

Putting Children at the Centre of Poverty Debates



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As a study of poverty during childhood, Young Lives focuses on children and their experiences of poverty in order to extend understanding of this critical period of the life course. Children's well-being and life chances are, however, interdependent with those of their parents and carers and the communities in which they reside, so Young Lives also considers household and community circumstances as central to child well-being. Additionally, the impacts of poverty have to be assessed in terms of other forms of risk to children, such as environmental hazards or ill-health that are often a cause of, or exacerbated by, material lack.

Poverty is best understood as a multidimensional concept – there are different, interacting elements which shape the extent and the impacts of poverty on children as they develop. The process of child development is also multifaceted, involving the interaction of different developmental domains (for example biological, cognitive, emotional and social), so that anything that happens in one domain may affect the others (Schaffer 1996). Some aspects of children's development are more amenable to external influences than others, and although these are continually subject to change, the foundations of most developmental processes are laid down in early childhood. Different societies have different ideas about children's development and different approaches to child-rearing; hence social and cultural contexts provide the framework for how children learn to think, speak, and behave (Rogoff 2003). In order to capture this complexity, we assess measurable developmental changes, such as weight and physical growth or learning, as well as children's perceptions and subjective well-being, for example their sense of self-efficacy, their aspirations and hopes for the future.

Young Lives is interested in children's development within the context of economic constraint and disparities, and cumulative risk. Both poverty (in terms of absolute want) and inequality (in terms of large gaps between social groups) are important. Clearly for very poor countries where survival continues to be the overriding concern, a policy focus on economic development to increase resources is necessary, but inequality has additional effects, such as social stigma and exclusion (see, for example, Ortiz and Cummings 2011), demonstrating a need to have concern for both within socio-economic development strategies.

Appreciating that the effects of adversity on children are highly influenced by both supportive and destructive elements in the wider environment, our research has been designed to identify not only the factors that impact negatively upon children's well-being but also the personal and collective resources they might draw on. This allows us to identify protective factors alongside risks and to consider personal and group resilience as well as vulnerability. Although there is clear evidence of the damage done to children by hardship and adversity, for some these strains can also facilitate the development of certain competencies, as in the case of children who develop enhanced pro-social skills by caring for younger siblings. Differential outcomes, and reasons for them, are then priority areas for our research.

There are a number of important reasons to focus on children:

- **The incidence of poverty affecting children:** A greater proportion of children face poverty than other age groups, and so policymakers wanting to reduce overall poverty should consider households with children as a priority. UNICEF figures for income poverty suggest that families with children face a higher risk of being income poor than other groups (being concentrated among the poorer sectors in all populations) and, because of this and because of the large number of children and young people in developing countries, they make up about half the world income poor population (UNICEF 2000).
- **Child poverty is a route to tackle broader poverty:** Poverty cycles are perpetuated by structural factors (for example, limited access to formal schooling and other opportunities, lack of market access, etc.) and also by damage done by poverty, for example to children's health or education – and these effects can be transmitted through the domestic cycle and/or across generations. From this perspective, reducing the impacts of poverty on children improves life chances in later life (as adults) and so will have positive effects throughout the life course and into the next generation (UNICEF 2000).
- **Children's particular needs:** Although children live in families, they may experience household poverty differently to other family members. Needs vary at different ages and resources may not be shared equally. Effects may manifest differently in adults and children, boys and girls (perhaps resulting from parental 'investment' decisions), and by birth order and sibling composition (including differences between birth, adopted and step-children). Policymaking that is based on evidence needs to consider all these factors in order to predict and understand the different impacts of policies and programmes on children.
- **The importance of investing during critical periods:** Childhood is a critical phase in the human life-cycle and due to time-sensitive processes of maturation in young humans, the outcomes of child poverty are often especially profound, long-lasting, and may be irreversible (see UNESCO 2006). For example, malnutrition in the early years of children's lives may prevent them from developing essential brain

connections that are necessary for learning throughout life, adversely impacting education and earning potential in later life. Crucially, the time-sensitivities of early childhood are also socially structured, as early cultural learning builds specific cognitive competencies, and participation in early childhood and primary education shapes long-term trajectories. This suggests that policy interventions will yield most social and economic benefit, and be most cost-effective in maximising human potential, if implemented early in children's lives.

- **A particular responsibility for children:** The case for this is most eloquently made within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which reflects consensus at the international level and has a reporting and accountability mechanism through the UN system (see UN 1989). The CRC has been ratified by all but two countries worldwide and sets out States' responsibilities towards children, including the core principles of life, survival and development, non-discrimination, participation, and the best interests of the child.
- **The relative powerlessness of the young:** Children's frequent dependence on older generations means they are generally less able than adults to avoid poverty, less likely to determine the distribution of resources, and less able to protect themselves from adverse consequences.
- **The best interests of the child:** in many cases where households experience poverty, parents make great sacrifices to buffer the effects of poverty on children. However it cannot be assumed that adults, including those close to and responsible for them, will always act in children's best interests, especially in situations of extreme insecurity or scarcity. So, while childhood poverty or destitution is a serious risk in and of itself, it may also increase children's susceptibility to other forms of social risk connected to incapacity, inequality, or the abuse of power.

Conceptualising and measuring poverty experienced by children

Young Lives conceptualises poverty as multidimensional in both its causes and its consequences. Access to resources (financial and other) is at the root of poverty, and there are a number of channels through which poverty may operate and create risks for children.

There is no single definition of poverty. However for the purposes of developing the argument here we quote Peter Townsend's authoritative definition from the late 1970s:

"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong."

Resources therefore need not only to meet basic biological requirements but to be of a sufficient level to ensure individuals can participate to a level deemed generally acceptable within society.

To be useful to policy, concepts need to be translated into measures so that we may understand the scale of a problem, which groups are most effected, and how the situation is changing. Alongside this, more sophisticated techniques, better able to explain causal relationships, are needed to help evaluate the impact of particular changes or interventions. Historically there has been considerable reliance on income-related measures (see Deaton 2006), including within the first Millennium Development Goal to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (UN 2011). While income-based measures have the advantage of providing (at first glance at least) a simple indicator of access to resources, income or consumption data may not be well reported or recorded. In addition, although income (and consequent consumption) provides a key channel through which power over resources is exercised, it is not an outcome (or direct) measure of what that money can then purchase (Ringen 1988).

Recognising these limitations, there have been several methods developed recently to measure poverty in multidimensional ways (see for example Gordon et al. 2003; Alkire and Foster 2009; or the UNICEF global study on child poverty and disparities). These measures seek to encompass a wider range of indicators of poverty, with, for example, the UNICEF work stressing nutrition, safe water, sanitation, health, shelter, education, and access to information as key.

Young Lives uses a range of measures to develop an understanding of different aspects of poverty, and does not propose a specific set of indicators nor a multidimensional aggregate measure. The study has previously drawn attention to diverse factors, such as the adequacy of income, assets and other forms of financial capital to sustain the household; levels of health, education, and skills; the quality of a child's environment (e.g. housing, infrastructure, access to services, personal safety); social connectedness both at a household level and within the wider community; and access to natural resources (Young Lives 2003).

The advantages of multidimensional approaches are that:

- they help to demonstrate the interconnected nature of different aspects of deprivation;
- they analyse when income is (or is not) a good predictor of outcomes important for children; and
- they can be used to summarise an aggregate of change over time in a more holistic and complete way than income measures alone.

However such measures are difficult to construct as they suffer the limitation that the elements and weighting of any given index may be questioned. More importantly, to understand the nature of change or the impact of public policy requires the disaggregation of measures to work out where any given effect may have occurred.

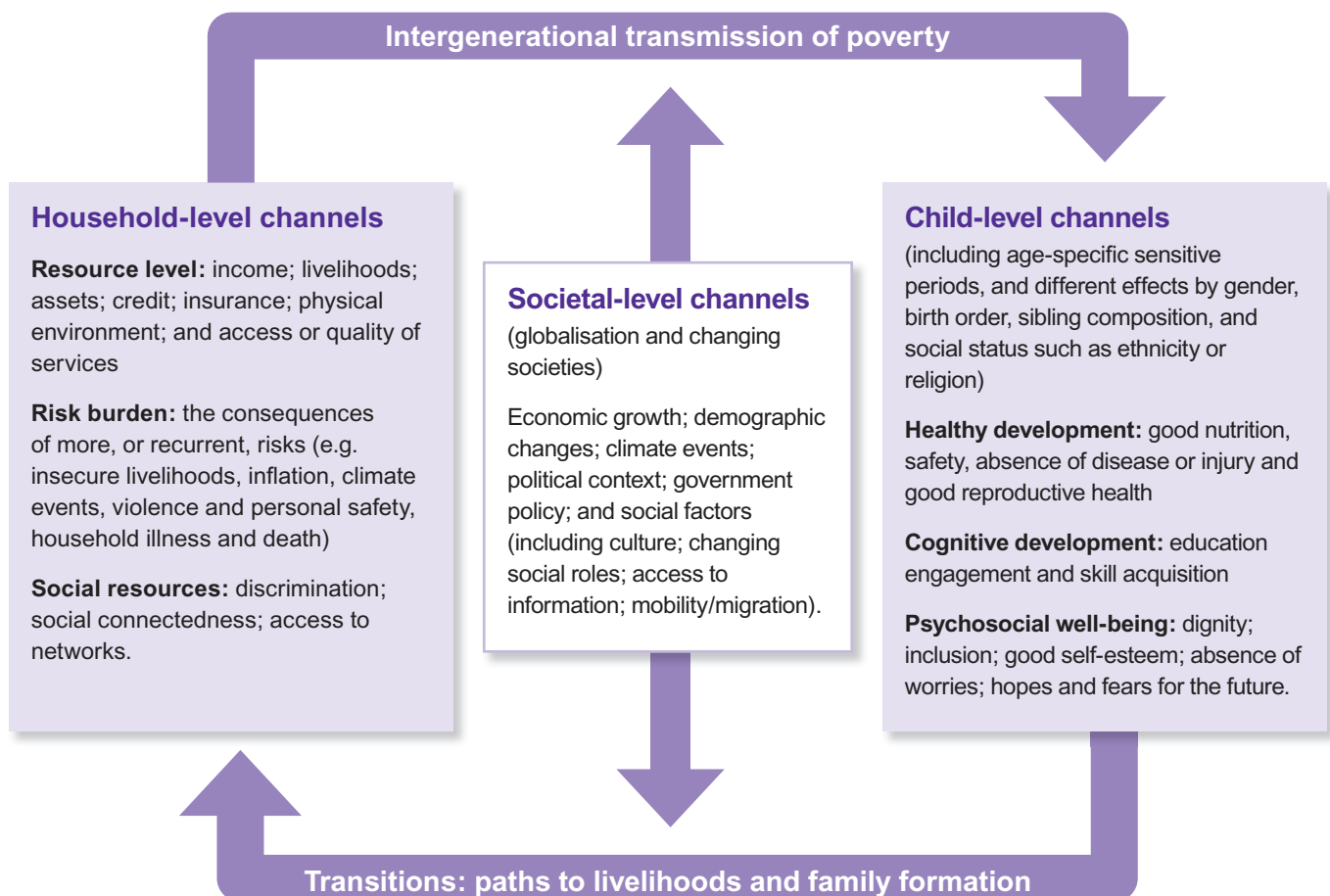
Understanding child poverty and how policy can affect it

As a longitudinal study Young Lives aims to examine the causes of poverty, its consequences for children, as well the life-course and intergenerational implications. This means understanding how different factors overlap – at the household level, the structural or societal level, or in government policy

and programmes – and how they affect different children at different stages in the lifecycle, as well as how children's own actions affect their condition and circumstances.

The model in Figure 1 indicates some of the different channels through which poverty affects children. It shows that both the context of rapidly changing societies and poverty experienced in childhood are likely to affect children and shape their later transitions to adulthood and household formation.

Figure 1. Channels mediating children's well-being



As the diagram shows:

- The analysis of causality includes structural or systemic causes of poverty that operate at the level of entire social groups, as in the case of institutionalised labour market discrimination against people of a particular class, group or ethnic status, and are transmitted across generations. Causes of poverty affecting specific populations or groups may also be situational, as in the case of natural or technological disasters such as drought or industrial accidents. Frequently, people who are poor due to structural disadvantage or discrimination are also prone to situational factors that further exacerbate their poverty.
- Young Lives also traces causes of poverty that are due to the specific circumstances of particular individuals or families. These might include personal crises such as ill-health, death or family separation, all of which can increase susceptibility to economic misfortune, attrition of social networks and other safety nets, or income loss.
- Child poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty occur within the context of wider social and economic development, climate change, and policy interventions. Socio-economic development may lead to new opportunities becoming available to children and young people. Equally, if rapid economic growth and other social change lead some groups to gain more than others, consequent inequalities may make it harder to help children achieve their potential.

■ Policy interventions which, for example, reduce food insecurity, improve health, encourage children to remain in school, or improve economic security can reduce the extent and transmission of disadvantage between generations. Pro-poor growth and the development of more effective social protection measures can also help stimulate some of the trends necessary to reduce risk and increase economic opportunities. However policymakers need to be aware of (and monitor) unintended (adverse) consequences of policy decisions and implementation for children, and therefore to consider trade-offs between the positive and negative consequences of policies for different groups.

In emphasising the many influences in children's lives, it is not our intention to imply that young people are passive recipients or victims of circumstances beyond their control. A crucial feature of the Young Lives conceptualisation of children and childhood is the understanding that even from infancy boys and girls are social actors or agents with a central role in determining their own destiny. This signifies that they have the ability to understand, and potentially to intervene in and influence their own condition and circumstances, as well as the situation of their peers, families and others. The seeming vulnerability of children goes hand in hand with their relative adaptability, and makes for creative adjustment (within and between generations) in the face of changing environmental pressures, opportunities and aspirations, their (and their caregivers') capacities for creative decision taking, physical, psychosocial and cultural reconstruction. This helps explain the extraordinary resilience of many children in many (although by no means all) difficult circumstances.

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