



# Reaching the last child

## Evidence from Young Lives India

### Introduction

The Young Lives India Country Report draws upon fifteen years of evidence captured by the Young Lives study in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in India. This longitudinal study began in 2002 and was conceived in line with the Millennium Development Goals. The aim was to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being.

The study followed two cohorts of children seven years apart, using mixed methods consisting of surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Drawing upon vital information gathered about children's experiences as they transition from early childhood to adolescence and then to early adulthood, the report captures key findings from various publications arising out of the study. The research was guided by three intersecting lines of enquiry. The first involves life-course analysis of factors shaping children's growth and development. The second works from the understanding that risk and deprivation are concentrated in particular social groups and localities with dramatically disparate outcomes in children's lives, and investigates what these inequalities mean for children. A third line of enquiry examines the changing influences in children's lives, including the risks to which they are exposed and the support they enjoy. The last is achieved by comparing the two cohorts seven years apart in age, and more generally by linking household and child data to political-economic, socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

This document is a summary of the Young Lives India Country Report *Reaching the last child: Evidence from Young Lives India*, highlighting the context in which this research was conducted, key findings, and implications for policy and practice. The full report is available on the Young Lives website, [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk) detailing acknowledgements, photo credits and references.

## Young Lives

Young Lives is a longitudinal comparative research study designed to collect information on children growing up in poverty. The research is conducted in four low- and middle-income countries: Ethiopia, India (in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru, and Vietnam, and is coordinated by a team at the University of Oxford (UK). Twenty sites were purposely selected in each country to include a range of urban and rural types, with a deliberate bias towards poorer areas. Samples of 2,000 children aged around 1 year old in 2002 and 1,000 children aged 8 years old were surveyed in five rounds from 2002 to 2016 (when the cohorts were aged 15 and 22 respectively), collecting information at child, household, and community levels. The survey data were supplemented by four rounds of qualitative research on smaller samples of the children. This research phase started when the Younger Cohort children were aged 4/5, and the Older Cohort children were aged 12, which included discussions with relevant adults, together with obtaining the children's views and aspirations, enabling a fuller appreciation of their agency in their own development. Qualitative research provided more detailed information to explain patterns observed in surveys, as well as bringing out some cases that defied the trends. There were also two rounds of school surveys: in 2010 in primary schools, and in 2016 on secondary school effectiveness. In the case of India, supplementary sub-studies on children's work in agriculture and fertility decision-making were undertaken.

## The Indian context

India's gross domestic product has grown on average by around 7 per cent annually between 1990 and 2016, transforming the country into a global economic superpower. This economic transformation has increased average incomes and contributed to a reduction of the number of people living in poverty from 45 per cent in 1993 to 22 per cent in 2011. Services such as electricity, water, and sanitation have been extended to millions. Life expectancy has improved from 58 to 68 years between 1990 and 2014, and the under-five mortality rate has declined by 2.5 per cent annually over this period. Nevertheless, India still has far more people living below the poverty line of US\$1.90 a day than any other country, and is home to about one-third of the world's children living in poverty measured multi-dimensionally.

Children have benefited from this economic growth, and some policies have been directed at children. The world's largest public funded child development programme, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), originally launched in 1975 to provide food, preschool education, and primary healthcare to children under 6 years of age and their mothers, was restructured in 2012-13, and a National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education was adopted in 2013 to ensure that children below the age of 6 have access to quality preschool education. There have been national policies to reduce malnutrition by reducing poverty and improving sanitation and health (including Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan which aims to improve sanitation, and the 2016 National Policy for Children which reinforces the importance of child nutrition). In 2018 the Government of India launched the National Nutrition Mission (POSHAN Abhiyaan) across 315 districts in the country, which aims to reduce stunting in children aged

0-6 years from 38.4 per cent to 25 per cent by 2022. There has been a reduction in rates of stunting, but these remain high, including about one-third of under-fives in both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In 2010, an Act made education free and compulsory for children aged 6-14, and around 90 per cent of children aged 6-10 are in primary school. There was an Act passed in 2006 prohibiting child marriage and separate legislation targeting Child Labour in 2016 in response to persisting problems related to child protection.

## Key Findings

### *Childhood poverty*

The wealth index used by Young Lives captures material living conditions and, in India, increased by over 50 per cent across the five survey rounds, showing improved standards of living in basic services, housing conditions and household durables. The increase was greatest for the more disadvantaged groups; those least likely to have access to basic services and other items at the start of the study. These disadvantaged groups included Scheduled Tribes and Castes, Backward Castes, and those in rural as opposed to urban areas. Similar improvements appear in access to consumer durables and to services. Surveys show many households moving out of poverty within the sample. Frequently, children from poor families received more education than did their parents, and some found better employment – 25 per cent of the Older Cohort from persistently poor households found salaried jobs as opposed to 6 per cent of their caregivers. Nevertheless, around 10 per cent of households remained persistently in the bottom tercile of the wealth index, mostly those from Scheduled Tribes and Castes, and those in rural areas. In terms of living conditions, these were the children who were most left behind. Children in poor families are particularly vulnerable to environmental and family economic shocks, and frequently have their education curtailed.

### *Nutrition and health*

Young Lives data show high rates of stunting, wasting and low body weight, especially among the chronically poor, members of Scheduled Tribes and Castes, and those living in rural rather than urban areas. Poverty is exacerbated by setbacks such as crop failure and high food prices. Sanitation and health facilities are also associated with stunting, as well as with recovery and faltering. Comparing the two cohorts at ages 8 and 15 shows significant improvements over time across most groups. 36 per cent of the Older Cohort were stunted when they were 15, compared with 28 per cent of the Younger Cohort at the same age. These gains were, however, often driven by improvements for the most advantaged, and progress for the poorest children was slower. In some cases, circumstances deteriorated: comparing the persistently poor at age 8, Younger Cohort children were actually more likely to be stunted than those of the Older Cohort at the same age. This suggests a failure of general progress to reach those most in need. While early circumstances are the most important, Young Lives data also show new evidence that children can recover from stunting in infancy.

Chronic and acute undernutrition were associated with low scores in cognitive tests at ages 5 and 8. Children's growth (an indicator of nutrition) measured by their height compared to the WHO expected norm is associated with improvements in



self-efficacy, self-esteem, and educational aspirations at age 12. Recovery from stunting, especially early recovery, relates to improved cognitive ability later.

### Education

Young Lives data show increased school enrolment over time at all levels. While 60 per cent of the Older Cohort attended preschool, this increased to over 90 per cent amongst the Younger Cohort; attendance at preschool is associated with higher achievement later, with greater gains from private institutions. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction was expressed at how little the children learned in public preschools, with a growing preference for private schools charging low fees. Since poor children are most likely to go to Government preschools and schools, prioritising their quality will be key to equitable learning.

At age 8, there was close to universal enrolment across both cohorts; and at ages 12 and 15, enrolment rates were higher among the Younger Cohort than the Older Cohort, with the poorest groups showing the biggest gains. Again, there is increasing use of private schools, even among the poor. The proportion of children who are over-age for their class has also increased, and performance in cognitive tests has declined among all groups, even those attending private schools. Failure at school leads to a lowering of aspirations. Lack of attention by teachers, and in some cases punishments administered, were linked to poorer outcomes, as was pressure to engage in work outside of school. Many dropped out before completing secondary school, often for economic reasons, with less than half continuing into tertiary institutions at age 19. More boys than girls continued into secondary school; social and economic status, background, and location are all strongly related to disparities at this level.

### Children's work and employment

Time spent in paid work increases as children grow older. The Younger Cohort spent less time engaged in work than did the Older Cohort at the same ages. For the Younger Cohort, differences begin to appear at age 12 and are greater at age 15, with the persistently poor, children in Scheduled Tribes and Castes, and children in rural areas, working most. In their early teen years, girls frequently do more housework while boys are more commonly engaged in paid work. Workloads often increase in response to economic disasters in the family, such as illness affecting the family breadwinner or crop failure. A large proportion of children combine school with paid and unpaid work; over half at age 15, but overall the dominant activities are school and study. Work can disrupt schooling and is seen by children as contributing to failure at school. While some children, nevertheless, take pride in working to support their families, long and burdensome work was linked with damaging consequences for schooling. Those involved in paid work or at least three hours of domestic work per day at age 12 were significantly less likely to complete secondary schooling.

At ages 19 and 22, disparities are large, with few of the poorest young people continuing their education, and fewer girls than boys receiving training and finding employment. Moreover, half the young men and nearly 70 per cent of women were employed or self-employed in agriculture.

### Transitions to marriage

Of the Older Cohort, 28 per cent of girls were married before the age of 18 and more than half by the time they were 22. The rates of early marriage were associated with mother's education, caste, wealth, location, and caregivers' expectations and aspirations for the education of their children. Family decisions around marriage are shaped by both gender norms and local practices, including worries about the safety and risks to reputation faced by daughters. Enrolment in school at age 15 reduced the probability of teenage marriage. Childbearing often follows marriage, and so early marriage is usually followed by early bearing of children.

### Policy implications

#### Poverty alleviation

Evident inequity remains between socially advantaged and disadvantaged households, and between urban and rural areas. Among Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and in rural areas, many remain trapped in poverty, with cumulative risks to children's long-term well-being. Social protection programmes need to be extended to vulnerable households to protect against financial disasters, both environmental (such as crop failure and rises in food prices) and idiosyncratic (such as illness and death of a breadwinner). The Indian government's recently launched National Health Insurance scheme (Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana) to improve healthcare is also a welcome step.

#### Nutrition and health

Malnutrition remains a significant problem, especially in rural areas and among disadvantaged groups, and affects physical growth and later cognitive outcomes. Continued attention is needed to the nutrition of infants and of young mothers (to prevent intergenerational stunting), and for longer periods than is currently practiced. There is growing evidence that it is possible to recover from stunting, especially during the early stages of childhood and early adolescence, and since malnutrition later in childhood can also hinder cognitive development, the current Public Distribution System needs to be made more effective for those in greatest need. School feeding programmes throughout childhood could be hugely beneficial, both in improving nutrition and in keeping children at school, with real possible benefits in extending such schemes into secondary education. School feeding is a practical way to respond to the multidimensionality of child poverty.

Since poor sanitation can damage health and nutrition, this needs attention, especially among disadvantaged groups.

#### Education

It is clear that greater attention is needed to ensure that children from disadvantaged groups benefit from quality education during the foundational years and are enabled to stay on through secondary school and beyond. Ensuring a good early start in education is a robust first step towards facilitating this educational trajectory. The ongoing process to formulate a new National Policy on Education is an opportunity to add a pre-primary class to every primary school, and to give highest priority to a strong foundation in literacy in the early years. Pre-schooling for the under-six age group also needs to be included as a Fundamental Right under the Right to Free & Compulsory Education Act, 2010.



Free and compulsory education could extend to secondary levels, where attention is especially needed to fill posts with well-trained teachers. Assuring good teaching is at least as important as expenditure on facilities. Schools should ensure that the learning needs of children from disadvantaged groups are met, including, for example, flexibility to allow for students who need to work while they study, especially to meet seasonal needs of family-based agricultural work, and also focusing on providing life skills through a relevant curriculum.

### Work

Poverty, and economic shocks in particular, frequently push children (and girls more than boys) into work and out of school, most commonly into long-term agricultural work. An effective way to keep children in school and out of extensive work is through social protection. Another way is to ensure that children from disadvantaged groups benefit from schooling. Further, school systems need to ensure that they are preparing children for the types of work that are going to be available to them later in life: there is a danger that they might be deprived of useful work experience and given nothing useful in return.

### Early marriage and motherhood

Since the strongest correlate with early marriage is leaving school by age 15, an effective way of preventing the practice is to keep girls in school for longer. To do so requires addressing gender and poverty imbalances at secondary school, through social protection and free and compulsory education to a higher level. A safer environment for girls in schools and the community would help relieve one of the pressures for early marriage.

Better access to reproductive health for young couples could delay early pregnancy.

## Conclusions

While the Young Lives study has provided evidence of improvements in the lives of children, many children remain severely disadvantaged and unable to reach their full potential. A number of priorities arise from the Young Lives India Country Report:

- A key overall message is to provide social protection for the poorest households to address persisting inequity between socially advantaged and disadvantaged households. Without adequate social protection, poverty impacts children's opportunities across the early life stages. While the urban poor face significant ongoing problems, the urban and rural differential remains very evident.

- Physical growth is central to healthy child development, and has also been found to support cognitive development. Lack of access to sanitation and health facilities are significantly associated both with the incidence of stunting in the first place, and with subsequent growth faltering. This reinforces the importance of improving sanitation. Both ICDS programmes and the Midday Meal Scheme offer opportunities to start strong, avoid growth faltering, and to promote physical recovery.
- Gender inequity in access to quality schooling, time given to domestic chores from an early age, access to secondary education, age of marriage, decision making and exercising agency all need to be addressed. Poverty reduction will assist in relieving some of the privations specifically experienced by girls, but systemic change also requires a shift in persistent gendered social norms. The practice of the dowry system is associated with boy preference and a large scale campaign to promote female empowerment and challenge patriarchy must be given priority.
- Educational inequalities appear in early childhood and tend not to reverse, while achievement gaps relating to location of residence, ethnicity, household wealth, parental education, and gender, pursue children throughout their educational trajectories. Early childhood education needs policy priority so that the poorest children are given a fair chance to build a strong foundation for future learning.
- The Right to Education Act needs to be extended to cover all children in the ages 3-18 years. It is equally important to ensure that elementary and secondary school curricula provide relevant and quality education to equip children with the necessary literacy and life skills for entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century labour market.
- The provision of safe hostels at secondary level for children from the poorest and socially and remotely located families could help to allow girls to stay in school longer, and make secondary education accessible for the last child.
- Paid work and more than three hours of daily domestic tasks at age 12 correlates with discontinuing school, so the poorest families must be supported against economic and environmental shocks to help protect their children from discontinuing education.

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