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# **Children Combining Work and Education in Cottonseed Production in Andhra Pradesh: Implications for Discourses of Children's Rights in India**

May 2009

Virginia Morrow

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# Abstract

Child labour in India has long been the focus of research, policy concern and intervention. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of children's work in cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh, drawing on evidence from two case studies from the qualitative component of Young Lives. In parts of rural Andhra Pradesh, children work in the cotton fields for two to three months of the school year. Children highlighted the importance of this work in their everyday lives and its consequences for their schooling. Evidence shows marked gender and age differentiation. In the early stages of cotton production, there was reported to be a cultural as well as an economic basis for children's work in cottonseed pollination, when it was believed that pre-pubescent girls were preferred for this kind of work, as they were considered to be 'pure'. However, this has shifted somewhat, and children appear to work in cotton pollination for economic reasons, as well as practical ideas that they are better-suited to this type of work because of their physical height and dexterity. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research for discourses related to children's rights in India.

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The views expressed here are those of the author(s). They are not necessarily those of the Young Lives project, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.

# 1. Introduction

This paper presents a preliminary analysis of children's work in cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh, drawing on evidence from Young Lives. Young Lives is an international research project on child poverty (2000-2015) funded by the UK Department for International Development following the lives of 12,000 children growing up in poverty in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam. It attempts to improve understanding of the causes, dynamics and consequences of child poverty, and how specific policies affect children's lives. Young Lives was initiated as a 'millennium study', and recruited 2,000 children in each country born at the turn of the millennium (2000/1) and 1,000 children in each country who were 8 years old at the time (born 1994). Together these two cohorts, along with their caregivers and other community members, are participating every few years in a data-gathering survey that collects information on diverse aspects of their lives. The first survey round took place in 2002 and provided baseline information about Young Lives children, their households and their communities. The completion of the second round of data collection in 2006-7 and subsequent rounds will track changes in children's circumstances and enable longitudinal analysis. A qualitative component was introduced in 2007 as an integrated sub-study exploring in greater depth the lives of 204 children across the four study countries over the remainder of the project. The coexistence of longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data for the same children provides potential for combined analysis, which will be juxtaposed with data on the political and economic context by the policy team, and supplemented with sub-studies of specific issues.

## 1.1 Background

In parts of rural Andhra Pradesh, children aged 10 to 11 years and above work in the cotton fields for two to three months of the school year. Quantitative data from the Young Lives survey show that 25.76 per cent of the Older Cohort in rural areas report working for pay (Galab et al. 2008). The data from fieldwork undertaken as part of the qualitative study during October and November 2007 suggest that five of the 24 Older Cohort case study children have dropped out of school, and most of these children are from rural communities. Children also work on their own farms at the same time as attending school. Intervention programmes to combat child labour and increase school attendance undertaken both by the government and NGOs focus on children who are out of school. Conversely, children who manage to attend school but struggle to meet school requirements because of their work commitments, receive little policy attention. This paper describes two such children who work in their families' fields while pursuing their high school education in the local government school.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces the vast topic of child labour in India, and provides some background information about Andhra Pradesh in relation to children and childhoods. The second section describes the Young Lives research, and draws on two cases of girls involved in cottonseed work, together with their parents' views and extracts from interviews with the local health care worker and teacher. Evidence shows marked gender and age differentiation, and a tension between engagement in labour and school-attendance. The analysis this paper is based upon relates to the case studies only. The final section explores discourses relating to child labour and children's rights, and discusses the implications of children's involvement in labour for their human rights in general.

## 1.2 Child labour

We want to situate this paper in the context of recent thinking about child labour in general, and in India in particular. The topic of child labour is a highly contested field and child labour is a complex and seemingly intractable phenomenon. Definitions are not straightforward: child labour refers to a form of child work, and was first conceptualised as a social problem during industrialisation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, for reasons related to the need for cheap unskilled factory labour, and new moral concerns about childhood (Cunningham 1996). The International Labour Organisation has, over the years, defined child labour as:

- Labour performed by a child who is under the minimum age specified in national legislation for that kind of work; and
- Labour that jeopardises the physical, mental or moral well-being of a child, known as hazardous work (Minimum Age Convention, No. 138, 1973); and
- Unconditional 'worst' forms of child labour, internationally defined as slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour, forced recruitment for use in armed conflict, prostitution and pornography, and illicit activities. (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182 1999; ILO 2002)

Convention 182 reiterates the forms of work that are already prohibited for both children and adults in human rights treaties, and unconditionally prohibits all work for children under the age of 12. In most countries, national legislation restricts the formal employment of children, but is not effective in many circumstances, and child labour needs to be seen in the context of local understandings of childhood and the contributions that children make to their families. The general assumption is that poverty causes child labour. For example, Betcherman et al. (2004) comment, 'one of the puzzles of the literature has been the finding that child labor *increases* with land ownership. This 'wealth effect' is not what one would expect when child labor is seen as driven primarily by poverty' (p.15; see also Bhalotra and Heady 2003 and Keilland and Tovo 2006 for sub-Saharan African countries). A further consideration is the provision of acceptable alternative activities for children, especially high quality education services, which do not exist in most countries (see EFA GMR 2005), and tend to be limited to 'elementary education' for the first five years only.

In a general discussion on child labour in India, Subbaraman and von Witzke (2007) suggest that 'agriculture and allied activities still remain the sector employing more than half of working children in India' (p.101; see also Jaiswal 2000 and Shirol 2000, for recent studies of child labour in India). India has not ratified the two ILO conventions on child labour, though it has numerous laws and regulations relating to child labour, and it ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 (Ramanathan 2000). Three articles of the Constitution of India are concerned with child labour: Article 21a: right to education for children aged between 6 and 14 years; Article 24: prohibition of employment of children in factories; and Article 39: state governments to form policies such that 'children are not abused and are not forced by economic necessities to enter avocations unsuited to age and strength' (Subbaraman and von Witzke 2007: 109). Subbaraman and von Witzke (2007) highlight Andhra Pradesh as having a large number of children out of school (according to Census 2001; see also Mukherji 2008). Further, a high number of schools operate in a single room building, suggesting that the quality of education is poor.

On the other hand,

Andhra Pradesh is seen as one of India's success stories emerging from the era of economic reforms that were introduced across the country from 1991. It is often cited



that its per capita income has been growing faster than the national average, and that its poverty rate has fallen more rapidly than the rest of India. (Murray 2008: 1)

However, economic growth and development appear to be confined to certain sectors and 'questions remain about the real economic impact of the reform process and to what extent progress has been inclusive or pro-poor' (Murray 2008). The involvement of children, particularly girls, in cottonseed production, is well known and well-researched, as we discuss in the next section.

### **1.3 A note about cotton and 'pro-poor' biotechnology**

Hybrid seed production in cotton was introduced in Andhra Pradesh in the early 1970s. It is highly labour intensive, as it involves crossing two varieties of cotton to produce hybrid seeds which have hybrid vigour and are more productive, but can produce only one crop. This means that cottonseed has to be purchased, because the hybrid crops are infertile. Male and female varieties are grown separately, and male flowers are crossed with female flowers (MVF 1998). Cotton flowers bloom for several months; the crossing needs to be done the day the flowers bloom (or the day after). Every evening, the female flowers are marked with coloured paper which is put around the flower and the next morning, male flowers are picked and crossed. These hybrid cotton plants produce more cotton, but are highly susceptible to pests and diseases, with the result that farmers have to spray them with pesticides up to 30 times in a single season. This increases production costs, and has reportedly trapped farmers in debt (MVF 1998). It also has health implications.

The picture has become more complicated with the recent introduction of genetically modified cotton, 'Bt cotton', in 2002; this is a hugely contested and politicised debate in Andhra Pradesh (Herring 2007). This is cotton genetically engineered to combat pests, with the introduction of a gene from *Bacillus thuringiensis* (a soil bacterium) which has a natural insecticide called Bt-toxin. There are a number of Bt hybrids. It was hoped these would reduce pesticide use and increase production of cotton. However, this is contested on the ground. Bt cotton may not have led to bigger yields because it 'has been engineered to reduce pesticide use, not to increase yields. But, more surprisingly, they found that pesticide use was not falling either, because farmers were facing serious problems with secondary pests' (Branford 2008). There are a number of Bt hybrids: in the year 2005-6, GEAC (Genetic Engineering Approval Committee) and the Government of Andhra Pradesh imposed a ban on the cultivation of hybrids in Andhra Pradesh (Qayum and Sakhari, n.d.). Others (Herring 2007) have argued that the evidence is not clear. At any rate, the debates about GM cotton on the one hand, and child labour in cotton pollination on the other hand, seem to be conducted quite separately. It is also worth noting that multi-national seed manufacturers have recently become involved in interventions to eliminate child labour on farms producing hybrid cottonseed in India (Venkateswarlu 2004, 2007; Venkateswarlu and da Corta 2005).

MV Foundation, an organisation that campaigns for the elimination of child labour in general, and from cottonseed production in particular, has had funding from a range of sources including ILO-IPEC and UNICEF over the years and claims it has been responsible for the removal of 100,000 children from child labour (MVF 1998, 2005). A detailed study in two villages in Rangareddy District, A. P., MVF (1998) draws on interviews with field supervisors, employers and case studies of five families, describing what children do, but not (apparently) eliciting their views about the work. The study gives an explanation of the processes involved in cotton pollination and the methods used by employers, and the effects on the girls' education. The study found that 90 per cent of workers in cottonseed pollination were girls aged between 7 and 14. There is not much difference in the type of work undertaken by girls

of different ages, though the amount of work that they do and the hours of work vary. On attaining puberty, girls generally stop pollination work (some girls were engaged in pollination work even after puberty, though in small numbers). They go to the cotton fields but are engaged in other work, such as picking up cotton, separating the seeds, cooking and carrying food to the fields, and so on (MVF 1998). Cotton pollination is highly labour intensive work; and further, there is a powerful idea that:

the work in cottonseed fields can be done only by children and not by adults. This notion is created and propagated by the employers themselves. In reality, there are important economic and political reasons behind taking only girl children into work. (MVF 1998: 39)

Girls are a source of cheap labour, and they are described as easier to control (MVF 1998). It is a kind of 'bonded labour': families are given loans on the security of labour; girls are compelled to work until the amount is repaid; they are not paid proper wages and are made to work for longer hours. MVF also argue, 'most of the children working in the cottonseed fields are from poor families. But there is no truth in the argument that it is only poverty that drives the parents to make their children work instead of educating them' (p.40; see also Sinha 2003). However, as we shall show below, some children from Young Lives sites work on family farms rather than for wages. This is done to reduce costs that they would incur if they hired labour.

Venkateswarlu (2003) included interviews with children and conducted research in the same district as the Young Lives site described below, but focused on migrant girl labourers from other parts of Andhra Pradesh. In a more recent study commissioned by OECD Watch, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, India Committee of the Netherlands, Eine Welt Netz NRW and the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), Venkateswarlu (2007) claims that the numbers of children involved in hybrid cottonseed production are rising. He argues that employment practices result in 'the denial of rights of children and violate many national laws and international conventions' (p.5). He describes the involvement of multi-national corporations in this industry:

Several Indian companies and multinationals... are involved in this 'modern form of child slavery'. The biggest among them... make use of around 200,000 children who are employed by the farmers to which they have subcontracted the cultivation of Bt cotton seeds. (Venkateswarlu 2007: 5)

A UNICEF survey conducted in 2006 on children working in Andhra Pradesh's cottonseed farms that indicated that about 95 per cent were employed in some form of debt bondage (Khanna 2006).

A recent ILO IPEC (2007) report highlights MVF as an example of good practice in relation to withdrawing child labour from cottonseed production.<sup>1</sup> These programmes, however, do not address the issues raised in this paper. MVF and many other interventions have, to a certain extent, ensured that children do not drop out of school. However, children who do attend school but miss classes for months during the cotton season are not covered by these interventions.

In summary, the research and NGO literature on cottonseed work is large but, generally speaking, it focuses on cotton pollination and does not mention the other forms of work that children participate in. The general debates are important background to understanding the political economy of children's involvement in cotton production, described below.

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1 The World Bank funds non-formal education bridge schools, Maa badi (our school), as part of a poverty reduction programme, and is linked to the social welfare reintegration unit for female school dropouts (World Bank 2007).

## 2. The research: Young Lives

This paper draws on the qualitative data collected with Older Cohort children, their caregivers and other community members in one of the four qualitative study sites in Andhra Pradesh. All names of places and people have been changed in this paper to protect identity.

### 2.1 Setting

Poompuhar *gram panchayat* comes under a rural mandal of Mahabubnagar district of A. P. 463 families live there, and the size of the population is 2040. The dominant ethnic group is Backward Caste (BC) and Hindu.<sup>2</sup> There is a sizeable number of Scheduled Caste households who are located in a specific area at the entrance of the community. The ecological zone is inland plain. The agricultural area is broadly divided into irrigated and unirrigated land. While the irrigated area covers 242 acres, the unirrigated area covers 1396 acres. The major occupations are agriculture, livestock rearing and daily wage labour. A number of acres are used to grow seed cotton. Children (mostly girls) are out of school for two to three months in a year as they are engaged in the work at the cotton fields. In most cases, they are engaged in their own fields. The local belief that children undertaking pollination work results in a good crop encourages seasonal child labour in the community. Individual interviews with parents explain the reasons for preferring children in the cotton fields. These were more focused during the second round of qualitative research. Caregivers explained that at present the reasons for engaging children are largely due to feasibility and economic factors. Child labour is much cheaper, and the nature of pollination work means that it is completed more quickly by children than adults. However, over the years word has spread in the community that the crop is good when children are engaged in pollination work. Based on cultural practices, where the period of menstruation is considered impure for all important activities (religious and land-related), this was initially extended into cotton fields as well. However, due to shortage of labour, this cultural requirement is no longer practised, and children in general (mostly girls, however) are engaged in cotton pollination, and not

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2 Scheduled Castes (SCs) are the lowest in the traditional caste structure and were earlier considered to be 'untouchables'. In rural Andhra Pradesh, SC colonies are located separately, and in most cases away from the main villages. These colonies are named after the caste and even in the official records are often called *harijana wada*. They have been subjected to discrimination for years and therefore had no access to basic services, including education. National legislation aims to prohibit 'untouchability' and discrimination. A 15 per cent reservation has been provided for the SCs in education including colleges and universities, and government employment. Separate boarding hostels are provided for SC boys and girls to attend school and scholarships to promote higher education.

Backward castes or classes (BCs) are people belonging to a group of castes who are considered to be backward in view of the low level of the caste in the structure. In Andhra Pradesh, the BCs are further divided into four groups, and some caste groups are placed into each of these subgroups. Recently, the high court has ordered the inclusion of a fifth sub-group, and Muslims have been placed into this category. A 25 per cent reservation has been provided to the BCs for purposes of education and government employment. Separate boarding hostels, scholarships etc are provided to promote education for these groups, as for the SCs.

Scheduled Tribes (STs) are the indigenous people, living in and dependent on forests. Different groups of tribes live in different parts of Andhra Pradesh and vary in their culture, language and lifestyle. Though a good number of them are mainstreamed and live in plain areas, a considerable population continues to live in isolated hill tops and have little access to services. Areas with high tribal population are covered by a special administrative system through the establishment of the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA). Special provisions are made to promote education, health and sustainable livelihoods through the ITDAs. A 7 per cent reservation is provided in educational institutions and government employment. Provision of boarding hostels for boys and girls to attend school, scholarships, training for jobs, job placements, etc., are some of the special services available to them.

necessarily pre-pubescent girls as was the case during the initial stages of introducing the cotton crops into the area a few years ago. The size of the cotton plants is also an important factor for engaging children. Children are the 'right height' to hold the plants and do the crossing, whereas adults have to bend down. When engaged outside family-owned land, children are paid lower wages than other workers.

Being part of the drought prone district of Mahabubnagar, the poor face food shortages during the months of June to August. Migration is common, with adults moving to distant places leaving their children and aged parents behind. However, people migrate more during February and May so as to be back in time for the agricultural preparations that start during June/July. The recently introduced National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, see Sjoblom and Farrington 2008) has led to a reduction in seasonal migration from Poompuhar to Bombay. Having been developed under the Indiramma scheme (Integrated Development in Rural Areas and Model Municipal Areas, a scheme to improve the standard of living in rural villages), Poompuhar now has access to most basic services, including health centre and veterinary services. This village is covered under a range of different government programmes, such as PDS Antyodaya-Annayojana, Annapoorna, (national midday meal scheme); educational schemes (free text books, Integrated Child Development Service); health, natural resource management and other social security programmes (such as food for work, widow/disabled pension, national family benefit scheme (NFBS); national maternity benefit scheme (NMBS); Girl Child Protection Scheme, which has a number of objectives to end discrimination against girls (see <http://www.aponline.gov.in>); Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), a scheme to provide houses free of charge to members of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, free bonded labourers in rural areas and also to non-Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe rural poor below the poverty line; national old age pension scheme (NOAP); and so on.

## 2.2 Questions and methods

The qualitative component of Young Lives has explored the following themes: children's well-being, children's transitions, and services children and their families utilise. Theoretically, Young Lives research understands children as active social agents in their own right, whose social relationships are worthy of study. This approach emphasises the diversity of childhoods, acknowledges children as informants in research about their lives, and moves beyond psychologically-based models that construct childhood as a period of development and socialisation (Prout and James 1990). It is increasingly acknowledged that 'research about children's lives is... essential if policies and programmes are to become more responsive and relevant to their concerns' (Boyden and Ennew 1997: 10).

Methods have been chosen to be child-focused, flexible and reflexive, and ethically sound. They include conversations, group discussions, drawings and other activity-based methods such as child-led community walks, and subsequent one-to-one interviews with children, their caregivers and other key figures in the community (see Crivello et al. 2009). A well-being exercise explores what children consider to be a 'good' or 'bad' life for children in general of the same age and gender, living in their communities. In describing a good life children from this community have, among many other indicators, suggested not having to work in the fields as an indicator of a good life. Other methods explore children's time use and activities, and their views about these activities, where they have not only talked about their feelings but have also engaged in ranking these activities.

Collective consent is initially sought at the community level, care is taken to explain the project to children and parents, and verbal consent is obtained. Participants' willingness to continue is regularly sought with the reminder that they can disengage whenever they want

to. The study raises numerous ethical questions that are discussed in a separate paper (Morrow, *forthcoming*).

The research team accompanied the respondents to the fields where they were working and conducted interviews during breaks when convenient. Children's activities took place either in the local *panchayat* building, or in the home of one of the children at times convenient to them.

## 2.3 Children's work in Poempuhar

By the time children reach secondary school age, they are expected to engage in work at home and on farms. It was evident from the interviews with children and the group exercises on time use that almost all the children in this group are engaged in household activities, though there is a variation in the type of activities undertaken by boys and girls. While the girls are engaged in household chores such as washing utensils, sweeping the floor, washing clothes, cooking and fetching water, boys are generally engaged in outside work such as fetching water, getting provisions, and so on. Children consider these as routine household activities and not as 'work'. During group exercises they ranked daily activities: they liked school the most, household activities were second, and farm work was the activity they disliked the most. Those children who are from land-owning households are also required to work on the family farm during the peak agricultural season. Children are required to manage school, home and farm work for two to three months, from the end of August to November. Unable to strike a balance between the three, children miss school and then find it difficult to continue attending school. Existing government and NGO services are geared towards the needs of children who have dropped out of school, but children who miss school for a specific period because of seasonal agricultural work do not receive much attention from policy makers (Vennam and Komanduri 2008).

The next section focuses on accounts from two girls.

Ramya (not her real name) is 12 years old, and comes from a family in the fifth quintile (least poor)<sup>3</sup> who own land upon which she is expected to work. She is one of five children, four girls and a boy. Ramya's case shows how child work is not necessarily directly caused by poverty. Ramya's father works as the village secretary for the neighbouring *panchayat* (considered to be a powerful position locally, as most decisions about social security services are made by secretaries, for example, whether a household is classified as being below the poverty line and receives a white card entitling them to a range of benefits such as allowances of rice and oil). Her mother manages the home with support from her paternal grandmother, who lives next door, as her father is busy with his job. The father makes the major decisions about the children, though the mother is consulted. Apart from the father's job, the family depends on the family land on which seed cotton and tobacco are grown. Like most children in the village, Ramya works in the fields from August to November. She described her day as starting as early as 7am and going on until 7pm. She misses school for two to three months of the year and finds it difficult to make up for lost classes. Her parents know that she dislikes working in the fields and the long walk (3.5km) to the fields. Being the youngest of four girls, she is spared from doing the bulk of the household work, though she

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3 The Young Lives sample is divided into five quintiles (groups of equal size) according to their per capita household expenditure, where the lowest quintile (20<sup>th</sup>) of families are considered to be the 'poorest' and those in the highest quintile (100<sup>th</sup>) 'non-poor'. Household expenditure is considered the most appropriate poverty indicator. It is based on data from Young Lives' survey of individual households and calculated as the sum of the estimated value (approximated to the past 30 days i.e. a month), of food (bought + home grown + gifts/transfers) and non-food (excluding durables such as furniture, gold jewellery and one-off expenditures). This monthly figure is then divided by household size.

described sweeping up, fetching the milk and numerous other chores. Ramya understands the need for her to work on the family's farm, and she is quite open about her dislike towards farm work as it is very difficult and makes her tired after the long day. She also considers this as a major obstacle to her ambitions.

## 2.4 Ramya: talking about work

She described going to the fields on an 'empty stomach', plucking the flowers for half an hour:

Then we cross the flowers from 8 till 12... we usually have breakfast at 11am. My mother gets it, she follows us to the fields with the food, then we eat, and work on flower buds. It will be 6:30pm, we will pack up all the things and return home, all of us come together, mother, me, aunt, brothers, sisters (i.e. cousins) and my sister and three daily wage workers together.

She complained that the walk is scary, the road is narrow, and she is scared of the insects in the field. But she also described talking while walking and how she mostly talked with 'the lady who comes as wage labourer on our farm... she is always smiling, she also talks nicely and makes us talk also'. She described watching TV (not at home, in the neighbourhood), having supper, and then studying for half an hour, then going to bed. 'I try to read, but I feel tired; I miss school, so I don't know what is happening at school.' Her father is too busy to help her with homework. Her mother understands her problems about work: 'If I say "I don't like to go to the field", everyday, she understands it and does not force me. If I want to go to school, she will allow me. But she doesn't let me during the cotton crop season.'

Ramya also mentioned her involvement in tobacco work. This involves stitching tobacco leaves together after the crop has been cut. Children are involved in picking/harvesting the leaves, then at home stitching them together to be dried. Ramya described how her family started growing tobacco only last year, so she began this work a year ago. She said that only two households in the village have started growing tobacco.

She described how the tobacco work involves going to the field some days and to school on others (interspersing the two), but the cotton pollination work is a daily job and involves a great deal of labour. 'If it is done by [too] few people, it is of no use, buds remain uncrossed and seeds explode and the crop goes to waste, that's why we have to go everyday.'

It is very hard... there is pain in the legs, we walk every day, I feel pain in the legs too... we have to do the same work everyday, even if it is hot. At that time I cover my head with a towel, sometimes I get a fever, but mostly it is only hands and legs that ache. I feel tired of the long day, and do not feel like doing anything after reaching home. Not even studying.

The interviewer asks her about what she thinks and feels about the work she does.

This field work, be it cotton or tobacco work. For these works we have raised loans, we will have to repay the loans, we work and repay the loans. Father took a loan for our sisters' marriage; we performed their marriages at the same time [2 sisters were married on the same day last year]. We have taken a loan of 1 lakh rupees for their marriage. ... I have to work, though it is hard work; we have to clear the loans.

The loans are both from the bank and from informal sources, who finance agricultural operations, which is a common practice in these communities. Ramya talks about buyers coming to the village and purchasing the crop. Ramya is not technically a debt-bonded labourer, as she works on the family farm and not for wages. She talks about the family's inability to hire many labourers, as this would increase the expenses. Ramya has a clear

understanding of financial arrangements and why she needs to work. She also described other activities she undertakes for her family:

I have to do all the small jobs, like going here and there to collect money given as small loan by my grandmother; they will send me to collect that money. I will have to do all that granny asks me to do; she will send me to get money, she will send me to the shop, she will send me to ask if anybody wants to buy blouses. My granny sells these; she has a small shop [next door].

She also takes care of her sister's baby (now 4 months old) when she returns from school, while her sister does the domestic work. She doesn't watch much TV now because she has to keep the baby at home. In terms of household chores, as mentioned, she helps with sweeping: 'I don't feel bad about it, it's our home, it looks good clean, *it should be clean and tidy and its our job and should be done by us only*, that's why I like to do it, everybody at home *has to take on responsibility*' (emphasis added). She talks about her brother (aged 11) and describes how he comes to the fields sometimes,

but does not do any work... but at this age, I used to go to the fields and do work... he is the youngest of all, only son after 4 girls, he is pampered a lot, as he is the only son, mother and father both pamper him. I also feel he is small, he cannot work. But sometimes I get angry; when he troubles me, when the work is hard, I compare [the fact] that he is not going, but I have to. But I don't say anything; I like him as a small brother.

Ramya also talked about boys' work tasks, which involve irrigation. She talked about her preference for baby girls: 'because girls help their mothers when they get strained and are tired, whereas the boys don't care as much as girls do. Either they don't feel for mothers, or they don't like to help, I am not sure.' She talked about how obedient girls are compared to boys: 'we immediately go and do the work without being told repeatedly'. She also described how her work load has changed over the past year because of her sisters' marriage:

Since last year, I [now] have cotton crop work and tobacco... I did not have much work [before] then, as both my elder sisters were with us. I never used to go to the field. Those two sisters used to go; me and another sister did not go. But now they are in their in-laws' houses, hence we have to pluck buds now.

When asked for her views about school, she described how she dislikes being scolded and beaten if homework is not done or school attendance is not regular.

I feel very bad when teacher scolds me. I like to be regular in school, do home work, but I can't do it all, it is difficult. But there is no choice, I have to do all the work that mother and grandmother say. Now that my two sisters are married I have to share work; they say I am now old enough to do all this.

Her parents don't talk with her teachers, 'my mother comes once in a while to give the key to my home when I am in school and they go to fields or anywhere. That's it; they don't ever come near the school'. She described how her father signs her progress card, but 'as I go to the field to work, I don't score good marks, he knows it, hence doesn't comment on it'.

The season for tobacco harvesting coincides with the end of the academic year and time for the final exams, and the season for cotton pollination coincides with the first quarter examinations.<sup>4</sup> Even if children miss school for long periods, if they are able to attend school

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4 The education system includes examinations on a quarterly basis and children are required to take quarterly, half yearly and annual exams.

for a few days before the exams, they perform relatively well with special guidance from their teachers. Ramya said:

Before examinations, even at that time, the work is from dawn to dusk... a few days to [attend] school and a few days to do tobacco work. Even at that time, I had to work from morning to evening. We go at 7am and pluck it, return home by 9am or 10am, and we take a bath and wash thoroughly. It is very pungent, it is like a burning sensation on the hands. We take a bath, and wash thoroughly, and have food, then sit to stitch tobacco.

When asked 'did it affect your studies and seventh grade examinations?', Ramya replied, 'it affected a lot. I would have been in school regularly, prepared better and scored more marks in the examination'. She described her plans for education, but here she is caught in a vicious cycle – she wants to carry on studying to tenth grade, but when she does go to school she is scolded by teachers because she is not attending regularly – 'we are scared of it' yet 'we will have to obey parents and go to the fields'. She explained that she has asked her mother to come and speak to the teachers in the school, but her mother never comes. 'If I insist on her coming she may ask me to stop school, so I just keep going; teachers also know by now about this system, it has become a routine in our village.' She would like to become a teacher, 'if the people in the family let us [me], I will study until degree' and described how she and three friends all want to become teachers. She named a teacher 'who is the inspiration. We like her, she teaches well.'

On the other hand, the school itself is not in a good physical state. The buildings are old, there is no furniture in the classrooms and children sit on the floor. The school is due to have a new building, but the construction has not been undertaken because of inadequate funds. The high school is therefore located in the same premises as the earlier upper primary school. The children do not mind all these inadequacies, but the water and lack of toilets do affect the older girls and their attendance at school (particularly those coming from the neighbouring villages). Ramya describes how:

There is no water in our school... they have drilled a bore, but not installed a motor to pump water... it is a big problem. Few people carry bottles... they come home to drink water during intervals [break in classes. As the school is located in the village, the children go home during breaks]. So we have to go and come back two or three times from home to school and school to home.

She expresses strong opinions about school and work and said: 'Children of my age should be in school only, no work, no field work. They can help in domestic work at home, because this is petty work and can be easily managed... *We should help* at home, if alone it is very strenuous for mothers at home, we have to share the work with the mother'.

She talked about doing her home work at school: 'if I have time after the school hours, I will complete it there. All friends do it together, and then return home. We help each other'. She also described how she 'used to play *thokkudubilla* (local game) but we don't play much now... we don't play at school, because since last year we have new work of cotton crop'. If a girl looks, or is, 'grown up' (which means locally that she has reached puberty) she no longer 'plays' but is expected to work. Post-puberty, children are still taken to the farms to carry out other tasks – plucking the cotton and separating the seeds, watering, and so on. In a few cases girls who have attained puberty are also engaged in pollination work as they have no younger sisters, and wage labour will have to be hired. In such cases, the cultural belief appears to be flexible enough to be abandoned for economic reasons.



## 2.5 Harika: talking about work

Harika's situation is similar in many ways to Ramya's, but compounded by her father's ill-health. Harika is aged 13, and comes from a family in the third quintile. She is the only daughter and has one older and one younger brother. The older brother has been fostered by close relatives, and for all practical purposes, Harika is the oldest child in the family. Being the only girl, she does all the household work. Her father is immobile due to a leg injury as a result of an accident. He cannot go to the fields and has remained at home for the last few months. Harika's mother has to shoulder the responsibility and spends a large part of the day at the family fields. Harika therefore does most of the household work, while also attending to the work on the cotton fields. Like Ramya, and indeed most children of her age in the village, she misses school for about two months during the peak season at the cotton fields. She attends school during the remaining period. She finds it difficult to manage school and work, and she also finds it difficult to perform in examinations, as she had missed school for a number of days. She is almost forced to attend the examinations to meet the school requirement so that she can retain her enrolment at school – she said, 'Sir told [me] to write the exam, otherwise my name will be deleted. So, I thought, I have to write.'

In her interview, Harika described her daily routine (note: going to the fields in local usage is generally referred to as going to the well (*baviki* means 'to the well'). This is because the fields are located in and around the well, which is the main source of irrigation):

I wake up at 6'o clock in the morning and sweep the floor. I sweep the floor and wash the dishes. I will bring water. After bringing water, I will brush my teeth... drink the tea... I study for some time in the morning as exams are nearby. I do study for a while and after studying... I go to the well. After doing the crossing work, I come back at 11 o' clock and take a bath. I will study for some time and come to school at 2'o clock... after eating lunch. I will come to the school and write the exam and go back home at 4.30 p.m. After going I will press the cotton and sweep the floor and cook the food for night. Aa... I only cook the food for night...

She said: 'If I go to the fields, I won't get an education. We look different when we go to school, and we look different when we go to the fields. We turn black by the heat of the sun if we go to the fields. We look good if we go to school.' These reflections about changes in skin colour and 'difference' due to work may have connotations in terms of racial/caste identity, and consequences for body symbolism of hard manual labour.

Later in the interview, Harika said: 'The children must not be forced to do hard work from childhood itself. If they study only, it's nice and their lives will be good.'

## 2.6 Parents' views

Ramya's parents were reluctant to speak openly about their daughter's work, downplaying the amount of time she spends working and citing the fact that 'labourers don't turn up' as a reason for children having to work. Her mother, however, considers her participation as an inevitable result of the need to reduce the cost of hiring labour. Her parents complained that she is a weak child and can't work in the fields for long, and that it is better if she gets educated. 'She is tiny for her age, not yet attained puberty, all her friends have.'

Harika's mother, on the other hand, talked openly about the cotton pollination work. She explained:

It is our work, isn't it. Who else will teach them? She will learn by seeing me. All children are taught by us... and they come along with us to the fields and then they watch us.

While we are doing, they will be along with us, and then they do on their own later... She feels sad, going to cotton work... she says 'why are you putting us in that? You are spoiling our studies as such...' we don't listen... To go to well, she will be angry. She does [the work] well. Not only separation of those petals, she will not leave a single ring [meaning the flower that has been identified the previous evening for pollination the next morning].

The mother here refers to the child being perfect in her work and not leaving behind any identified flower without crossing it. When asked why the pollination work is done by young girls, the mother replies:

Small children will do well. It is child's work.... Older people cannot do it. They don't do it well. Seed will not come, they won't stay at all, fruit will not remain... Older people do other tasks like planting and cutting.

The interviewer asked about the availability of children for cotton pollination. Harika's mother said: '[it is] totally reduced, not at all available in our village. They bring them from some other villages.' She explains that the children are given food and stay in the village. 'Their duration of stay depends on the amount of work. We engage them for two or three months and send them back.' The transportation of children (migration) for pollination work is also noted in NGO studies (Venkateswarlu 2003). Harika's mother explained that children now mostly work on their own farms, that some are attending school, and that 'people are now more alert and prefer to send children to school. When there are no children in the family, what else can one do except engage other children?' She also talked about the risks to children of the work, the sun and snakes. On her school attendance, Harika's mother said:

Recently, since two months, she is not going properly. Her father got his leg fractured, we actually felt very bad since we can't send her to school. We don't know what to do. He is injured badly, cannot come to the fields. He has to be taken care of. When I go to the fields, Harika takes care of him. If she is at the fields, I take care of him. Now she is attending exams at the school.

Harika's mother explained that Harika also looks after her younger brother. Harika also does the cooking:

Now she can cook one kilo of rice, but doesn't know how to cook two, three kilos of rice. She cooks well. If we tell her this many people and cook one kilo of rice, then she cooks, but if people are more, how can she cook then? She is still a small girl. She can do it now, like getting water, cleaning utensils, and all, she does it well. She cleans well.

Harika's mother also described how her daughter hardly has time for leisure: 'I think sometimes she gets down her toys of her liking from the cupboard, [or does] *rangoli*'.<sup>5</sup> She also described how children 'complete [the work] as play, moving quickly from one plant to the other. Adults cannot work so quickly. The coverage is therefore higher and on time, as the pollination has to be completed each day before noon. As a result of good coverage, the crop is good.'

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5 *Rangoli* are the designs that are made with a particular powder every morning in front of the house. These are made in special colours during particular festivals as a part of the celebrations. Young girls spend free time practicing these on paper and preserving them as a guide as and when required. Being able to do *rangoli* is also an assessment of the girl's ability to undertake household work and the way she has been trained for that.

## 2.7 Health worker's and teacher's views

The local health worker described gender differences in the children's work in the cotton fields.

These first four months there will be work in the cotton fields. Boys go less. They pick the flowers in the cotton fields, water the fields, and usually they will go to spray pesticides, to pour water. They remove grass. Girls will go to do the crossing, remove the unwanted grass in the cotton fields and in paddy fields [weeding]. In onion fields also they remove the unwanted grass... Their work requires long work at the fields. But boys will have to go at odd hours to water the fields because electricity for motor pumps is provided only during the night. So both boys and girls will... work.

The health worker described the health risks children face from their involvement in cotton pollination work. She talked about a smell which 'means that children won't grow properly'. The interviewer asked what smell she was referring to.

They spray pesticides in the cotton fields, that is why... we ourselves cannot bear that smell. It is intolerable and very pungent. Even older people cannot bear this smell, let alone the children. Some people vomit, and have burning sensations in their eyes.

Venkateswarlu (2003) includes an account from a migrant girl labourer describing very similar symptoms following pesticide spraying: 'I got a severe headache and felt giddiness which was not normal while working in the field immediately after spraying pesticides' (case study girl quoted in Venkateswarlu 2003: 13).

The health worker said the cottonseed work affects children's health very directly:

If they go for such work, the children will become weak and turn anaemic. They have small cracks on the gums and teeth. They become anaemic, to such an extent that they will become very weak. Even if we give them some tablets, they will not accept or take [them]... In those girls who are in the age group 12 to 14, their breast growth is slow, particularly among those who are going to work in the cotton fields... so many times we observed that quite a few of them have flat chests in this community. A few days ago, some doctors came from London. They took 10 to 20 members of the cotton field workers. They took these age group children and checked them. They observed the children [and] those who are not going for labour, and concluded that the growth is not proper in those who are going to the cotton field.

This confirms the comments made by Harika's mother about her physical development.

They are more anaemic than the adults, particularly the adolescent girls. They have less blood, they will not grow much. Because of that smell, they also do not feel hungry. So they don't eat much, and therefore do not grow... We get the children of the same age group and compare them, so we can find the difference in these children. Even though they have good complexions, if they go to the cotton fields, their skin turns dark and gets tanned. Even their nails are spoilt as they pluck the cotton flowers. Feet get cracks and bleed. Some wear footwear, some will not. They get their periods late.

The health effects of children's involvement in agricultural production are also beginning to be explored in public health research. Parker and Overby (2005) argue that there is a need to move on from seeing child labour as purely an issue of economic development, education or labour regulation, and suggest a rights-based approach and public health model to child labour (see below).

Finally, the teacher also talked about cotton work: 'it requires a whole lot of labour – small children, who are of 10, 7, 8 years will go to cotton fields to work. August, September, October, November.'

All children from the Young Lives subsample for the qualitative study who are engaged in farm work would prefer to attend school full time without missing it for long periods. They consider field work as an obstacle to school performance and find it hard to cope with the subjects and examinations when they miss school. However, children did not mind their involvement in household activities and did not consider it to be work. They thought of it as part of their daily routine and saw it as their responsibility to share the household chores to keep the family going.

## 2.8 Discussion

What do we learn from children's accounts? Ramya and Harika show a clear understanding of their work roles, their domestic tasks, and of the difficulties they face in combining school and work. The girls' expressed desire to support their mothers highlights the interdependency of family members, particularly mothers and daughters, and the ways in which children contribute to the domestic economy. Nieuwenhuys (2005: 169) argues that children who work are involved in 'wealth creation' (or at the very least subsistence), and she emphasises the importance of recognising the 'interdependence between the two areas of social life... childhood and the market... Children play a key role in constituting and maintaining forms of wealth that are passed down from generation to generation'. She utilises the notion of generalised reciprocity (based on Sahlins 1972) to explain how 'sets of social rules and divisions of tasks ensure that... new generations of children are taken care of and acquire assets, resources, knowledge and relationships that will enable them to repay, as adults, their debt to the older generation' (Nieuwenhuys 2005: 175).

Ramya describes how obedient girls are, and how housework is 'our job', and clearly recognises her own responsibilities to her family: as Nieuwenhuys (2005) notes, submission is the most evident way to be a 'good child' (p.176). Child labour/work is conceptualised as problematic because it is perceived as conflicting with the over-riding aim of 'being a child', in other words, to become educated. This paradigm leads to a societal devaluation of children's contributions, and hence fails to acknowledge interconnections between family members, generations, and others in the community (Morrow 2008).

At any rate, girls are clearly an important source of labour, and cotton pollination is but one form of work among many that children describe doing. The dynamics of family transitions affect children's work – from Ramya's point of view, her workload has increased because her two older sisters got married the previous year. Harika's workload has changed because of her father's health status, with his injured leg rendering him unable to work. Birth order, age, gender and family health intersect and affect children's workloads (see Reynolds 1991; Punch 2001). Seasonality is also important because if the fieldwork had been conducted at a different time of year, a different picture may have emerged. The quality of education matters too, because the dilemma for Ramya and Harika is that they have to obey parents and work in the field, and if they do manage to go to school they are scolded because their attendance is poor.

What can Young Lives add to what is already known about child labour and children's economic activities? Previous attention has tended to focus on children's involvement in a particular sector of agricultural production (cottonseed pollination), rather than on children's work in general, and we have already noted the dynamic nature of agricultural work, with the

reported introduction of tobacco growing, a crop that may bring a new set of health risks to children. Anthropological research on children's work/child labour has found that children are far more likely than adults to have multiple concurrent occupations (Boyden 1991; Ennew and Young 1981; Ennew 1982). Few studies have attempted to talk to children about their views on their experiences of work – they tend to appear as passive victims – though some studies have elicited parents' views. Young Lives can also add the views of other community members to build up a picture of children's lives. Most research on child labour also presents a snapshot of children's work at one particular moment in time. As a longitudinal study, Young Lives will be able to explore how children's roles shift and change over time. It is not our intention to explore the relevance of these findings for children in other parts of Andhra Pradesh, and it is outside the remit of this paper to explore any policy implications. However, the children's and others' views give an insight into what happens when children do try to attend school, and how difficult it is for them to combine school and work, if this is how their lives are to be managed.

### 3. Implications for children's rights

The final section of this paper considers the implications of children's labour for their rights in relation to education and work, and asks whether children's rights/human rights approaches are constructive. Defining child labour as work that 'deprives children of their childhood' (ILO, n.d.) and invoking children's 'right to a childhood' (UNICEF Andhra Pradesh spokesperson cited in MVF 2004) is problematic. It is linked to an unspecified, idealised 'childhood' – children should be in school, playing, carefree and sheltered, not at work – that is often evoked in the literature on child labour. It enables criticism of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as Western and essentialising, and begs the question of what childhood is in the first place. The data presented here suggest that there are powerful norms and social values relating to children's roles, about how childhood is defined, what girls and boys are expected to do, that need to be respected and interpreted carefully in any attempts to 'eliminate' harmful work (see also Morrow and Boyden, forthcoming).

A useful typology of four overlapping perspectives on child labour developed by Myers (2001a) identifies a *children-centred perspective* to the study of child labour.<sup>6</sup> This approach takes into account the effects of labour on children's well-being and individual/social development and also balances these with the advantages of work from children's and their families' perspectives. Recently this view has become linked with notions of children's rights

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6 The other three perspectives are as follows. The *labour market* perspective initially dominated European interventions and arose through concern from trade unions, employer associations, government departments, and philanthropic organisations during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It involved the construction of child labour as a 'problem', not least because it competed with adult employment, requiring abolition through the extension of compulsory education and enforcement of labour legislation. This approach expanded gradually internationally and remains the dominant model. Secondly, the *human capital* perspective views child labour as resulting from economic underdevelopment, and childhood as preparation for adulthood, seeing children as potential economic producers, thus requiring skills and literacy to be developed through intensive education. This approach emphasises the benefits of 'investing in children'. Thirdly, the *social responsibility* perspective sees child labour as arising from social inequalities, and defines children's work as exploitative, alienating, or oppressive work that excludes children from protection, and depicts child labour as a collective moral responsibility. This approach has generated innovative non-formal education programmes, such as street education and work-school arrangements.

and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which set standards for freedom from exploitation at work (Article 32), and also for participation (Article 12), which guarantees children's rights to participate in decisions concerning them. This view sees children as active social agents who have capabilities and responsibilities, rather than as passive victims or blank slates upon whom culture is inscribed (Myers 2001a; Ennew et al. 2005). The two case studies can be analysed within this framework, because it takes into account the effects of labour on children's well-being and individual/social development, and also balances these with the advantages of work from children's and their families' perspectives.

Bissell (2005) explores the differences between needs-based and rights-based approaches to child labour by drawing on a case study of a boy from her Bangladesh research. Here we adopt her approach to explore the possible solutions to Ramya and Harika's situations. Paraphrasing Bissell (2005), a 'needs-based approach' would argue that they should both be in school full-time, and not working at all. There would be suggestions that adults should be doing the work the children are doing, and furthermore, in Harika's case, social assistance should help to support the family while her father recovers from his injury. The children's views of what should happen to them would not be taken into consideration. This approach fails to acknowledge any possible benefits to children from their involvement in work, and any possible difficulties with schooling. As Woodhead has suggested, 'children's needs, and their process of meeting those needs,... [are] profoundly shaped by beliefs and practices through which children are incorporated into their families and communities and which gradually become part of their own identity and self-esteem' (Woodhead 1998: 126). An analysis of the two cases presented above through a child-centred lens suggest that a re-conceptualisation of local understandings of childhood, as well as a disruption of the intergenerational contract, and of intergenerational relations in general (including a redefinition of parents' and grandparents' roles) would be necessary if child labour/work was to be 'eliminated'. It is also clear that poverty intersects with other factors in encouraging children's work in agriculture, and that even though parents, teachers and the health worker see the involvement of children in cottonseed work as very problematic, compromising their health and education, children continue to work.

A rights-based approach (whether human rights, or based on UN CRC), would argue the case differently. While the girls do not use the language of rights, they recognise the difficulties for children of child labour. As Harika says, 'children must not be forced to do *hard* work from childhood itself. If they study only, it's nice and their lives will be good'. The girls have the right to specific services simply because they are human, not because it would be kind to give them these rights or because they are needy (paraphrasing Susan Bissell). They also have the right to the highest standard of health, health care (Article 24, 1) and measures which 'take into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution' (Article 24.2 c), viz. the implications of pesticide use in cotton fields (and tobacco harvesting). Article 27, 1 recognises the right of every child to an adequate standard of living; and Article 12 recognises the right of the child to express views freely in all matters affecting the child. As Bissell (2003: 68) points out, much of the literature on child labour cites only UN CRC Article 32, the right of the child 'to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education'. She suggests that 'wrongly interpreted and cited in isolation of each other, the articles of the convention run the risk of hurting rather than helping children' (p.68). Ennew et al. (2005) also suggest that:

Accumulated international experience in defining and addressing child labour strongly suggests that it is beneficial and empowering for children if rights principles are defined flexibly... Children's best interests depend on their diversity being treated with as much

respect as their universality... respect and dignity are the basic criteria of human rights, which mean that the rights and well-being of children depend above all on profound respect both for who they may become and for who they are right now. (p.52)

Ramya and Harika fall between gaps in provision. They are 'mostly' in school, but their schooling is interrupted by the demands of agricultural production. It is outside the remit of this paper to consider the contested question of work versus school (see, for example, Balagopalan 2005, 2008; Boyden 1994; Boyden and Myers 1995; Kabeer et al. 2003; Myers 2001b; Woodhead 2001; Orkin, *forthcoming*), nor is it possible to generalise from the two cases presented here. This leaves some unanswered questions. Firstly, how does a rights-based framework help our understanding of these particular cases without formulaically applying what may appear to be abstract rights enshrined in the CRC? And secondly, how can we avoid turning these abstract rights into what may be intermediary statements of children's needs? And finally, how do we reconcile the expressed wishes of the children to go to school, and to undertake domestic work (but not labour in agricultural work) and their aspirations for the future with their lived realities and social responsibilities?

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**Young Lives is an innovative long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty.**

The project seeks to:

- improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being
- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

Young Lives is tracking the development of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam through quantitative and qualitative research over a 15-year period.

## Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Jo Boyden.

Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia

Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India

Save the Children – Bal Raksha Bharat, India

Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India

Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (Group for the Analysis of Development), Peru

Instituto de Investigación Nutricional (Institute for Nutritional Research), Peru

Centre for Analysis and Forecast, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam

General Statistics Office, Vietnam

The Institute of Education, University of London, UK

Child and Youth Studies Group (CREET), The Open University, UK

Department of International Development University of Oxford, UK

Statistical Services Centre, University of Reading, UK

Save the Children UK (staff from the Rights and Economic Justice team in London as well as staff in India, Ethiopia and Vietnam).



**Young Lives**   
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

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