

# Longitudinal Research with the children of the Millennium

## Highlights and overall key messages

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- There have been massive advances in reducing poverty and improving children's well-being and access to public services notably in health and schooling. However, major inequalities based on location, wealth and gender remain, which need to be addressed for all children to reach their potential.
  - Children's poverty is related to a variety of factors, including location, education of carers, gender of family head, and number of dependents. The effects of childhood poverty are multi-dimensional, including health, education and well-being. Effective strategies therefore require greater integration across sectors.
  - Investments in nutrition and education in infancy have been shown to have positive effects as children grow up. There has been a huge expansion of pre-school provision. Further attention to improving the system and quality of early childhood development particularly in infancy can yield the best returns and reduce inequalities.
  - There has been notable progress in reducing undernutrition and food insecurity. However, undernutrition remains pervasive hindering physical and cognitive development. Attention to nutrition and diet diversity is beneficial at all ages: in the early years, it can promote development; as children grow, good nutrition can result in recovery and prevent faltering; and as girls move into adulthood, nutrition is important for healthy mothering.
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- Widespread school enrolment has been achieved. However, learning and grade levels progression have fallen below expectations. Attention needs to focus on quality and improving outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children.
  - Policies and systems for addressing harm and violence have been developed. Effective protection of children from hazardous or excessive work and gender based violence requires holistic attention to their social and economic contexts.
  - There have been significant gains in girls' education and protection from harmful practices. However, further progress requires addressing the special challenges girls face throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.
  - There has been massive expansion of education beyond primary school. However, more attention is required to ensure the education system is geared to the demand for jobs and promotes youth enterprise in order to ensure more effective involvement of young men and especially young women in economic development.

## Introduction

Young Lives is a longitudinal comparative research project following 12,000 children growing up in poverty. The project is based in Oxford (UK), and the research was conducted in four middle- and low-income countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. In each country, a sample of 2,000 children born at the time of the Millennium was surveyed in five rounds from 2002 to 2016, collecting information on the children and their families. The sites included a range of urban and rural types, with a deliberate bias towards poorer areas. In Ethiopia the longitudinal research has followed two cohorts of children in 20 sites selected from the five main regions of Ethiopia. The research followed one cohort as they grew from infancy to adolescence (aged one to 15), and the second as they grew from early childhood to early adulthood (aged 8 to 22). The study relates conditions early in the lives of children to later outcomes, explaining the effects of poverty on children's life trajectories. It also provides information on the effects of policies and changes on children's lives, and offers evidence-based guidance for policies to improve children's chances of developing into integrated and productive members of society.

The survey data were supplemented by four waves of qualitative research on smaller samples of the children, which collected more detailed information about their lives, including information about families, schools and communities. Qualitative research included discussions with children and relevant adults, together with observations and techniques to record the children's views and aspirations, enabling a richer appreciation of their well-being. The qualitative data provide a fuller picture of how trends indicated in the surveys affected children's lives, and of specific cases that do not follow the trends. Data collected regularly from the same children over time show how events and experiences at early stages in their lives can affect their later lives, and sometimes how they can overcome difficulties. A second sample in each country of 1,000 children seven years older than the children born at the Millennium allows a comparison between the lives of the two cohorts at the same age seven years apart, which indicates the effects of policies and changes, and provides a means to measure progress.

The regular qualitative and quantitative research was complemented by a number of specific thematic studies on topics of interest for policy and intervention, conducted in collaboration with other interested parties. In Ethiopia these included studies relating to safety-nets, child labour, early learning, child marriage, violence, and urban relocation.

## The Ethiopian context

The study coincided with rapid economic growth in Ethiopia, and with a range of policies and programmes designed to address poverty and to improve the situation of children. Already in the 1990s, Ethiopia had introduced a number of policies to improve the situation of vulnerable women and children. In the first two decades of the new millennium, there has been increasing institutional awareness of issues concerning children and youth, with the establishment of ministries that include specific mandates to attend to these. In the first decade, national plans and strategies aimed at sustainable development and the reduction of poverty, paid attention to children primarily in the spheres of health and education; the *National Growth and Transformation Plans* of the second decade pay broader attention to children and youth, along with women's affairs, as components in the transformation of society. The national *Social Protection Policy* initially focussed on four areas, all of which affect children: social safety nets, livelihood and employment support, social insurance and access to health, education and other social services; it subsequently added a fifth area of specifically protecting vulnerable groups including children from various forms of violence, abuse and exclusion. Further progress is evident in the increasing prominence given to legislation and planning concerning children and youth. Children have received increasing access to public services, including schooling at all levels, health and nutrition services, and child protection services. These improvements have culminated in a revised *National Children's Policy* approved by Parliament in 2017, focussing on children in a variety of difficult circumstances. A *National Youth Development and Change Strategy* promises attention to continuing transformation.

## Twelve Key messages

### ***Message 1: Tackling child poverty in all its forms should be an urgent priority***

Over the fifteen-year study Young Lives' evidence has demonstrated important improvements in living standards, nutrition, food security and diet diversity, and access to services, notably sanitation, water, education and electricity, with important implications for child well-being. This longitudinal research has also shown how formative the early years are, with differences between social groups emerging from early childhood. Despite significant gains, child poverty remains persistent and pervasive, and is multidimensional, with negative impacts on children's life chances and with societal loss of human capital and potential. Moreover, children are over-represented among the poorest people, so that a child focus is an important means to address overall poverty. Policies addressing children's issues have been increasingly developed since 2000, culminating in the *National Children's Policy* in 2017. Further progress requires implementing policies and programmes effectively and equitably within and across sectors, recognising age- and gender- specific needs, with a focus on the early years, and protecting the poorest and most vulnerable households and children.

### ***Message 2: Building on major gains requires further emphasis on addressing inequalities***

Wealth levels have risen over the study period and multidimensional poverty has decreased. Although there have been greater improvements among the poorest and rural households, the gaps based on wealth, location, education and household conditions remain massive, as reflected in differences in undernutrition, food insecurity and lack of access to services. Ethiopia's development plans and policies have been pro-poor and the *Social Protection Policy and Strategy* provides an important basis for addressing the needs of vulnerable households and children. Furthermore, the *National Children's Policy* focuses on children in difficult circumstances, which includes disabled children, orphans, refugee, displaced or migrant children, and domestic child workers and street workers. Further emphasis on rural, remote and pastoralist communities can also reduce inequalities, while a greater investment in the early years can avoid gaps widening.

### ***Message 3: Improving support to children entails addressing the needs of different age groups***

The needs of children and adolescents vary by age from early infancy through to adulthood, often intersecting with gender, poverty, deprivation, ill-health and other household shocks. Young Lives has shown that a life-cycle approach is important to understanding and addressing the different needs of children as they grow up. In early childhood, interventions to address undernutrition, childhood diseases and early learning are crucial. In middle childhood, priorities include ensuring access to adequate and diverse diets and to good quality education, and protecting vulnerable households from shocks and children from excessive or harmful work and violence. In adolescence, promoting post-primary education, training and transitions to the labour market are important, as is protecting girls from gender-based violence. The implementation of sectoral and cross-cutting policies and programmes could be strengthened by improving targeting on the basis of age categories in conjunction with gender and other intersecting inequalities. For example, improving coverage of Early Childhood Development for young children and reducing violence for adolescents would be important age-related priorities.

### ***Message 4: Enhancing children's well-being involves addressing gender issues***

Young Lives' evidence highlights increasing gender differences as children grow up, often compounded by other inequalities based on wealth, location and education. Girls are less likely to be sent to pre-school, whereas in primary school boys are more at risk of dropping out. Girls face pressure in combining school with work in the home as well as for pay. Girls' chances of post-primary education are often constrained by social norms. In adolescence, gender roles become accentuated and girls face risks of greater work burdens and gender-based violence. In the transition to adulthood, adolescent girls face challenges and difficult choices in prioritising or combining education, work, marriage and parenting. These patterns of gender disadvantage further constrain women's opportunities in adulthood. Policies on children and youth, as well as sectoral policies in health and education, should address gender issues, which require further support and targeted plans and programmes.

***Message 5: Prioritising investment in the early years can yield the best returns***

Young Lives shows how important early life is to later prospects. Early undernutrition has profound and lasting consequences for learning and later health. Children with access to good pre-school education show better later educational achievements. The National Strategy for Newborn and Child Survival addresses key health concerns, while the National Nutrition Program and the Early Childhood Care and Education Framework provide the basis for strengthening integrated interventions. Further prioritisation of investments during infancy and promotion of integrated approaches can dramatically improve outcomes, including child survival, development and well-being. Greater focus on social protection for households with young children and prioritising rural and disadvantaged areas, as well as households and children at risk, can accelerate progress and reduce inequalities.

***Message 6: The potential for nutritional recovery offers a second chance beyond infancy***

The first thousand days are known to have a crucial impact on children's nutrition and later outcomes. Young Lives has further demonstrated that, as children grow up, they can recover after infancy from early undernutrition, but also that they can be at risk of falling back into undernutrition in later childhood. The National Nutrition Program acknowledges the multidimensional factors affecting nutrition, and school feeding programmes have been expanded in recent years partly in response to drought crises. A greater emphasis on nutritional interventions beyond infancy, and institutionalisation of appropriate feeding approaches in day care, pre-school and primary school can ensure recovery and protect vulnerable children from faltering. Promoting adequate nutrition and diet diversity for girls in adolescence before they become mothers can play a vital role in breaking cycles of inter-generational undernutrition.

***Message 7: Consolidating gains from pre-school expansion requires improving the system***

Access to pre-primary education has massively increased, notably through the recent expansion of O-Class provision. Young Lives' longitudinal evidence suggests that good quality pre-primary education can have an important impact on later educational and cognitive outcomes. However, there are considerable implementation challenges to responding at a national scale to community needs and demand for good quality pre-schooling. The current Education Sector Development Program has prioritised the rapid expansion of pre-primary education. Improvements to the system, including teacher preparation, support and deployment, and resource allocation with community involvement can improve school readiness and ensure that the considerable potential gains from early learning materialise. Promoting enrolment of girls and targeting the poorest households and rural, remote and pastoralist communities can improve equity and redress emerging inequalities.

***Message 8: Progress to universal learning involves further promotion of quality and equity***

Young Lives' research confirms a remarkable expansion of access and opportunity in primary education. Progress through grades is, however, slow and intermittent. Performance levels and learning outcomes are low by international standards and for the majority of students are much lower than expected in the curriculum. The current Education Sector Development Program prioritises addressing quality and reforms are underway. Prioritising investment in pre-primary and early primary grades and implementing system reforms which promote the attainment of minimum learning expectations among all young people can ensure more balanced foundations for later schooling and employment. Targeted and contextualised support for the poorest and most disadvantaged groups from rural, remote and pastoralist communities to ensure they continue in school and learn adequately can increase equity in education gains.



### ***Message 9: Child labour legislation needs to be implemented sensitively to be effective***

Young Lives' evidence shows that most children do some work from a young age and working is part of children's lives and relationships. Some work can be benign or beneficial, contributing to household livelihoods, the costs of schooling, and skills development, although excessive or hazardous work is harmful and should be prevented. The National Action Plan on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and the National Children's Policy provide important protection for children that needs to be implemented sensitively, involving parents and communities to have the best effects. Social protection addressing family poverty, and providing insurance against vulnerabilities can reduce the need for children to work and promoting child care provisions can reduce pressure on girls to cover domestic care work. Support with flexible education can ensure that children who need to work are able to access schooling.

### ***Message 10: Promoting well-being in adolescence requires prioritising support for girls***

Young Lives' evidence shows that in adolescence girls face major challenges and particular risks. They carry a greater burden of work in the home and often for pay, putting pressure on their schooling performance and their well-being. Adolescent girls also face greater risks of gender-based violence, notably female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), abduction and child marriage. In transitioning to adulthood adolescent girls face challenges over access to reproductive health, and constraints in their decision-making regarding education, marriage, work and parenting. Given the rising enrolment of girls, schools and girls clubs can provide important platforms for addressing such issues and service delivery. The Harmful Traditional Practices Strategy, the Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategy and the Youth Development and Change Strategy provide frameworks for enhancing the well-being of adolescent girls and ensuring their protection, but they require further support and targeted programmes for their effective implementation.

### ***Message 11: Benefiting from educational investments involves improving transitions to work***

Young Lives' evidence shows that there has been considerable progress in access to education, but grade progression, learning levels and completion rates are below expectations. The education policy has implemented reforms and prioritised secondary, technical and tertiary education. However, training, skills development and linkages with the job market and youth unemployment present major challenges. The Youth Development and Change Strategy and Package seeks to promote job creation and youth entrepreneurship, with attention to urban, rural and pastoralist youth. Further efforts are required to ensure that the benefits from investment in education translate into greater economic involvement of youth. A focus on the capabilities and specific needs of young women and youth in urban, rural and pastoralist communities can ensure that interventions are tailored to differential needs in order to promote effective youth engagement in economic development.

### ***Message 12: Ensuring the well-being of children and youth requires promoting safe environments***

Young Lives' evidence suggests that there are risks of violence in the home, school and community, including corporal punishment, and emotional and gender-based violence, affecting children at different ages, with certain categories of vulnerable children more at risk of abuse. Existing social norms can underpin violence, while new risks have emerged with globalisation and urbanisation. The National Children's Policy and Strategy, the Youth Development and Change Strategy and the Social Protection Policy and Strategy provide safeguards and identify sectoral issues and categories at risk, while the Strategy on Harmful Traditional Practices protects girls from gender-based violence. Protective, counselling and remedial measures have been piloted. Ensuring children's protection and well-being requires changing social norms to promote safer environments, including in rapidly urbanising contexts, addressing the deep-seated poverty that often exacerbates violence, training and deploying social workers, and expanding, enhancing and integrating preventative and remedial services.



## About this brief

This brief, produced in partnership with UNICEF Ethiopia, draws on 15 years longitudinal research by Young Lives Ethiopia and the Country Report, highlighting the context in which this research was conducted, cross-country findings, and key implications for policy and practice. This research brief is one of the five briefs produced under the joint work of Young Lives and UNICEF. The remaining four briefs are on early marriage, early childhood development and education, violence and adolescence.

The full report is available on the Young Lives international website, [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk) and the Ethiopia website [www.younglives-ethiopia.org](http://www.younglives-ethiopia.org) detailing acknowledgements, photo credits and references.

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