

Young Lives

An international study of childhood poverty

Overall summary findings

Young Lives is a long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in four developing countries – Ethiopia, Peru, India (Andhra Pradesh) and Vietnam – over 15 years. This is the time frame set by the United Nations to assess progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We are using surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being. This will serve to inform the development and implementation of policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

We are following two groups of children in each country: 2000 children who were born in 2001/2 and 1000 children who were born in 1994/5. We have collected data from two rounds of research, in 2002 and 2006/7. These groups provide insights into every phase of childhood.

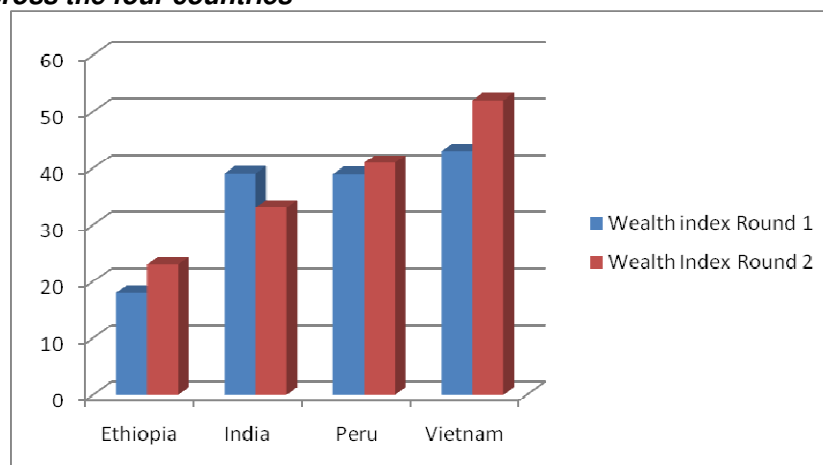
The findings come from the country reports of the second round of quantitative research. At present the research results are still preliminary, but they will be added to by qualitative research over the coming months. This will help to build a detailed picture of what is actually happening to children growing up in different households, communities, and localities in each country.

Findings across the countries

Poverty and intergenerational transmission of poverty

Over the research period, poverty has declined across the world, partly due to strong growth in many developing countries, including Young Lives countries. A relatively large number of Young Lives children are now living in families that have been lifted out of poverty in recent years. However, our research confirms that there are stark inequalities within countries, and in some cases these are increasing. There are also differences between countries when using a 'wealth index', based on a household's access to a basket of standard goods. In Andhra Pradesh, India, this decreased by 5.7% between the two rounds of the Young Lives households, while the other three countries showed an increase in the wealth index.

Wealth index across the four countries



The significance of parental education as a factor in the intergenerational transmission of poverty is clearly demonstrated in all countries, with deprivations experienced by parents during childhood impacting upon their children and their children's children. Poverty is also more likely to persist and even

increase in families with poorly educated parents. In Vietnam, two-thirds of families with maternal education below primary school level were in the bottom 20% of the cohort during the recent round of research, compared with less than half in 2002. Even if economic growth allows households to escape from income poverty, poor parental education will continue to have a negative impact on other child outcomes, such as nutrition.

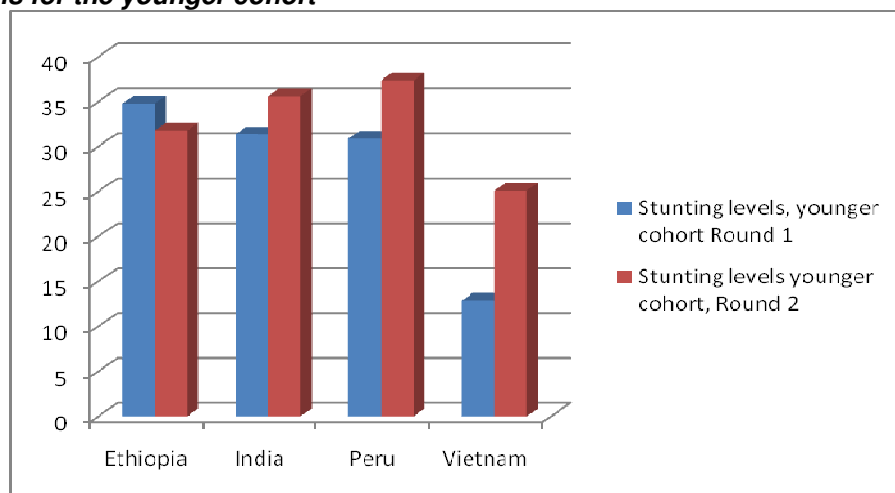
The food price crisis and global inflation is likely to put pressure on living standards in our study countries. Evidence from the survey in all countries shows how sensitive living standards are to such external influences. It is unlikely that those families who have moved out of poverty will be able to withstand these pressures. Other outside factors that have an impact on child poverty include drought and natural disasters. In India, we found that over a third of households in rural areas reported having experienced drought in the four years between 2002 and 2006. In the younger cohort, children had significantly lower height-for-age scores (an indicator of chronic malnutrition), indicating long-term deprivation. Drought also had an impact on the older children, making it more likely that they would seek paid work.

We found systematic evidence of persistent inequality in all four countries by caste/class, ethnicity, and urban/rural residence across all our study countries, despite social and economic change. The greatest gap is between rural and urban areas and between majority and minority ethnic groups. In Vietnam, for example, the community a child is born into is one of the most important determinants of their subsequent well-being. Consumption expenditure of majority households is more than double that of the ethnic minority group. In Andhra Pradesh, those from what the Government calls 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Scheduled Tribes', who are the most disadvantaged groups, also fare worse than the rest of society. Scheduled Tribes, for example, have expenditure levels 1.5 times lower than non-tribal households.

Nutrition

The Young Lives research shows that nutrition levels have not improved as much as poverty levels. This is consistent with the experience of the MDGs on nutrition across the world. Stunting remains a serious problem in all four countries, and strong correlations not just with wealth or income, but also with parental nutritional status and educational background, suggest that progress is bound to be slow. Nevertheless, in Ethiopia, against the usual trend of persistence or even increases in stunting between the ages of 1 and 6, we observed some recovery, suggesting a process of resilience and nutritional catching up of children. Part of the explanation could be that our children were first interviewed during the crisis of 2002, and that some of the nutritional deficiencies observed then were sufficiently temporary to allow a recovery. In the other three countries, stunting has increased between the two rounds among the younger cohort - by 4.2% in India, 6.5% in Peru and 12.2% in Vietnam. This is not unusual, as around the age of 1, children reach a particularly vulnerable period when they are gradually introduced to food eaten with the rest of the family, which often lacks sufficient nutritional quality for a young child.

Stunting levels for the younger cohort



In Peru, a gap in malnutrition rates opens up between children in urban and rural areas during the first months of life and remains relatively constant after that. By 18 months, more than half the rural children are stunted. This suggests that the gap itself is linked to conditions affecting children at a very early stage of their lives. However, urban children appear to catch up with average growth at 4 to 5 years old, perhaps due to better access to public services.

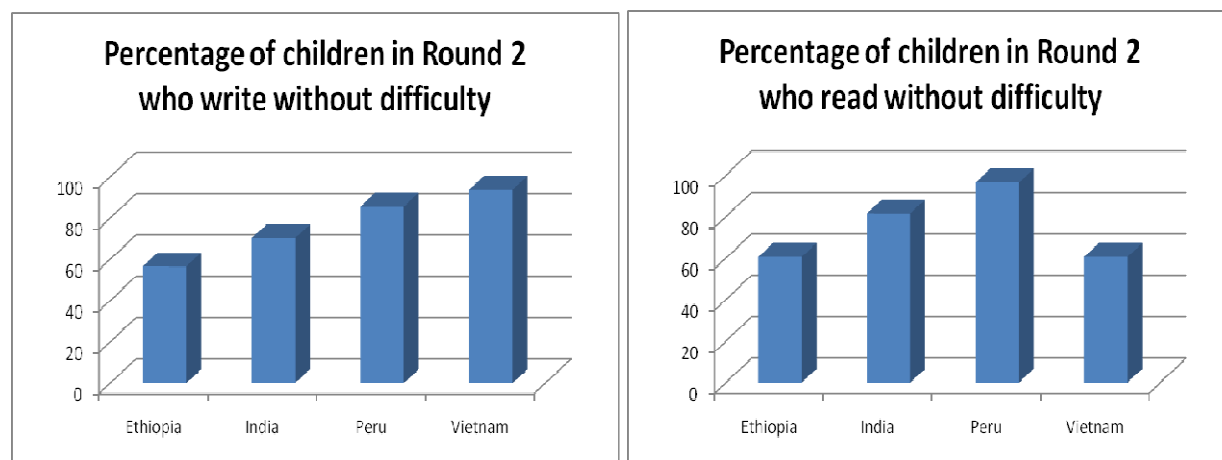
We also find clear evidence that well-designed social protection policies can have a real impact on children. In India, we were able to conduct a unique evaluation of the Government's midday-meal scheme, and we found that it improved nutrition and learning. In Ethiopia, we found that the productive safety net policy improved nutrition. These policies may have other consequences: there is evidence that the cash-for-work and food-for-work programmes increase children's work, especially on family farms.

Access to services

Largely due to government initiatives, access to services such as electricity and sanitation has improved for all four countries. In Peru, it is striking that children who have access to electricity, improved water sources or proper sanitation (predominantly in urban areas) are able to follow a relatively normal growth curve compared with those who do not. This highlights the importance of investing in areas with high malnutrition rates and the difference this may make for severely malnourished children. In Ethiopia, access to electricity and sanitation has improved substantially between the two rounds. This growth is mostly among relatively poor households, indicating that the government's health extension programme has been successful. However, there continue to be stark rural-urban differences. In India, although access to services seems to have improved in rural areas, the urban-rural gap remains stark, with 86% of urban households having access to sanitation in Round 2 compared to just 14% of rural households.

Education

Education in all four countries is once again mediated by inequalities according to rural-urban residence, class/caste, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Maternal education continues to be a strong factor that determines pre-school and school enrolment in all countries. In line with experience across the world, enrolment has been improving, and in line with national data, enrolment rates for our 12-year-old cohort have reached unprecedented levels in all the study countries, with everywhere round 90% or more of this cohort enrolled. Everywhere, educational enrolment remains strongly correlated with wealth and income, which suggests it may well be at risk when a downturn in economic fortunes occurs, such as the current global food price crisis and faltering growth. Furthermore, and especially in Ethiopia and India, the evidence points to serious quality gaps in education, as far too many 12-year olds appear to be unable to master even the most basic literacy skills. In Andhra Pradesh, India, only 70.2% of older children could write without difficulty and 81.6% could read without difficulty. In Ethiopia, the figures are 56.5% and 60.7%. Again, this has implications for children's future prospects and well-being, with the strong likelihood that they will be unable to escape the poverty trap in which their own parents were caught.



Child work

Child work is an issue in the number of Young Lives countries. In Andhra Pradesh, over a fifth of older children in our sample reportedly engage in paid work. The incidence of child labour is much higher than in rural than in urban areas. Child labour is highest among the Scheduled Tribes (30.84%) and lowest among the 'other (mostly higher) castes' (9.3%). In Ethiopia, about 87% of children are engaged in productive activities or household chores, or both. The incidence of children working for pay rises sharply with age and increased somewhat between rounds. In Peru, paid child labour for the older cohort increased from 24% to 51% between rounds. Boys were more likely to be involved in paid activities and girls to work in unpaid domestic chores.

Ethnicity and gender

We have seen that in all four countries, children from minority ethnic or lower caste/class groups fare worse in all aspects of their lives than the majority group. In Vietnam, among the H'Mong, 90% of households belong to the poorest quarter of the sample. Ethnic minority children are more likely to be stunted and less likely to enrol in school and pre-school. In India, disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes and Tribes fared worse than others in all categories. Interestingly, no major differences are emerging between boys and girls, although in Andhra Pradesh, India, initial analysis of data gathered by the Young Lives qualitative research team shows possible gender discrimination in spending, with boys more likely to be sent to private schools.

Subjective well-being

Young Lives is one of the few studies of childhood poverty that assesses children's subjective perceptions of well-being (see, for example, Young Lives Policy Brief 5). We found that 12-year-old children's own subjective well-being was linked to the material wealth of their family, but that the two were not the same thing. Material poverty also led to low self-esteem, shame, perceived exclusion and lower aspirations, which may have increasingly important consequences when these children grow up and move into work and marriage. In Vietnam, children's own perceptions of life satisfaction are clearly affected by absolute poverty in terms of wealth. But household wealth is not the only factor of importance. Urban children, who are better off in terms of material goods, have lower subjective well-being than rural children. This suggests that focusing on material indicators of poverty alone may not be sufficient to fully understand child well-being.

Looking to the future: policy implications

The question of resilience in the face of economic downturn and the food price crisis should become a core theme of the analysis in the next few years of the Young Lives research. The cohorts studied provide insights into every phase of childhood. Over 15 years we are following the younger children from infancy to their mid-teens and the older children through into adulthood, when some will become parents themselves. There are also likely to continue to be differences based on ethnicity, geography, class-caste, gender, parental education etc. When this is matched with information gathered about their parents, we will be able to reveal much about the intergenerational transmission of poverty, how families on the margins move in and out of poverty, and what policies can be instituted to make a real difference to children's lives.

Young Lives is a collaborative partnership of research institutes and government organizations in the four study countries, together with British universities and the international NGO, Save the Children UK. It is coordinated by a team based at the Department of International Development, University of Oxford.

Young Lives is funded by the UK Department for International Development with sub-studies funded by IDRC (Ethiopia), UNICEF (India), Irish Aid (Vietnam) and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Reports from the each country survey from which these findings are drawn, can be downloaded from the website below along with a range of policy briefs, working papers and other publications go into more detail about different areas of our work.

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Young Lives, September 2008

