

What Can Comparative Country Research Tell Us About Child Poverty?

Young Lives Methods Guide • June 2015

“Cross-national research is valuable, even indispensable, for establishing the validity of interpretations derived from single-nation studies. In no other way can we be certain that what we believe to be social-structural regularities are not merely particularities, the product of some limited set of historical or cultural or political circumstances”. Kohn (1987: 713)

We are frequently asked why Young Lives is conducting research in four countries, and why specifically Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam. This short paper attempts to answer these questions (and can be read in conjunction with a second paper, ‘What can longitudinal research tell us about children’s life-chances?’ which sets out the case for long-term cohort research).

Why Young Lives?

There was huge optimism at the turn of the century about the Millennium Declaration and the international community made a commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, many of which related to children and childhood – ending poverty, expanding enrolment in primary education, improving access to clean water, and reducing child mortality. DFID wanted to understand the drivers and impacts of child poverty in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and to generate evidence to help design better programmes and policies. One way to achieve this was to initiate a long-term study to track children’s lives over the 15-year lifespan of the MDGs, in a range of countries and so Young Lives was commissioned by DFID to do this.

The world has changed rapidly since the year 2000 and in the run-up to the agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, it is timely to set out a rationale for longitudinal research that helps to understand children’s development in a range of poverty contexts, by exploring what we have learned that will be useful for the proposed data revolution within the SDGs when: “the world must acquire a new ‘data literacy’ in order to be equipped with the tools, methodologies, capacities, and information necessary to shine a light on the challenges of responding to the new agenda” (UN Secretary General 2014: 38).

Why these four countries?

Young Lives was designed to explore the correlates and outcomes of child poverty and well-being, and to contribute to international efforts to understand the consequences of poverty during childhood. Because it was intended from inception to be a policy-relevant study, the extent to which governments and civil society organisations in each country were committed to poverty reduction was a factor in country selection. The aim was to ensure a comparative perspective that also reflected a diversity of political and economic circumstances and a range of geographical, social and cultural contexts and circumstances, including economic liberalisation,

indebtedness and debt relief, conflict and natural disasters, and inequality. Finally, the existence of institutions in each country with capacity to undertake long-term research was also crucial to the choice of country (Attawell 2003).

The Young Lives study countries were selected from twenty-four possible options. The countries chosen are in the four continents of the global South – that is, sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian sub-continent, South-East Asia and Latin America. By undertaking research in a range of circumstances, Young Lives can explore children’s experiences of and responses to poverty, highlighting the diverse ways in which poverty affects children in specific communities, regions and countries.

What comparative research can tell us

While direct comparisons between countries are not possible, simultaneous research in four countries enables Young Lives to explore how patterns of relationships are similar or different across the countries, in relation to the long-term effects of poverty, the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and the unequal outcomes of economic and social development for children and young people. This is essential for understanding the causes and consequences of poverty in relation to the life-course, and for the possibilities of generalising (or not) from particular countries to other LMIC countries. Over time, it has become clear that the four-country design enables better understanding of the apparent failure of economic growth to alleviate childhood poverty in three countries now categorised as ‘middle-income’ (India, Peru and Vietnam). So while general living standards are improving, Young Lives households continue to be affected by negative events such as droughts, flooding or illness. Some children and households remain in poverty and, in some cases, families fall into poverty in spite of the increasing resources around them.

Undertaking research with children and families in four countries also enables us to track the effects of specific social policies over time, for example, relating to the consequences of increased enrolment in school and the

variations in schooling effectiveness, policies relating to child labour, the impacts of policies relating specific issues (such as early marriage in Ethiopia and India), and the implications for children and their families of a multiplicity of social protection schemes. These include the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (NREGS) in India, the conditional cash transfer programme *Juntos* in Peru, and Programme 135, an area-based Poverty Reduction Programme in Vietnam. Understanding why and how specific policies or programmes are effective in one country may help to pose important questions.

- Comparative analysis can give greater confidence that evidence found in one country is applicable to others. For example, Young Lives evidence shows some children appear to recover in terms of height growth after malnutrition in infancy. This suggests the benefit of and need for continued nutritional support throughout childhood. That this pattern recurs across the four countries strengthens the argument that these findings are not country-specific, have wider applicability, and are not mere 'peculiarities'. This preliminary finding from Young Lives is now being tested by other researchers using other datasets with similar results.
- Comparative analysis also shows how norms vary between countries, and what this might mean for children. For example, global debates tend to emphasise the significant commonalities in discrimination experienced by girls and women. In relation to school expenditure, girls are systematically disadvantaged in India, but in Ethiopia and Vietnam we find that more of the Older Cohort girls are enrolled in school than boys (at age 18 to 19). Collecting data from children in a number of countries helps identify similarities and differences in these patterns, and enables us to explore underlying determinants of such disadvantage.

- Social policies are designed differently across countries, and comparisons highlight both national implications and messages for global learning. For example, analysis shows that children in primary schools in Vietnam learn more quickly than in the other countries, posing questions about why the Vietnamese school system seems to be more effective.
- Undertaking research simultaneously in multiple locations means that Young Lives contributes to learning in relation to methods, including the possibilities and limitations of trying to develop measures that can be used across cultures (for example testing children's learning levels in schools), which enables us to analyse policy-effectiveness more closely.

Possibilities for long-term comparative research

Priorities in international development have shifted considerably over the lifetime of Young Lives. The world changed on September 11th 2001, and the focus of the international community shifted away from childhood poverty and towards the intersections of poverty and conflict and the potential for civil unrest. However, the renewed focus on poverty and inequality within the SDGs means that there is potential for Young Lives to contribute learning from its comparative longitudinal research with children. Research within and between middle- and low-income countries is essential in order to understand deepening inequalities. Findings from India, Peru and Vietnam, now middle-income countries, enable us to report on trends that are likely to affect low-income countries in the future.

Further reading and references

This note is designed to be read alongside a second note *What Can Longitudinal Research Tell Us About Children's Life-chances?* (Young Lives, 2015).

Kathy Attawell (2003) *International Longitudinal Research on Childhood Poverty: Practical Guidelines and Lessons Learned from Young Lives*, Working Paper 11, Young Lives: Oxford.

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