

Strengthening the connections between research, policy and practice in Ethiopia

YOUNG LIVES IMPACT AND LEARNING • CASE STUDY 1

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For Young Lives in Ethiopia to strengthen the connections between research, policy and practice the team needed to identify an approach which could bring together different actors in a way which was participatory, inclusive and acknowledged the multi-directional nature of the policy engagement process.

Recognising the importance of engaging with key decision-makers at an early stage, Young Lives held two consultation exercises to solicit the advice of government and non-government stakeholders for a study on vulnerability. Outcomes included the facilitation of policy discussion and collaboration between groups who had never worked together before and the launch of the Child Research and Practice Forum – a place for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to meet and talk about new research.

By convening these events, Young Lives has played an active role in improving the relationships between research, policy and action in Ethiopia. Thanks to its involvement in the Forum, Young Lives is now able to link up with new partners, including government departments and international and local NGOs to increase the impact of its policy activities.

The importance of working closely with key policymakers and practitioners to ensure that research is used to inform policy and action for reducing child poverty is widely understood. Yet the challenges experienced by those tasked with policy engagement are no better illustrated than in Ethiopia.

How might the Young Lives study bridge this divide and play a role in strengthening the relationships between research, practice and policy necessary for pro-poor policy and poverty reduction?

The nature of Ethiopia's political climate and the paucity of local policy-relevant research have meant that researcher-policy interaction is still a relatively new concept. Dissemination of study outcomes is often limited to narrow circles and, with the exception of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), there has been little consultation between government and non-government actors.

For Young Lives Ethiopia to strengthen the connections between research, policy and practice within this context, it needed to identify an approach which could bring together different policy actors in a way which was participatory, inclusive, and could acknowledge the multi-directional nature of the policy engagement process.

Recognising the importance of engaging with key decision-makers early on in the research process, Young Lives held two consultation exercises to understand and solicit the advice of individual government and non-government stakeholders for a study on the orphans and other vulnerable children, and their care and support.* As well as helping Young Lives to build a picture of their involvement, the two meetings also enabled participants to explore the linkages between research, policy and practice and identify practical steps towards enhancing them – including a framework for further research.

Participants for both meetings were identified during the early stages of planning and drawn mainly from local and international NGOs but also comprised representatives from government institutions including the Coordinator for the National Taskforce for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) at the Ministry of Women Children's and Youth Affairs and the OVC Programme Coordinator of the Federal HIV-AIDS Prevention and Control Office, and a representative of the OVC Network.

The Child Research and Practice Forum

During the first meeting, the idea of a Child Research and Practice Forum (CRPF) – a place for policymakers and practitioners to meet and hear about new research including, but not limited to, Young Lives emerged.

So far, the Forum has held six meetings sponsored by UNICEF including two presentations by Young Lives. One of these, on pre-schools and cognitive development was followed by a request for Young Lives to present the findings to the government's Early Childhood Education Task Force. Between 30 and 40 participants regularly attend the meetings, although who comes varies according to the topic.

In addition to these events:

- The Forum has produced a newsletter for members which the Steering Group hopes to grow into a vehicle for disseminating research findings.
- There are plans to hold thematic seminars and trainings for practitioners on research.
- A concept note for the Forum was prepared and discussed by the steering committee.
- Young Lives had a meeting with the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth affairs who expressed an interest in the Forum and suggested it should link up with other government ministries and set short- to long-term objectives including the idea of promoting the establishment of a centre for children's studies.



- Forum members also met with the Consortium of Christian Relief and Development Association (CCRDA), the umbrella organisation of NGOs who expressed an interest in hosting the Forum.
- Young Lives has been approached by a journalist who attended a Forum meeting to make a radio programme about how orphans are integrated and supported by communities.

Other outcomes

During the second consultation meeting, participants were invited to question taken-for-granted ideas about orphanhood and vulnerability. It was noted that children draw support from a range of sources, including family, community, and government, but these are not well coordinated – a point which has helped Young Lives raise important issues regarding the need for integrated interventions. A forthcoming policy brief on vulnerability will share these insights.

On a theoretical level, participants at both meetings recognised that the relationship between research, policy and practice isn't only about sharing research with policymakers and practitioners, but also about researchers being responsive to the research needs of practitioners and policymakers.

Lessons learned

Institutionalising the Forum won't happen quickly: It takes time to take into account all the different views and interests of the members.

Lack of numbers doesn't necessarily mean lack of quality: Sometimes it was difficult to get people to attend the stakeholder meetings but the quality of participation was excellent.

The Forum can serve a variety of needs for a variety of people: Every member comes away from a Forum meeting with something different. For some, it's ideas on new research, for others it's how the issues discussed play out in their work. For Young Lives, the Forum has helped share findings, stimulate debate and raise the study's profile.

Conclusion

Building the capacity of others and encouraging policy debates on issues concerning child poverty are core activities for Young Lives policy work and the formation of the CRPF represents both of these in action.

Young Lives has played an active role in strengthening the relationships between research, policy and practice in Ethiopia and has enjoyed some rapid success through the Child Research and Practice Forum (CRPF).

The CRPF has enabled Young Lives to:

- share its findings
- stimulate dialogue
- help the study to get closer to stakeholders
- promote joint action around policy-relevant issues.

The wide variety of topics discussed do not necessarily reflect the research interests of Young Lives and therefore demonstrate how the Forum has become owned by a wider group. Young Lives is aware that the Forum will need support and nurturing and careful consideration of ways of ensuring it is sustainable and not dominated by any one interest group.

Young Lives is a small piece within a large jigsaw. There is a lot to be gained from linking up with other stakeholders and the Forum acts as a platform for Young Lives ideas and interests, and, more importantly, to raise issues of children and poverty with a wider audience.

Further reading

Laura Camfield, Rozana Himaz and Helen Murray (2009) *The Impact of Parental Death on Child Outcomes: Evidence from Ethiopia*, Young Lives Policy Brief 7

Young Lives Ethiopia (2010) Orphans and Vulnerable Children: Improving Research to Practice, newsletter issue 1 (June 2010), issue 2 (October 2010), issue 3 (January 2011)

Child Research and Practice Forum (2010) CRPF Newsletter, issue 1 (March).

* The sub-study on orphans and vulnerable children in Ethiopia was funded by the Oak Foundation (www.oakfnd.org). A core part of this work was to look at how research can be better used in development policy and practice.

