, for example on child labour, where the international consensus is that there is an age limit before which children should not work. Young Lives has shown that while government policies rightly outlaw child labour, the realities of children's lives in balancing home, school and work are more complex, with some work being helpful for skill development, as opposed to working long hours, or dangerous and exploitative work.

The strength of its data also means that Young Lives can shine a light into areas that currently have little evidence, and sometimes this is what international agencies or ministries need to help them change a policy, move an agenda, or develop and fund new programmes.

Clear lines of research linked to policy

In each of its study countries, Young Lives has **clear lines of research that address policy concerns** – for example, inequalities in early education programmes in Peru, or the decrease in learning levels and increasing inequity between poor and richer children, or child marriage in Ethiopia and India, or the long-term effect of child work before the age of 12, or the effects of malnutrition and stunting in all four countries.

CASE STUDY: Influencing the Juntos conditional cash transfer programme in Peru

In Peru, Young Lives has been able to inform the Government's JUNTOS (Together) cash transfer programme. The research team undertook a number of studies comparing the health, nutrition, educational achievement and time-use of children who were beneficiaries with those who were not. The results showed that cash transfers were most effective if they were accompanied by improvements in access and quality of the health and education services. These findings, published in a number of journals, were covered extensively by the national media.

Government officials incorporated the Young Lives findings into the design of JUNTOS, as Aurea Cadillo, Head of Planning and Budget at JUNTOS explained:

“Thanks to the Young Lives study, JUNTOS have had a source of knowledge on the poverty impact in children. Their advice and technical assistance has helped us to clarify issues, and provide evidence to show how a cash transfer programme should function. JUNTOS has taken on board reflections and recommendations from some of the Young Lives findings in the revision of its annual strategic plan.”

The importance of building relationships

Young Lives has also learned that **establishing relationships** with policymakers and other stakeholders is an essential pathway to influence. As Renu Singh, Young Lives Country Director in India, points out: *“The fact that we find a place on the table is because of the contacts we have built up over the years. But it is the work in the field that counts. We find a place and we find a listening ear. But we can’t convince people if we don’t have the evidence.”*

““ For me, the Young Lives study is a matter for envy. We often struggle to get even two experts in the same organisation to talk to each other. I am absolutely astounded by the fact that very highly respected people in their own fields are engaging with each other constructively over a project which all of us should be engaged in a little more. ””

Sindhushree Khullar, Secretary of the National Institution for Transforming India

An iterative approach

Young Lives research influences policy **iteratively**, with its evidence of the effects of a policy feeding back into and improving that policy – as with the changes in the Cuna Mas programme in Peru, or the clustering of schools in Andhra Pradesh. Nguyen Thang, Young Lives Country Director in Vietnam says that for this reason: *“The World Bank uses evidence from Young Lives in its Vietnam Development Report, as does UNDP in the Vietnam National Human Development Report.”*

CASE STUDY: Using research to promote action at local level in India

For research to have an impact on children's lives, it needs to influence policy, but also to bridge the gap between policy and practice. In order to reach out at district level, the Young Lives team held workshops in its study sites in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, attracting a wide range of stakeholders, including senior officials from local government, staff from NGOs and INGOs and academics. District-level fact sheets on education, nutrition, and gender, youth and development, were compiled and participants discussed the research findings, and the implications for policy and programming in their local areas.

Participants said that they appreciated this opportunity to reflect on research evidence and what it meant for their work. There was also wide coverage in the local media. Specific suggestions which arose directly from the evidence presented included:

- **Early marriage:** Child Protection officials were asked to prepare an action plan for reducing early marriage.
- **Nutrition in schools:** Two of the District Collectors openly admitted that subsidised rice supply was causing an imbalanced diet and asked officials to plan for other cereals and to supply eggs in the school midday meals programme.
- **Quality of education:** The Collector of West Godavari directed the District Educational Officer to stop concentrating on providing school buildings and put more effort into enhancing students' learning.

CASE STUDY: Creating space to talk about evidence

Young Lives works closely with policymakers in each of the four countries in order to influence key debates on child poverty. The Child Research and Practice Forum (CRPF) in **Ethiopia** emerged from a Young Lives consultation workshop on orphans and vulnerable children. Participants said they wanted to continue to meet to discuss research and its implications for policy and practice. They were joined by UNICEF and Government officials, and the Forum became a monthly themed meeting held at the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, and supported by quarterly newsletters and an annual workshop.

In **Vietnam**, the Young Lives team works closely with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Committee on Education and Culture of Children and Youth in the National Assembly. Young Lives evidence has been fed into policy briefs sent to MOET and the Committee on selected topics. Some of the policy briefs were picked up by the Committee for publication in the News Bulletin distributed to all deputies during National Assembly meetings, a major channel for policy discussion in Vietnam.

In **Peru**, workshops convened regularly for Government staff show them how to access and use Young Lives data and methods for their own analysis and, eventually, for decision-making as well as highlighting the latest findings. For example, Research Officers from the Ministry of Education and the Economy and Finance Ministry are using Young Lives data, under the guidance of Young Lives researcher Alan Sanchez, to review the factors that contribute to youth unemployment.

In **India**, Young Lives Country Director, Renu Singh, was nominated to be a member of the expert committee of review of curriculum of the B.Ed. and M.Ed. by the National Council of Teacher Education and the Rehabilitation Council of India. She is also a Member of the working committee on drafting the Policy of Early Childhood Care and Education and has taken part in Joint Review Missions of the Ministry of Human Resource Development as an expert witness.

Working with international alliances and networks

Building alliances and networks internationally is another important part of the Young Lives strategy for policy influencing. Major international organisations such as UNICEF, donors like DFID and the World Bank, and NGOs such as Save the Children, Plan International and World Vision, are key allies and all commission work from Young Lives to shape their own research, advocacy, policies and programme interventions. Young Lives also has important alliances with other longitudinal and cohort studies via UNICEF's Office of Research and the recently formed Global Coalition to End Child Poverty. It has authored background papers for significant international reports such as the UNDP Human Development Report and the UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports on Education For All.

Using diverse channels of dissemination

Young Lives **uses a diversity of channels** to disseminate research, from policy briefs through to social media, via its website, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, by working with journalists or with young people. This builds the credibility and the authority of the study and its findings among as wide an audience as possible, often by collaborating with other organisations, as the Oxfam study (p. 14) shows.

“ The Young Lives publications are now made available for all officials in the Ministry... and the research officers in the regions [of Peru]. This has allowed us not only disseminate important methodological aspects, but also to cover themes that are important for the regions. ”

Martin Garro, former Director of the Office of Research at the Ministry of Education in Peru

CASE STUDY: Young Lives and the news media

In India, the press regularly reports on Young Lives research, for example, an Op-ed on the new child labour amendment in *Firstpost*, a widely read online news platform, as a result of which Young Lives Country Director Renu Singh spoke about Young Lives findings at the Ministry of Education. Or Young Lives findings on the links between malnutrition and learning outcomes published in *IndiaSpend*, a data journalism initiative which uses open data to discuss issues with the broader objective of fostering better governance, transparency and accountability in the Indian government. Recently they published a report based on Young Lives India data on education and nutrition. At least nine other news outlets picked up the story, and *IndiaSpend* are keen to continue to use Young Lives data. It has encouraged the Young Lives team to look at other open data journalism initiatives, for example outlets such as *The Hindu* and the *Ideas for India* website, which featured a comment piece on the midday meal scheme by Abhijeet Singh of Young Lives as its most-read blog of all time.

In Peru, Niños del Milenio (as Young Lives is known) often features in the country's major newspapers. Researchers regularly submit opinion pieces to the national and sectoral press, and have become known as trusted and authoritative sources who are now routinely approached by newspapers, radio and TV for comment on legislation or other child-focused news.

Open sharing of data

Young Lives also **shares data** and all its instruments and technical documents through the UK Data Archive, which has been accessed by over 1400 researchers, with over 70 research papers published to date. Together with other methods (for example workshops on how to use Young Lives data) this helps to develop capacity for other researchers, students and policymakers on how to understand longitudinal data. It also involves supporting networks of scholars to ensure that the data are used across all topics and contexts, as well as promoting opportunities for open scientific debate about the significance of key findings. Archiving the survey data is a legacy for future generations of researchers, providing insights into child development during the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Young Lives often works with other stakeholders in providing data to Governments and other bodies. For example, in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education asked Young Lives to look into how the pre-school system could be improved, bringing lessons from the international experience for the design of the Education Sector Development Plan V in relation to early-years education. Young Lives data has also contributed to the World Bank's 2015 Public Expenditure Review for the education sector in Ethiopia.

“ This kind of longitudinal data – for example on mathematics or reading outcomes – is rare in developing countries and so is very useful to the Government. This is an important example of how our data are being used alongside other data to build a story – in this case a detailed picture of the challenges in education. ”

Zoe James, Young Lives Education Research Officer

Timing

Finally, **timing is key**. Terms of office for governments are often short and administrative processes take a long time to bring about change. It is therefore vital to have the local knowledge to be able to be ahead of the game; being able to second-guess what issues are likely to come up on the policy agenda and have the appropriate evidence at hand at precisely the time that it is needed – for example at the 2014 Girl Summit in London, Young Lives presented evidence from Ethiopia on early marriage and FGM.

Young Lives has found that success in terms of policy influencing is often a matter of having robust evidence and being in the right place at the right time, together with a dash of serendipity. Fortunately, the Young Lives team has built the kind of relationships which mean that it is in that position. As Alula Pankhurst, Young Lives Country Director in Ethiopia, notes, many successful initiatives on the policy side have been due to: *“a gradual building up of relationships. There is a long-term aspect to working with policymakers and it is crucial to build up our evidence alongside that of others to reach a tipping point.”*

CASE STUDY: Teaching resources for the UK

In the UK, Young Lives has collaborated with Oxfam's Youth and Education team to publish *Everyone Counts*, a free downloadable maths teaching resource for 9- to 12-year-olds based on the Young Lives book *Changing Lives in a Changing World*. The Mathematical Association was involved at all stages – Rachel Horsman from the Association described it as: “A great resource ... The real-life data and links between the pupils overseas and at home make the whole project more engaging for pupils.”

Liz Newbon, Oxfam's Education and Youth Adviser, explains: “Real-life data is in constant demand by teachers. *Everyone Counts* enables pupils to explore how inequality affects the lives of children in different parts of the globe.”

Everyone Counts has already been downloaded more than 10,000 times, far exceeding original estimates. Teachers and children alike have been positive: “I liked learning not just about our country but about different countries too and I liked the real data,” said one child.

More recently the Oxfam team has worked with Young Lives on *More or Less Equal*, a cross-curricular resource for 11- to 14-year-olds covering mathematics, geography and English.

References and further reading

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Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. This booklet shows how, through researching different aspects of children's lives, we try to improve policies and programmes for children, both nationally and internationally.



Young Lives international team meeting, 2010.
Photo credit:
Martin Woodhead

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