Situating Children In International Development Policy: Challenges Involved In Successful Policy Influencing

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Introduction[i]

Understanding the role of evidence and ideas in shaping policy change has become a topic of increasing interest in international development. Development analysts and practitioners are realising that the non-linear, dynamic nature of policy processes makes evidence-based policy influence or advocacy complex and context-specific (eg, Court *et al*., 2005; McGee and Brock, 2001). Nevertheless, important progress has been made in identifying some of the key prerequisites for bridging policy and research. These include quality evidence, a nuanced understanding of the political context, links between researchers and policy-makers, culturally resonant framing of messages and a more critical intention to produce policy-relevant knowledge (Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Court *et al.*, 2005). There has been less rigorous discussion, however, about the policy-related impacts of such 'policy entrepreneurship'.[ii] Yet, if transnational advocacy is to become both more effective and accountable, careful evaluation and documentation of advocacy initiatives is imperative. As Eade (2002: 91) argues, advocates urgently need to undertake more regular and self-critical evaluation in order to better 'assess the issues upon which they should be advocating, to set their advocacy goals, to plan desired outcomes, and to make more informed judgments about the people, organizations and institutions they should be influencing'.

This paper draws on Keck and Sikkink's (1998) policy impact framework to analyse the role of evidence and ideas in the policy process through the lens of an international policy research project on childhood poverty, Young Lives. Young Lives was explicitly set up to bridge research and policy, and thus provides a useful opportunity to evaluate the relative successes and weaknesses of a cross-country evidence-based advocacy experience. The project offers unique insights in terms of both institutional structure and content. Institutionally, as a partnership between several UK universities, an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), southern research institutes and government partners, it combines professional research skills with those of full-time political analysts and communicators, while simultaneously promoting ownership of the research findings by key government stakeholders. As a 15-year longitudinal study (currently in its sixth year), it addresses the growing call for longer-term investment in fostering networks and capacity-building of southern partners (eg, Carden and Neilson, 2005). In terms of content – advocating on behalf of children living in poverty who are typically voiceless in the policy arena – it also grapples with new challenges in ensuring that development dialogues are more inclusive and participatory.

The paper begins by providing a brief overview of Keck and Sikkink's (1998) policy impact framework. This framework takes into account different stages in the policy cycle, from framing debates and agenda setting, to securing discursive and procedural changes from key policy actors, through to affecting policy and changing behaviour among target actors. The second section applies this fivefold framework to evaluate Young Lives' efforts to mainstream children in poverty policy debates. Given that the four participating Young Lives countries (Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam) are geographically, politically, socio-culturally and developmentally diverse, we seek to tease out broader lessons for advocacy around children's rights. Our conclusion in Section 3

reflects on the particular challenges and insights that child-focused advocacy work raises for international debates on evidence-based policy-making.

1. Knowledge networks and policy impacts: towards an evaluative framework

Whereas theories of 'interest group influence' focus on the extent to which lobbyists are able to influence electoral campaigns, key political appointments, budget decisions and legislative change (LAITS, 2006), analysts interested in the role of ideas in policy change have highlighted the importance of adopting a broader approach that includes the capacity to set new policy agendas and shift discursive practices. Drawing on insights from Foucault's theory of knowledge as power[iii] and Lukes's (1974) argument that power operates by shaping preferences, values and ideologies, there is now a rich body of empirical work that documents the interplay between new knowledge, actor networks and policy change (eg, Steinmo *et al.*, 1992; Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Court and Maxwell, 2006).

Earlier work focused on the importance of historical and cross-country differences in institutional configurations in mediating the impact of ideas on policy. For instance, Weir (1992) focused on the way that new political institutions and/or regimes can channel the flow of ideas and create different sets of incentives for political actors. She showed that, whereas the scope for new ideas to shape labour and social policy were considerable after the 1930s in the USA – giving rise to the New Deal and the War on Poverty – by the late 1970s/early 1980s, the rise of a supply-side, pro-market economic paradigm limited the capacity for new ideas to penetrate employment policy debates in a process she termed 'bounded innovation' (*ibid.*: 189). Others, such as King (1992), have focused on cross-national differences and highlighted the ways in which federal (US) versus centralised (UK) political systems refract new policy ideas – about welfare and work requirements – in very different ways.

More recent work on the knowledge–policy nexus has drawn attention to two distinguishing factors: a) recognition of the need to move beyond the nation-state as the unit of analysis and take account of an increasingly globalised political environment, and b) the growing importance of knowledge or information management. Haas's (1992) concept of 'epistemic communities' – groups of professionals with common theoretical frameworks and technical expertise who seek to secure privileged access to policy debates – has served to capture the growing role of research in transcending national boundaries. Increasingly, international coalitions of professional consultants, researchers and scientists are becoming influential players on the global political stage. For example, development economists who belong to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-sponsored Poverty and Economic Policy Network (PEP) are increasingly relied upon as technical experts in Africa and South Asia (Carden and Neilson, 2005); conservationists belonging to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature played a significant role in ensuring that environmental protection concerns came to be seen as a critical issue in international development (Keck and Sikkink, 1998); and the

Ugandan Debt Network sought to highlight the negative effects of debt on sustainable development (Mbabazi *et al.*, 2005: 160).

Although not specifically addressing linkages between research and policy, the work of Keck and Sikkink (1998) on transnational advocacy networks also offers some important insights about the politics of information. Writing about the rise of global human rights, environmental and women's networks and their role in taking forward the human rights consciousness that was awakened during the 1968 uprisings (in Mexico, North America and Europe), they emphasise the centrality of 'the production, exchange and strategic use of information' *(ibid*: x). They argue that providing alternative sources of information and filtering or interpreting these ideas through a particular set of principles or values, in order to inspire political action, underpin the efficacy of such advocacy (*ibid.*: 300).

> *'This information may seem inconsequential in the face of the economic, political, or military might of other global actors. But by overcoming the deliberate suppression of information that sustains many abuses of power, networks can help reframe international and domestic debates, changing their terms, their sites and the configuration of participants.'*

By focusing on the power of information, this approach encourages a more nuanced evaluation of evidence-based policy influence by taking into account the complexities of the policy process. It encompasses the full policy cycle – from expanding the policy agenda through to policy enforcement. However, Keck and Sikkink (1998) are at pains to emphasise that these are not simply different types of impacts but are also likely to be different stages of impact, which are often mutually reinforcing. Increased attention, shifts in discursive practices and decision-making procedures tend to render governments and international actors 'more vulnerable to the claims that networks raise' (*ibid.*: 26).

1.1 Dimensions of policy impacts

The following section outlines Keck and Sikkink's fivefold framework, drawing on examples from international development policy to illustrate the range of possible policy impacts that advocates may have.

a) Framing debates and getting issues on the political agenda
Drawing attention to new issues that were previously not part of public policy debates is one of the key levers of power that advocacy networks can exercise. Through public communication and awareness-raising initiatives, new ideas can lead to a rethinking of dominant values and policy priorities. For instance, human rights groups such as Amnesty International in the UK have sought to raise awareness of the entrenched problem of violence against women in the family by relabelling it a human rights abuse. The language of human rights abuse lends a new gravity to the problem and also seeks to awaken the general public to the fact that human rights are not just the problem of authoritarian states, but also an issue in their own backyard to which they should not turn a blind eye (Amnesty International, 2004).

b) Encouraging discursive commitments from states and other policy actors
Persuading state and non-state actors to endorse international declarations or conventions or to modify national policy positions in favour of marginalised groups can also represent an important policy influencing step. For example, introducing the language of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) into national debates puts pressure on policy-makers to articulate how their country-specific plans will reach these development targets. It also provides poor, marginalised groups (eg, women, children) and their advocates with a framework and specific measurable goals against which their government's progress can be assessed.

c) Securing procedural change at the international and domestic level
Successful advocacy does not only involve policy outcomes, but also remoulding the process through which policy decisions are made. While procedural changes may not result in an automatic improvement in policy content, they often improve dialogue processes between state and civil society actors, and this can lead to gradual policy reforms over time (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 26). One recent high-profile example in international development has been the inclusion of a grassroots consultation process as a mandatory component of the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) initiative of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although the content of many final strategy papers have been justly criticised for not adequately recognising these multiple perspectives (eg, Heidel, 2005; Oxfam GB, 2004), the initiative has served to open up important new political spaces, to create greater awareness among a broader array of 'counterpublics' about the importance of engagement in national development policy frameworks and also to provide the impetus for a range of new monitoring and evaluating endeavours.[iv]

d) Affecting policy
Changes in policy that are secured – including budget increases, the passage of new legislation or more favourable ministerial policy positions – tend to be viewed as indicators of effective advocacy. For example, the trial and imprisonment of military officials convicted of human rights abuses and the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions in a number of Asian, Latin American and African countries are often cited as evidence of the successful advocacy efforts of human rights organisations. While such policy shifts cannot be equated with policy enforcement, they should not be underestimated, as Haas (2000: 1), using the example of women's rights, emphasises:

> *'While legal advances alone cannot eliminate discrimination against women, laws expanding the rights of women interact with and reinforce broader processes of cultural change. The process by which de jure rights are translated into de facto rights may be frustratingly slow, but the latter is impossible without the former.'*

e) Influencing behaviour change in key actors
Changing behaviour – both at the level of officialdom and at the grassroots level – must be seen as the ultimate goal of evidence-based policy influencing. Are new policies effectively implemented so that they lead to improvements in people's lives? Do policies

that mandate greater awareness of rights actually lead to daily life changes – eg, are women less likely to be subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace? Are minority ethnic group candidates viewed as equals in political elections? However, as the broader literature on behavioural change (especially regarding health interventions) emphasises, this is a complex area and difficult to evaluate, given that the change process is seldom linear (Gerwe, 2000).[v]

2. Policy impacts

This section now employs the Keck and Sikkink framework to evaluate the policy impacts of Young Lives to date. Given that Young Lives is a 15-year longitudinal study with only one completed data round so far,[vi] much of our energy and resources to date have focused on the first type – framing debates and agenda-setting – and thus there is a more detailed discussion of this dimension. Overall, however, the discussion seeks to tease out the challenges faced by an international research project involved in policy influencing as well as those linked to advocating change for children.

To situate our analysis we begin with an overview of key prerequisites of influencing policy, identified within recent academic literature and drawn from our own research.[vii] First, an appreciation of the political context, including formal institutional processes and rules as well as informal political values and practices, is critical for effective communication and identifying the opening and closing of political windows. As Spray (2003: 2) argues, no matter how strong the research, ultimately 'politics rather than research changes policy'.[viii]

Second, to establish credibility in the policy arena and to ensure that ideas for reform are well founded, quality evidence is crucial. Criteria for quality evidence can include methodological rigour, a multi-disciplinary approach, attention to the complex interplay of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that underpin many development issues and even the concept of catalytic validity, which calls for an explicit concern for social transformation. The latter goes beyond the research principle of 'do no harm' and calls for research 'that allow[s] marginalized voices to be heard, to challenge dominant discourses and to open up alternative perspectives and courses of action' (Lather, 1986: 69).

Third, evaluation of why some research ideas revolutionise policy thinking (eg, social capital, sustainable development) and others fail, point to the critical importance of translators and communicators of new ideas (eg, Court and Young, 2005; O'Neill, 2005). Particular attention is paid to the positioning and credibility of the messenger, and because of the complexity of political processes diverse political issues are more effectively communicated by appropriate actors. For example, where channels of communication between domestic actors and the state are precarious, international networks may serve to amplify domestic groups' claims and bring the pressure of international bodies and media attention to bear on domestic politics and thereby prise open new political spaces. In other cases, new ideas championed by northern NGOs may

find much greater cultural resonance if they are communicated through local partners because of strong national discourses (eg, indigenous rights, trade policy impacts). Working as part of a network also serves to hone an individual institution's understanding of different perspectives and to develop greater communication versatility.[ix]

The fourth key ingredient is less tangible but no less important and is concerned with the intent to shape policy. While it is recognised that ideas and new knowledge may percolate into policy circles gradually over time (Weiss, 1980), given the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of the policy process, empirical evidence suggests that researchers who deliberately intend to influence policy debates are more likely to be successful. This is because they are more likely to invest in the critical interpretative task of translating academic research findings into specific, context-appropriate and measurable indicators and policy recommendations required by government officials and donors alike.[x]

2.1 Framing debates and agenda-setting

Creative, culturally palatable and politically feasible framing of issues is a hallmark of effective advocacy (Snow and Benford, 1988). Collective action does not result from a simple conversion of objective socio-economic conditions into protest, but needs to be framed 'around cultural symbols that are selectively chosen from a cultural tool chest' (Tarrow, 1994: 119) and which resonate with broader discourses of 'injustice' employed by both domestic and international advocates of social change. Where evidence involves Southern testimonies or policy proposals, communicating these ideas in ways that resonate with internationally accepted frameworks is especially important if they are to be accorded the necessary gravity in development policy circles. As Eade agues:

> *'We believe that the poor in spite of the supposed proliferation of Southern NGOs do still lack "linguistics", a term used in West Africa which here would translate into conceptual frameworks and policies that are intelligible to the outside world but retain the original meaning. Exploiters have never been limited by language barriers, so why should do-gooders be so limited?* (2002: 16).

One useful example in the context of this paper is the adoption of human rights discourses to evaluate child well-being. 'Child rights' as a discursive practice gained rapid international acceptance during the 1990s owing to the power and urgency of human rights language (Howe, 2003). Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC) was criticised by some for its Western bias, in Africa, for example, government leaders still retained the language of rights in the Charter of African Children but modified the content in order to capture more African-specific understandings of family and community relations (eg, Burr, 2006).

A framing challenge particularly pertinent to research-based advocacy relates to the importance of developing a shared definition of the issue between researchers and policy-makers (Taylor, 2005). If advocates are able to persuade decision-makers to adopt

a common framework to analyse existing evidence, then the likelihood of agreeing on a solution will be significantly enhanced. The aim is 'to make possible the previously unimaginable, by framing problems in such a way that their solution comes to appear inevitable' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 40-41). This is of course critical in an age of information overload, and when many policy-makers are still unlikely to consult academic research papers. A recent UK Cabinet Office survey of 50 key decision-makers in Blair's government – champions of evidence-based policy-making – found that key decision-makers are more likely to consult "their special advisors, experts, think-tanks, lobbyists, professional associations, media, their constituents and consumers" before relying on academic sources (Davies, 2005).

Over the last five years, the three broad policy ideas around which Young Lives' advocacy initiatives have sought to promote engagement have been: a) highlighting linkages between macro-development policies and micro-level impacts on child well-being; b) the importance of mainstreaming children into development debates; and c) fostering an appreciation of the diversity of children's experiences of poverty.

a) Macro–micro policy linkages
Typically, debates on childhood poverty tend to focus on child health, nutrition and education. However, Young Lives has sought to draw attention to the way that children are often more, or as profoundly, affected by macro-economic and poverty reduction policies than by sector-specific education or health policy initiatives. By reframing common assumptions about the underlying causes of children's poverty, Young Lives has sought to gain stakeholder support for adopting a child-sensitive perspective in broader poverty reduction and development policy debates. Let us take three different examples to illustrate this endeavour.

Research on the grassroots impacts of the core economic pillar of Ethiopia's first PRSP – agricultural-led industrial development – highlighted the unintended negative impacts on children. The agricultural extension policy's heavy reliance on subsistence agriculture was shown to result in an increase in children's involvement in work activities, particularly animal herding, to the detriment of their school attendance and/or time available to invest in homework and study (Woldehanna *et al.*, 2005a). Similarly, food- or cash-for-work programmes in the absence of affordable and available childcare services have been found to encourage women's and children's participation at the cost of caring time for children and/or children's education (Woldehanna *et al*, 2005b). In other words, one of Young Lives Ethiopia's key messages has been that without a child-sensitive perspective, household-level poverty reduction strategies may indirectly undermine education sector initiatives to increase child enrolment in schools, thereby threatening the achievement of the MDG for Universal Education for All.

In Peru, Young Lives' analysis of the potential impacts of trade liberalisation on child well-being has served to highlight the need to address the particular vulnerability of marginalised children, within the context of any complementary social protection strategy developed in tandem with the recently approved Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the USA.[xi] Although economic simulations suggest that the much-contested FTA will have

an overall positive impact on Peruvian growth rates, welfare gains and losses are likely to be unequally distributed across the population and among different types of families (with or without children, male- or female-headed, etc). Our research also highlighted the fact that changes in household poverty will have uneven impacts on childhood well-being. In particular, children in jungle, highland and rural households are likely to experience exacerbated poverty because of an increasing demand for their or their mother's labour and/or falling household incomes (Escobal and Ponce, 2006). Whereas public debate in Peru has paid attention mainly to the likely negative impacts on particular sectors (eg, agricultural producers of specific crops such as grain), Young Lives has sought to set a new agenda that argues for more careful social impact analyses of trade that disaggregate different intra-household and intergenerational consequences (Villar *et al.*, 2005).

This concern, to underscore the relevance of poverty alleviation strategies for child well-being, has necessitated a different approach in the work of Young Lives India. Because Andhra Pradesh's development policy has taken seriously the links between development and the feminisation of poverty, major government and donor initiatives are focusing on micro-credit provision to women's groups. Andhra Pradesh now boasts over half a million women's self-help groups with a total of almost 7.5 million members. Thus, Young Lives has sought to investigate the relationship between increased maternal social capital and child well-being. Our findings, however, suggest that positive spillover effects of women's group membership on greater child welfare are not automatic but rather evident only in policy areas where there have been deliberate efforts to tackle child-specific deprivations – such as child labour and child malnutrition (see Galab *et al.*, 2006). This analysis highlights, to policy stakeholders, the importance of developing explicit policies to tackle childhood poverty rather than assuming a synergistic mother–child relationship.

b) Mainstreaming children
In an effort to persuade policy stakeholders that a child-sensitive perspective needs to be systematically adopted in policy debates, Young Lives has used the term 'mainstreaming' from the language of 'gender mainstreaming' prevalent in gender policy circles. Adopting a strategy referred to in the social movement literature as 'frame extension' or 'frame bridging' – ie, modifying a dominant frame to include one's own concerns – we have sought to raise awareness that, just as gender includes topics that go beyond a narrow focus on women's interests, safeguarding children's rights needs to take a more holistic perspective than simply considering the impacts of specific child welfare services. Walby (2005) defines gender mainstreaming as the 'deliberate, planned, intended strategy to transform the gender order throughout society, including organisations, programmes, and projects'. Pais (2002) similarly argues that the child-mainstreaming agenda is equally ambitious, and seeks to involve government and non-governmental actors at international, national and sub-national levels around the agendas of development, humanitarian aid, peace and security.

Admittedly, the concept of gender mainstreaming has come under considerable criticism,[xii] primarily because its discursive popularity. Notwithstanding, gender equality

still remains an elusive goal in many social and political spheres (Walby, 2005).[xiii] Nevertheless, not only does growing evidence suggest that gender mainstreaming approaches have contributed to important advances in development policy, in project evaluations, in the workplace, in the United Nations and other donor agencies (eg, Escott and Punn, 2006; de Waal, 2006), but critiques usually focus on capacity gaps among implementing officials (eg, Shaw, 2002).[xiv] While a dearth of understanding and analytical tools to translate mainstreaming principles into reality clearly represents an important practical issue that requires serious attention and resources, it does not undermine the conceptual power of mainstreaming.

Two important mainstreaming examples from the work of Young Lives Peru serve to illustrate the diverse issue areas in which we have sought to modify the framing of major social and political debates using a child-sensitive lens. When Young Lives was established in 2001, a major political issue in Peru involved the findings from the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) which had been set up to uncover and document the political violence (state and guerrilla) between 1980 and 2000. Approximately 13 per cent of the victims were children, especially poor children from rural areas, who suffered forced recruitment, sexual abuse, kidnappings, disappearances, murders, extra-judicial executions, imprisonment and torture. However, relatively little public attention was paid to children's particular vulnerability and experiences. Young Lives therefore sought to highlight this problem through the publication of a report entitled 'Violence against children. Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', presented the official final report on children that had not been included in the widely disseminated abridged edition of the TRC report. The Young Lives publication was introduced by an essay called 'Discrimination, violence and education in Peru: children in the war', written by a renowned historian who worked with the Commission in the analysis of the victims' testimonies. The essay focused on the penetration strategies used by the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) guerrillas in schools to recruit new members for its organisation as well as different ways in which racism and discrimination are expressed in the Peruvian education system, creating resentment and reinforcing patterns of social exclusion.

The second example concerns efforts to mainstream children into Peru's national and regional election campaigns in 2006. Because of the limited visibility of children in political party platforms, Young Lives Peru launched a bus advertising campaign combining some of the key findings of the Young Lives survey and challenging voters to think what their preferred candidates were proposing to do to tackle these problems. Buses covering routes in the more disadvantaged and most populous areas of Lima carried eye-catching photos of poor children with messages to emphasise that children should not be dismissed as they will be tomorrow's voters. An overarching slogan, 'In a few years, children will vote too', was presented alongside one of three challenges to politicians: 'What is your candidate going to do to improve our education? What is your candidate going to do to reduce child malnutrition? What is your candidate going to do to protect us (at school, at home, at streets)?'. For the regional elections, Young Lives collaborated with a broader civil society network initiative led by an umbrella organisation, CIES,[xv] to improve the quality of political debate. Key activities included

collating regionally specific data on children's development indicators, developing policy briefings with policy recommendations to address these specific problems, and presenting these publicly to candidates from three regions (Arequipa, Piura and Cusco) and in press conferences. Situating child-specific policy concerns within broader discourses about the impacts of macro-economic and political issues on families at the micro-level, problems of resource concentration in Lima and regional capitals, and inequalities among and within regions, served to raise the visibility of children in public policy debates.

Although there is perhaps a risk that such initiatives could be seen as interference by an international project in domestic politics, Young Lives Peru's policy engagement approach is not to presume to tell public officials what action they should take but rather to provide a more comprehensive picture of children's realities and to ask critical questions about how the government can better deliver on national and international commitments to children's rights and development.

c) Diversity of children and their experiences of poverty
Comprising 37 per cent of the population in developing countries and 49 per cent in least developed countries (UNICEF, 2005: 12), children are a heterogeneous group living in diverse socio-economic conditions, with distinct needs and concerns. In order to highlight the importance of nuanced, context-specific policy approaches to tackle childhood poverty, one of the key messages we have sought to communicate, particularly through oral testimony and multimedia methods, is the diversity of children's experiences of poverty. Photographic exhibitions documenting children's poverty experiences combined with children's testimonies and sometimes juxtaposed with political leaders' policy promises have served not only as a mirror enabling communities and children to reflect on their own lives, but also as a means of sensitising authorities to their differential needs. These exhibitions have involved professional and amateur photographers as well as Young Lives children and, in Peru in particular, have been displayed in diverse public places – the Peruvian National Congress building, the Ministry of Women and Social Development, embassies in the USA and UK, regional administrative offices, public universities, the streets of Peru, policy stakeholder meetings, in local schools (in Young Lives countries and the UK) and on the BBC website. The quotes in Box 1 below highlight the potential of first-hand testimonies and visual images to contribute to shifting public concern and policy priorities.

Other innovative methods to spotlight children's diverse understandings of poverty have included the establishment of Children's Fora and Young Journalist Clubs in Vietnam. In the Children's Fora local children, with the help of adult facilitators, present their views on community poverty issues, using drama, song, poetry and art to provincial leaders and follow up with interactive dialogues on their key policy concerns with local authorities. These fora resonate with a conceptualisation of knowledge as including not only technical expertise, but also grassroots voices. As Selener (1997) argues:

> *'The inclusion of direct testimony in the development debate can help to make it less of a monologue and more of a dialogue, as people's testimony begins to*

require answers and as their voices force the development establishment to be more accountable for their actions.' (2)

They provide children with a rare opportunity to articulate their own views and to be heard by decision-makers, while government officials have a chance to better comprehend the particular concerns of children and young people (see Pham and Jones, 2005). Young Journalist Clubs are based on a similar principle of providing spaces to children's viewpoints but focus on equipping children with writing and photographic skills to prepare articles which are then broadcast on provincial and national radio and the government's Youth Association monthly magazine (*ibid.*).

Box 1: Testimonies from viewers of Young Lives photo exhibits in Peru

'One thinks that reality is right around the corner but there are images from other regions in the country where poverty is more raw and the impact is more profoundly felt. It is rather shocking for me to see this sort of thing.' (Martin Guarniz, marketing and public relations student, aged 20)

'I think there is a reciprocal relationship between an absence of relevant public policies and civil society apathy. The policies that the state carries out are supposed to reflect our priorities but if society considered childhood poverty an important issue then it would command a larger place on the public agenda….This exhibit makes us face reality and to be more sensitive … it suggests that society gets the state it deserves and the state is a reflection of the citizens it governs.' (Eduaordo Flores, journalism graduate, aged 22)

'These photos make us realise we are not the only ones here. Lima is not Peru – Peru is much larger. Too often we all live in a very centralised, narrow way and we don't even begin to consider what the reality is like in other provinces.' (Oscar Creado, engineering student, aged 18)

'These pictures – that speak by themselves – express well the critical situation in which Peruvian children live. When a country wants to progress, that country needs to take care of its children and looking at these pictures I wonder, what are we doing for our children?' (Congressman Luis Iberico during the exhibition opening in the Peruvian Congress, 2006)

' Poverty and economic misery are simple words that are often repeated simple as abstract concepts. But they have a very real and dramatic face, a face that is sometimes hidden but that has been vividly revealed in this exhibition.' (*el Peruano* daily newspaper, 17 December 2002)

'These beautiful eloquent images cannot be captured in words. Visual language has a compelling immediacy. Our eyes uncover in black and white what daily life is like for many girls and boys in this troubled Peru. Forty-seven images are sufficient to show us this in a well-rounded, dramatic – but not pathetic – non-verbal way.' (*La República* daily newspaper, 3 March 2002).

2.2 Discursive commitments

Encouraging commitments by state and other policy actors to formally include language that recognises the specific situation of particular marginalised groups is a second key stage of policy impact. While recognising that discursive commitments should not be confused with actual policy change, Young Lives regarded securing an explicit recognition of childhood poverty as an analytically distinct phenomenon (as opposed to aggregate household poverty) meriting particular policy attention in the second Ethiopian PRSP as a valuable advocacy achievement. The country's first PRSP had included references to child nutrition, health and education but had not provided any specific analysis of childhood poverty and the need to consider interactions between other poverty alleviation strategies and child-specific deprivations. Equally importantly, our advocacy efforts contributed to the recognition in the second PRSP of the importance of striving not only to achieve the MDGs but also to implement the more holistic, rights-based National Action Plan for Ethiopian Children. While there is a healthy dose of scepticism about the value of PRSPs (eg, Driscoll and Evans, 2005), we would argue that this discursive shift should not be underestimated. To secure this new section in the PRSP document on childhood poverty, we had to engage officials in the Ministry of Finance and Economics in a debate about children, in itself an important awareness-raising tactic. Moreover, given the importance that international financial institutions (IFIs) and donors are attaching to PRSPs, if an issue is not included in the document, in developing country contexts of resource scarcity there is little chance it will be subsequently taken up. In other words, securing a discursive commitment provides a useful launching pad for follow-up policy and monitoring work.

2.3 Procedural change

Bringing about procedural change at the international or domestic level is another important step towards substantive policy change. Here our most successful effort has related to the role of Young Lives Vietnam in participatory poverty policy planning and can be largely attributed to what Keeley and Scoones (2003) term a 'communicative interaction' approach to policy influencing, involving consultative partnerships between civil society and government stakeholders. More specifically, thanks to the close relations that Young Lives forged with provincial officials as a result of the Children's Fora initiative, combined with strong donor and national government networks built up over the life of the project, the Young Lives/Save the Children UK team was invited to play a key co-ordinating role in the 2006-2011 Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) grassroots consultation process. Young Lives used this leverage to persuade the donor–government co-ordinating group to incorporate discussions with children and young people into the consultation process design, and to ensure that children and youth issues were integrated as a cross-cutting issue alongside gender equality and environmental sustainability. In this way the voice of children and young people were incorporated into a nationwide policy process, thus broadening concepts of participation and grassroots democracy.

2.4 Affecting policy

Being able to demonstrate a direct line between research and policy change (either a policy reform or the introduction of a new policy) is difficult (McGee and Brock, 2001). This is particularly the case in the world of international development where part of our struggle has been to persuade decision-makers that childhood poverty should be viewed as an important policy area in its own right and does not automatically follow from measures to increase macro-economic growth, alleviate household poverty or combat the feminisation of poverty. We can, however, point to one important success case regarding research – policy linkages around *wawawasis* – a government-subsidised community-run childcare programme in poor indigenous regions of Peru. At the end of 2003 Young Lives Peru presented to the Ministry of Economy a video documentary on childcare issues in poor Andean communities, which was instrumental in bringing about a 70 per cent budget increase for the project. The key contribution of the documentary was to highlight the positive impact that a relatively inexpensive public policy initiative could have in terms of a) access and quality of childcare services, b) facilitating mothers' opportunities to enter into the paid workforce without having to rely on older children (especially daughters) at the cost of the latter's education, and c) generating employment for some community women (the care providers at the *wawawasi* centres). Whereas the project's core funding at the time came from the Inter-American Development Bank, as the Program Director, Carmen Vasquez, pointed out: 'The video provided an external view of the programme which strengthened arguments about its value internally and the importance of scaling up coverage. For us the video was decisive in our lobbying efforts with the Ministry of Economy and persuading the minister's advisers. Since 2005 the Ministry has provided 100 per cent of the project's budget. This policy achievement was particularly successful not only when contrasted with the fate of similar social programmes at the same time (a number of which were discontinued or faced funding cuts) but also because it underscored the value of a less standardised and more regionally targeted policy design model.

This approach nevertheless does present some dilemmas for an advocacy project such as Young Lives. There is always the risk that endorsing a particular social programme could be seen as social policy being driven by a well-resourced international project. However, the policy engagement strategy behind the *wawawasis* video project was not to advocate that this programme should be prioritised over other child-related social policy initiatives but rather to frame it as a positive example of how a social programme could have positive impacts for multiple family members. These include freeing older (especially) girl children from daycare of siblings, facilitating women's income-generating opportunities and ensuring that younger children have better quality and reliability of care. Although the Ministry of Women and Social Development subsequently used the video documentary to support a specific initiative for more funding, tools such as this can always be utilised to justify particular political or policy projects over which the originators have no control. However, the utility of this policy-influencing strategy lies in being able to highlight the multiple but less obvious spillover effects for children of different ages and care-givers of a childcare programme such as *wawawasis*.

2.5 Influencing behaviour change in target actors

Policies – at least, effective ones – provide new (dis)incentive structures for social actors to reorient their behaviour. However, there is often a disjuncture between policy content and its implementation in practice, owing to a variety of factors, including resource constraints, government officials' and/or service providers' capacity limitations, insufficient political will and weak public conscientisation (eg, Scott, 1997). Mindful of the instability of political institutions, capacity limitations among public officials (especially because of frequent turnover) and the particularly critical role that the media plays in shaping public attitudes and behaviours in the Peruvian context (Pereznieto et al., forthcoming), Young Lives has implemented an innovative community radio project aimed at directly influencing public attitudes and behaviours. This advocacy programme facilitates access to useful information about parenting practices in order to improve the quality of the care environment and thus the well-being of children living in impoverished communities. A core objective is to tackle issues of social exclusion by addressing the dearth of easily understood and applied information for low-income adult populations – which include many people for whom Spanish is a second language – about child-rearing, early education and the availability of public services and social programs in a context of poverty. Drawing on Young Lives research findings as well as complementary secondary sources, the project designs and broadcasts short radio programmes on national and community-specific radio channels. The testimonies in Box 2 provide examples of the reactions of participants in focus group discussions organised to evaluate the first phase of the programme. Together they suggest that an audio format of communication that is integrated into people's everyday lives (ie, a five-minute radio slot that is repeated throughout the day) can have an important impact on attitudinal and behavioural change.

Box 2: Community radio programme listeners' evaluations

'What's important is to pick up the message and then pass it on from person to person.' (Maria, focus group for age range 25–39 years)

'It's addressed to everyone … these messages stay with you once you become a parent.' (Héctor, focus group for age range 25–39 years)

'These messages should be provided by the State … but still what's important is not who communicates these ideas but rather that it actually gets done … The State should provide us with these types of messages because it is responsible for all of us, responsible for educating the people.' (Carlos, focus group for age range 25–39 years)

'I would like a copy of all the messages … to read every day and to hand out to all my people.' (Alejandra, focus group for age range 25–39 years)

3. Conclusions and future challenges

Disaggregating policy impacts into different types and stages facilitates a more nuanced assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of research-based advocacy. In the case of the Young Lives project, it has served to highlight successes in framing new debates on childhood poverty, securing child-related discursive commitments from state actors and changing policy processes (particularly to ensure greater participation of children, young people and their advocates). By the same token, it has also revealed the project's more limited success to date in affecting specific policy changes and behavioural change. This is perhaps not surprising, given resource limitations and the longitudinal nature of Young Lives, ie, the project's real value will be realised only after multiple rounds of data collection (Harpham *et al.*, 2002).

An additional strength of Keck and Sikkink's staged framework borne out by our analysis is its emphasis on the cumulative, interactive relationship between different policy impact dimensions, suggesting that evidence-based advocacy approaches – particularly working in complex cross-cultural contexts – necessitate a longer time horizon. This is no doubt particularly pertinent given that in all our project countries civil society organisations and networks are in a fledgling stage and policy advocacy is still a new enterprise. The challenge now is to build on the impacts in the first three impact dimensions – agenda-setting, discursive and procedural changes – in order to ensure that child-focused development policies are developed and effectively implemented at the international, national and sub-national levels. The research-policy community, however, still has only a limited understanding of what steps or elements are the most likely to facilitate such positive spillover effects. We therefore conclude our paper with a set of future research concerns with broader relevance to development policy advocacy initiates.

The first set of questions relates to the interplay between cultural and politics, and how this mediates the impact of research-based evidence. An underlying concern in Young Lives has been the difficulty faced in getting 'children' and 'childhood' on to the development agenda in diverse political contexts. Our experiences to date suggest that we need to do a better job of systematically unpacking cultural-specific understandings of the core cultural concepts we are seeking to engage with (eg, 'childhood', 'family', 'work') and how these are subject to competing interpretations and re-interpretations in societies undergoing rapid social, political, economic and demographic transitions. Even if we are committed to influencing policy so that universal minimum standards are met (as is the case with rights-based approaches to development), it is critical that we develop an in-depth understanding of the complex web of meaning that surrounds our issue of choice, if we are to develop effective culturally resonant discursive tactics and communication strategies. It may also be the case that rather than aiming to persuade others of the value of our specific interpretative lens, a useful role for advocates may be that of facilitator, whereby local policy and civil society actors are empowered to develop their own frameworks that enable them to make sense of their particular historico-cultural context. For example, in order not to be seen as yet another 'special interest group', public sector officials working on child-related issues need to be empowered to develop a convincing framework about the importance of tackling childhood poverty so as to persuade more

powerful government agencies (especially ministries of finance/economy and planning) of the need to mainstream children's issues across the policy spectrum and to allocate corresponding resources. A key challenge will be, of course, how best to monitor the efficacy of such cultural engagement and communications work, especially as the impacts are likely to be diffuse and non-immediate.

A second set of concerns relates to the importance of furthering understanding on the combination and sequencing of the prerequisites for policy influencing that we identified – policy context, quality evidence, networks and intent – which best enables us to move beyond agenda-setting, discursive and procedural changes, to eventual shifts in policy content and behaviours. In order to do this there is a need for comparative analysis of the types of institutional/organisational models that best facilitate such synergies, as well as a more detailed assessment of the capacity-strengthening (and related funding) challenges entailed in forging cross-institutional and cross-cultural partnerships or networks.[xvi]

Lastly, given some of the tensions around power and resource imbalances that we have identified in our experience of bridging policy and research in cross-cultural contexts, a final question relates to whether there is a need to develop ethical guidelines for policy engagement. If we are to take seriously the challenge to embed the concept of catalytic validity (ie, valuing new knowledge on the basis of its potential for social transformation) in development research, then such guidelines may constitute a helpful starting point to encourage policy advocacy projects to think through, in a more systematic way, dilemmas relating to the fine line between policy-influencing and policy interference.

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[i] The authors wrote this paper while they were part of the Young Lives project. Rachel Marcus and Caroline Harper provided insightful comments but all errors and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone.

[ii] Policy entrepreneurs are actors (either close to or in government) who seek to communicate new ideas to influence policy decisions.

[iii] Foucault (1980) argued that belief systems derive their power as they become associated with common knowledge, and facilitate a distinction between what is right and wrong, normal and deviant. Within a particular belief system – or discourse – certain views, thoughts or actions become unthinkable.

[iv] See Fraser's (1992) discussion of the importance of working towards an inclusive public sphere. 'In stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public' (122).

[v] The stages – pre-contemplation (where an individual is not aware that a behaviour is problematic), contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance (working to prevent relapse and embedding changes in daily routines) – are best seen 'as a set of dynamically interacting components through which the individual will likely cycle a number of times before achieving sustained behavior change' (DiClemente *et al.*, 1991). Given this dynamism, recent evidence suggests that an integrated model of cognitive (awareness-raising) and action-oriented strategies are usually most effective (Malotte *et al.*, 2000: 362).

[vi] The first round of data collection was undertaken in 2002 and the second round in 2006/7.

[vii] See eg, Court and Young, 2005, Stone and Maxwell, 2005, Jones, 2005, Jones *et al.*, 2005.

[viii] For example, in the context of a weak political party structure such as that in Peru (as evidenced by the high rate of independents winning elections), there is a need to be aware of the major role played by mass media to influence public opinion and to strive to set the agenda through this channel. Moreover, in countries with high levels of exclusion, it is critical that advocacy initiatives develop innovative means to penetrate the cracks in the system with some key messages.

[ix] Working together with research institutes, government organisations and an international NGO, Young Lives partner institutions have learned to appreciate differences derived from divergent professional motivations and incentive structures, as well as diverse disciplinary and ideological frameworks, and to become more flexible in communicating knowledge, including 'translating' disciplinary or institution-specific jargon and approaches. Although investing in this interpretation process slows down the knowledge production process, the resulting products are arguably richer and more versatile as a result.

[x] See Jones *et al.*, 2005.

[xi] The FTA was signed by both governments on 12 April 2006 and approved by the Peruvian Congress on 28 June 2006. It is yet to be approved by the US Congress.

[xii] Shaw (2002), for example, questions whether gender mainstreaming is best viewed as 'constitutionally embedding' gender equality considerations or 'comprehensively marginalizing' them.

[xiii] Although analysts are still struggling to account for this disjuncture, possible reasons include the multi-layered and social embeddedness of cultural values and practices as well as the malleability/adaptability of patriarchy (eg, Verner and Belanger, 2002).

[xiv] Others have suggested that the differences between the high-profile gender mainstreaming and the more limited impacts on gender equality can be linked to the neo-liberal market focus which has critical implications for work and care responsibilities (Shaw, 2002).

[xv] CIES – Consorcio de Investigación Económica y Social, or the Economic and Social Research Consortium, is an umbrella organisation with over 30 institutional members among Peruvian academic, research and governmental institutions, and NGOs.

[xvi] Carden and Nielson (2005: 153) emphasise that the 'generate research, assess findings and then fund communication and dissemination work' model of policy influence is inconsistent with a recognition of the policy process as non-linear, multiple and dynamic in nature. Instead, there is a need for more strategic longer-term investments, which would allow for greater synergies among partners and capacity-strengthening initiatives that facilitate the uptake of new knowledge.