

Young Lives in Ethiopia: An international study of childhood poverty

Young Lives is a unique long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. It has been tracking the same 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) since 2000, using a combination of different research methods, including asking children and their carers for their own perceptions of well-being.

The two rounds of Young Lives in Ethiopia, in 2002 and 2006, surveyed two groups of children: 1,999 children aged between six and 18 months at the start of the project and 1,000 children aged between 7.5 and 8.5 years old. The children come from 20 sites in the five regions of the country where most of the population lives. In line with the focus on child poverty, there was an emphasis during the selection of poor rural and urban sites. Between the two rounds, there was an attrition rate of 1.33%, which is low compared with other longitudinal studies.

The findings below 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.

The findings in Ethiopia already show that there are differences in children's life chances associated with differences in the sex and age of the child, household wealth, parental education, region, urban-rural location, ethnic group, and religion. In addition, the research was affected by the fact that there was a major drought in 2002, the year of the first Young Lives' survey, while the second survey was conducted during a generally good harvest. The improvements in the lives of the Young Lives' children also reflect this change.

Initial findings

Country context: Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. In the 2007/2008 United Nations Human Development Report, it ranked 169 out of 177 countries, with a life expectancy at birth of only 51.8 years. Most of the population are subsistence farmers. Literacy is low, at 31% for rural and 74% for urban residents. Despite economic growth, and a number of government programmes which have led to improvements in many areas, most of Ethiopia's children continue to live in very difficult circumstances, although there have been advances in the numbers in primary education.

Poverty and wealth: The prosperity of Young Lives' households (measured by wealth and asset indices and by consumption) has increased for both cohorts (now 6 and 12/13 years) between the two rounds of data collection in both rural and urban areas and across all regions except Tigray. For example, the percentage of children from the younger cohort living in households in the lowest wealth and asset index categories decreased in both rural and urban areas from 22% of the total sample to 17%. However, despite three years of relatively good harvests between 2003 and 2005, Young Lives' children are still below the national average for food consumption. Absolute poverty is higher in rural areas, where 85% of both older and younger cohort children live below the nationally defined poverty line, than in urban areas, where the figures are 44% for the younger cohort and 51% for the older cohort. Overall, 69% of the sampled children lived below the national poverty line, compared to 38% of the population nationally. However, while absolute poverty is higher in rural areas, relative poverty is higher in urban areas, suggesting greater inequality in the towns.

Malnutrition and health: Ethiopia has one of the highest malnutrition rates in Africa. We have found high levels of stunting (a measure of chronic malnutrition) and many Young Lives' children are underweight. Within the younger cohort, 31% were classified as 'stunted', with 8% of the children being severely stunted. On a more positive note, both stunting and underweight have declined significantly for the younger cohort, with stunting decreasing from 35% to 31% and the proportion of underweight children from 33% to 24%. This can be attributed to improvements in household wealth and increased access to health services and sanitation. The older cohort saw an increase between rounds in the numbers who were underweight from around 28% to 36%, although for this age group, changes are harder to interpret in terms of actual health implications,

because they are growing so fast. Our analysis shows that girls are less malnourished than boys (a finding that has been replicated in other studies in Ethiopia), while urban children tend to be relatively better off than rural children. Household wealth and levels of parental education have a positive impact on the nutritional status of children.

Access to services and infrastructure: Access to electricity and sanitation facilities for households has improved substantially between the two rounds, with 57% of households now reporting access to sanitation (up from 38%). Most growth in sanitation has been reported by the relatively poorer households, indicating that the government's health extension programme has been successful. However, there continue to be stark rural-urban differences, with only 43% of rural households with access to clean water and toilets compared to 78% of urban households. Similarly, rural access to electricity is low, at just 11%, compared to nearly 90% in urban areas.

Education and child work: Literacy and school enrolment remain a challenge in Ethiopia. Only 38% of the total population are literate, with a large disparity between rural (31%) and urban residents (74% literate), although there have been substantial improvements in primary enrolment. Young Lives also found major differences between urban and rural areas in relation to education. About 52% of children in urban areas have been enrolled in pre-school compared to less than 4% in rural areas. This is affected by education levels of both mothers and fathers. We did not find any differences between boys and girls. For the older cohort, school enrolment increased from 66% to more than 94% between the two rounds, with the biggest increase among the poorest households. However, quantity did not necessarily translate into quality of education – 39% of the same cohort could not read a whole sentence. This would indicate that quality as well as quantity are key policy issues.

In terms of child work, about 87% of children are engaged in productive activities or housekeeping, or both. The incidence of children working for pay rises sharply with age, with almost half of all 5- to 14-year olds being involved in some kind of economic activity in 2001. We found that the incidence of paid work had decreased between rounds and those children with parents with higher levels of education showed the greatest reduction.

Subjective well-being and children's perceptions of poverty: Young Lives is one of the few studies of childhood poverty that accesses children's subjective perceptions of well-being. We found a significant reduction between rounds in the percentage of children who felt that they were treated badly by adults or were treated worse than other children of their age. Controlling for other factors, location was also important; children in urban areas felt worse off compared with those in rural areas. Girls are more positive about their current well-being, and more optimistic about the future well-being than boys. Children in households with more initial wealth, particularly in rural areas, felt better off, as did rural children in male-headed households. Stunted children said they found it hard to talk to other children in school and have lower aspirations than other children.

Looking into the future: policy implications: The third round of the Young Lives Survey, when the younger cohort will be about 9 and the older cohort about 15, will pick up on events, policies and trends between 2006 and 2009, some of which we already know about. For example, the failure of the short *belg* rains in early 2008 particularly affected certain regions. Rapid international food price increases are also having an affect across Ethiopia. High international prices have made it difficult to import food, which has fuelled increases in domestic food prices. This is especially bad news for young children, as any disruption to their nutrition tends to have serious long-term implications, both in terms of growth and stunting and lower educational outcomes, affecting their earning potential in later life. By studying the effect of all these factors and tracking the children over time, we will be able to reveal much about the intergenerational transmission of poverty and the policies that can make a real difference to their lives.

Young Lives is core-funded from 2006-2009 by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), with sub-studies funded by IDRC (in Ethiopia), UNICEF (in India), Irish Aid (in Vietnam) and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

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Young Lives, September 2008