

THE ETHICS OF RESEARCH RECIPROCITY:

Making children's
voices heard in
poverty reduction
policy-making in
Vietnam

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Preface

This paper is one of a series of working papers published by the Young Lives project, an innovative longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh state), Peru and Vietnam. Between 2002 and 2015, some 2000 children in each country are being tracked and surveyed at 3-4 year intervals from when they are 1 until 14 years of age. Also, 1000 older children in each country are being followed from when they are aged 8 years.

Young Lives is a joint research and policy initiative co-ordinated by an academic consortium (composed of the University of Oxford, the University of Reading, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London South Bank University and the South African Medical Research Council) and Save the Children UK, incorporating both interdisciplinary and North-South collaboration.

Young Lives seeks to:

- Produce long-term data on children and poverty in the four research countries
- Draw on this data to develop a nuanced and comparative understanding of childhood poverty dynamics to inform national policy agendas
- Trace associations between key macro policy trends and child outcomes and use these findings as a basis to advocate for policy choices at macro and meso levels that facilitate the reduction of childhood poverty
- Actively engage with ongoing work on poverty alleviation and reduction, involving stakeholders who may use or be impacted by the research throughout the research design, data collection and analyses, and dissemination stages
- Foster public concern about, and encourage political motivation to act on, childhood poverty issues through its advocacy and media work at both national and international levels.

As a working paper, this document represents work in progress and the authors welcome comments from readers to contribute to further development of these ideas.

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For further information and to download all our publications, visit www.younglives.org.uk

The authors

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“Reciprocity implies give-and-take, a mutual recognition of meaning and power. It operates at two primary points in emancipatory empirical research: the junctures between researcher and researched, and between data and theory” (Lather, 1986: 263).

“Research which involves the collaboration of people, rarely is sustained without a shared purpose, and this shared purpose stems from what understandings people have together developed about what is of value” (Wadsworth, 1998).

I. Introduction

Recently, there has been an increasing degree of reflection in academic circles about the linkages between research, policy analysis and advocacy and the very real challenges that are posed in bridging different professional interests, motivations and discursive strategies (Court *et al.*, 2005). There has also been a growing emphasis in international development circles on consulting poor people about their experiences and opinions of what is needed to improve their well-being, particularly through participatory poverty assessments (Robb, 2002; Turk, 2001). However, there has been relatively little attention in these circles to the importance of reciprocating communities involved in such survey research.¹ This paper addresses this theme through the lens of Young Lives in Vietnam.² The longer-term aim of the project is to bring about improvements in the quality of life of children and their communities by producing evidence-based research results and lobbying for pro-poor and child-friendly policies. However, during the first phase of the project, project participants and partners have raised sensitive questions about reciprocity. Reciprocity is however a much contested concept and there is no single definition.

Cicero once argued that *“There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness [...] all men distrust one forgetful of a benefit”* (quoted in Gouldner, 1960: 161). Both anthropologists and economists agree with his general definition of reciprocity as a basic principle of human interaction but emphasise two different but important dimensions of relevance to this paper. Anthropologists such as Sherry (1983) and Gouldner (1960) highlight the important role reciprocity plays in integrating society. Practices of reciprocity, such as gift-giving, are systems of exchange of goods and services, but the exchange goes beyond a market transaction and is infused with social value. As will be discussed further below, the implications of such a definition compel us to go beyond an understanding of reciprocity as compensating research communities with small monetary payments to offset their labour time. It calls for a more human endeavour based on repaying goodwill to participate in the research with goodwill to ensure that the information collected is in turn usable and meaningful for participants.

Economists by contrast frame reciprocity in terms of game theory and individual rational behaviour. They define it as a situation where wider society benefits from individuals responding to a set of incentives or social norms:

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- 1 Participatory elements of the PRSP process, for example, have been criticised for assuming that real participation will automatically follow from technical donor requirements and for failing to acknowledge the importance of local power dynamics and of the domestic political context in defining participatory outcomes (Piron and Evans, 2004; Rowden and Irama, 2004; O'Malley, 2004).
 - 2 Vietnam is one of four countries, alongside Peru, India (Andhra Pradesh) and Ethiopia, participating in Young Lives, a longitudinal policy-oriented research project on childhood poverty. It is tracking 3000 children in each country over a period of 15 years (2000-2015).

*“Our notion of reciprocity is [...] different from kind or hostile responses in repeated interactions that are solely motivated by future material gains. [...] **the power to enhance collective actions** and to enforce social norms [e.g. to punish free riders] is probably one of the most important consequences of reciprocity”* (Fehr and Gächter, 2000: 1-2; emphasis added).

The emphasis here is on reaping an exponential benefit from actions that go beyond a concern for the immediately material. In the context of research this would therefore suggest that community interaction involves more than mere data collection. If Young Lives research is to contribute to policy change that translates into visible grassroots impacts for children and their households, it will be important to invest in fostering more in-depth and longer-term relationships.

As a result, we have asked ourselves the following three questions:

- How can we inspire and sustain the interest of the communities, local collaborators and project partners in taking part in the project?
- How can we effectively design research and disseminate it to important stakeholders to ensure that research findings and policy recommendations will be translated into pro-poor and child-focused policy?
- Given that most efforts at research reciprocity have focused on adult participants, what are the particular challenges of reciprocity involving child research participants?

In this paper, our aim is twofold. First, we seek to contextualise efforts to develop innovative methods for giving voice to children’s views on poverty in Vietnam within a broader theoretical framework of research ethics and participatory research methods. We hope that this goes some way in bridging the rights-based advocacy approaches of NGOs on the one hand, and researchers working within a quantitative, positivist-oriented framework, on the other. The discussion draws on insights from feminist research methodologies and feminist research ethics, action and participatory research methods, as well as recent work on research with children.

We then use these insights to analyse the development and impact of Children’s Fora — fora where children develop creative presentations to convey their views to policy-makers — and Young Journalist Clubs — groups where children are able to develop writing and photography skills and present their work on national and regional radio and in print media. Cognisant of some of the broader debates about the form and meaning of child participation, we pay particular attention to the development of mechanisms through which children can be empowered to articulate their own perspectives on poverty and solutions to tackle its multiple dimensions. We argue that these initiatives are not only valuable in their own right in that they promote meaningful child participation, but that they can also be seen as an innovative model of child-sensitive research reciprocity.

1.1 Theoretical influences

In order to understand the thinking behind the design and methodology of the Young Lives Vietnam Children’s Fora and Young Journalist Clubs, this section focuses on four key dimensions of social justice-related research ethics, namely the importance of:

- self-reflexivity in the research process,
- reciprocity and dialogue with research participants,

- uncovering marginalised knowledges, and
- rethinking definitions of research design and validity.

a) Thinking critically about power relations between researchers and research participants

Feminist researchers and theorists have played a central role in prompting social scientists to think critically and self-reflexively about positivistic research paradigms, notions of 'objectivity' and 'truth', ownership of research results and the ethics of data collection and reporting (Harding, 1987; Reid, 2004). Whereas traditional research assumed that researchers would make discoveries and the subjects would “somehow make use of what social researchers discover” (Whyte, 1991: 8), feminists argued that researchers needed to think critically about the ways in which their own ideological, cultural and socio-economic positioning might shape their interpretations of supposedly neutral data.

The type of “self-aware” research promoted by this school of thought has particularly important implications for research on children, especially children in developing country contexts as is the case in Young Lives (YL). In order to ensure that the research reflects children’s realities and provides new insights into issues that are of concern to them, their families and communities in Southern contexts it is essential that Northern partners in particular, but also Southern partners involved in collaborative North-South research projects, are mindful of the power relations that inevitably underpin the research process. This includes multiple dimensions of Northern privilege, including professional and educational privilege, as well as the power hierarchies between adult researchers and the children who are “being researched”.

While there are increasing efforts by children’s rights advocates to involve children as active participants in the research process from the inception and design phases (Graue and Walsh, 1998; Wilkinson, 2000), as Robertson (2000) argues, there is also a need to recognise that researchers and communities who are the focus of the research bring very different perspectives, skill sets and interests to the process. Thus, in order to bridge these differences, “maximum reciprocity within the research design provides the key” (p. 311). More specifically, participatory research processes necessitate three distinct but inter-related elements: research, mutual learning/education and action. In particular, it is important that the learning/education process is seen as a “two-way street” and real efforts are made to understand the underlying logic of local communities’ beliefs and practices. As is discussed further below, it is this combination of activities that the Young Lives Children’s Fora in Vietnam prioritise. Moreover, we contend that facilitating children’s participation benefits not only children, but also serves to reciprocate other project partners by providing them with valuable learning opportunities and fostering a more inclusive notion of citizenship.

b) Reciprocity and investing in relationship-building

The notion of reciprocity and investing in relationship-building presents a strong challenge to more positivist notions of “objectivity” and “non-intervention” in research. In particular, while conventional research ethics focus on ensuring that research “subjects” are not harmed and that consent is obtained, reciprocity suggests a more proactive approach to research ethics. Such an approach is in keeping with recent research on the drivers of policy change which emphasises the importance of fostering an interactive communication approach with stakeholders. Because of the non-linear dynamic nature of the policy process, continuous interaction is likely to have a greater impact than simple delivery

of research results (Court *et al.*, 2005). This is particularly the case with longitudinal studies where researchers need to sustain long-term interest in the project and its objectives. Indigenous knowledge expert, Grenier, explained in a recent interview:

“Research is a two-way street. The researcher can’t really expect to go into local communities and just take. If a person is going to do research, something has to be given back. The community has to gain from the research process. Why would someone want to waste their time because local people’s time is valuable. Moreover, before people give their knowledge you usually have to build some friendship. And until that friendship or relationship is built, people may not give you correct knowledge, or accurate knowledge or the real piece of information that is critical to your understanding and a development process” (IDRC, 1999).

While it is true that research often has an indirect impact on policy formation through, what Crewe *et al.* (2005) have termed, “knowledge creep” or the gradual filtering of ideas through to a broader array of policy stakeholders, such arguments often have limited persuasive value among communities whose lives are the focus of research endeavours and who are understandably eager to see more tangible impacts. This is particularly the case in Southern contexts where clientelistic patterns of political interaction are often deeply entrenched. Instead, it is important to follow what Thompson (1991) terms the “dialogic imperative” and provide opportunities for research participants to learn from, and articulate feedback on, the research findings at regular intervals. Given the very different educational levels and backgrounds between researchers and participants in poverty projects, however, we argue that it is also important to think beyond traditional formal presentations of research data and to ascertain what it is that local community participants are interested in learning about, as well as the types of capacity-building that might be necessary in order for them to realistically take advantage of new research-derived insights. Moreover, in some cases, this process may also involve working with local stakeholders to move beyond viewing knowledge as abstract and foster a demand for information.

Developing such creative mechanisms in the case of research on children’s poverty experiences over time is even more challenging as it necessitates maintaining relationships with potential “champions” for children (government agencies and NGOs),³ families and children themselves. Given what child development specialists term children’s “evolving capacities”—i.e. their differential abilities to exercise agency and participate in their communities as they grow older and accumulate more experiences—the nature and intensity of these relationships will also need to grow flexibly. As we argue below, efforts to take the principles of research reciprocity seriously in Vietnam have led to the development of capacity-building on statistical literacy for local policy-makers (so that they can take advantage of Young Lives survey data), education for teachers and children about children’s rights as citizens, and capacity-building for children so that they can better articulate their experiences of poverty orally, in written form and through photography.

c) Uncovering marginalised knowledges

Just as feminist research has sought to uncover the social relations which silence or overlook the lived realities of women and “to access the oft-neglected voices of women and to give presence to their lived experiences” (Reinharz 1992: 4), participatory work and research with children aims to identify children’s unique perspectives and experiences. As Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000: 61) stress: “The reality experienced by children and young people...cannot be fully comprehended by inference and

3 Note that one should not assume that NGOs and government agencies are necessarily going to advocate for children’s interests. In some cases these agencies may in fact ignore or misrepresent children’s interests and needs. However, participatory and reciprocal research processes can help to identify who are best defending children’s own concerns.

assumption”, and only if children’s voices are “uncovered” will policies and programmes be designed in a way that is “responsive and relevant to their concerns and needs” (Boyden and Ennew, 1997: 10).

In this regard, it is crucial that research moves beyond standardised models of “childhood” and seeks to unpack the diversity of children’s experiences, not only in different national contexts but also reflecting the variation within countries. If we are to achieve meaningful policy change for children, it is essential that policy-makers are not limited to dominant Western models of “childhood”, or a standardised national “sociology of childhood”, but are rather conscientised about the rich diversity of children’s experiences depending on their age, gender, ethnicity, etc. As Graue and Walsh (1998: 5) point out:

“In traditional research on children, the context in which the child acts is irrelevant beyond its specifications as a variable in a research design. Indeed, the goal is to standardize the context as much as possible, thus the popularity of the laboratory or laboratory like rooms – the contextless context. ... We suggest that researchers spend less time attempting to develop grand theories and more time learning to portray the richness of children’s lives across the many contexts in which children find themselves.”

d) Rethinking definitions of research design and validity

What implications does a focus on social justice — such as addressing childhood poverty — have for questions of research design and evaluating the validity of research results? Research that is designed to influence policy change is not about generating knowledge for its own sake, but is rather “directed towards understanding something in order to...take action” (Wadsworth, 1998). This suggests that it is crucial that the people who are the focus of the research should be actively involved in providing input into the research design to ensure that research questions are pertinent and sharply focused. This is not to argue that theoretical academic frameworks should be discarded, but that both approaches should be balanced within the research design.

In this regard, Lather argues that we should adopt a new standard of validity to assess research findings based on the extent to which research is transformatory. Dubbed “catalytic validity”, such a test would entail assessing “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, 1986: 272). So, for instance, assessing the validity of research on childhood poverty would evaluate the degree to which local policy stakeholders as well as children and their families have gained a greater understanding of children’s diverse experiences of poverty and are actively aware of the need for children’s perspectives, voices and rights to be integrated into policy decision-making around poverty reduction and development issues. Over the longer-term, it could assess the relevance, creativity and effectiveness of the new actions decided on and the commitment to them (Wadsworth, 1998).

1.2 Advocating for policy change to address childhood poverty in Vietnam

We now turn to an analysis of the rationale and development of child participation in advocacy activities within the YL framework. Within Young Lives in Vietnam children have been seen as important actors in advocacy for a number of reasons. Vietnam was the second country in the world and the first country in the South-East Asia region to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in the early 1990s. Despite strong political will, the implementation of the CRC does not follow a coherent and holistic approach. While the other three core rights of the CRC (survival,

development and protection) have been enhanced, child participation has not been accorded equal emphasis. This lacuna can mostly be explained by a general dearth of understanding about the importance of children's participation (among both adults and children), the traditional and deep-rooted attitude of shaping child-related policies based on adults' experiences and limited skills in working with children. Children's limited participation skills may constitute an additional factor.

In order to address this weakness, in Young Lives Vietnam, children have been given opportunities to express their concerns and those of their families and communities to local policy-makers. Two major forms of child participation have been developed: provincial Children's Fora and Young Journalist Clubs. By involving children in the Young Lives project, the aim is to produce more reliable information about children because no one can understand children and children's needs better than themselves. Moreover, children's voices will constitute a very good reference resource not only for policy-makers and the community, but also for future revisions of the Young Lives surveys and research.

2. Provincial Children's Fora: "Children speak out on poverty"

A forum "Children speak out on poverty" organised at the provincial level in all YL provinces⁴ is an initiative the YL team developed after a series of national children's fora⁵ led by the International Save the Children Alliance in Vietnam.⁶ Like national children's fora, the "Children speak out on poverty" fora aim:

- To create opportunities for children, especially poor children, to meet and share experiences, perspectives and concerns on poverty.
- To create opportunities for policy-makers to listen to children's voices.
- To raise awareness and improve children's knowledge about their rights, especially the right to participate, through teaching them about the CRC and the Vietnamese Law on Protection, Education and Taking Care of Children.
- To set up a network of children's groups and adult facilitators.
- To improve awareness about child participation and to build capacities of the project's partner, Committee for Population, Family and Children (CPFC), in working with children.
- To contribute to the implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Decree which was passed to encourage greater civic involvement in local decision-making and eventually contribute to the future growth of civil society in Vietnam.

In addition, Young Lives' "Children speak out on poverty" fora make several distinctive value-added contributions:

- The fora aim to provide more chances for poor children to articulate their views and aspirations, as other participatory initiatives have tended to be dominated by children with more well-developed communication skills. (As discussed below this is achieved through intensive pre-forum workshops and capacity-building.)
- The fora involved children from different parts of each province. Provincial-level Committee for Population, Family and Children (CPFC) officials selected the sites to ensure a balance of districts and socio-economic conditions. In this way, the fora were able to provide a more representative picture of the multiplicity of children's poverty experiences in the province.
- The YL fora were organised at the provincial rather than the national level. As Vietnam is currently promoting political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation, provincial governments have been given more responsibility in budgeting and decision-making. The fora, therefore, aim to directly influence local policies as children raise issues that are part of the mandate of provincial and local governments. Because of the novelty of the fora, they have generated considerable excitement among policy-makers and child participants alike.

4 The YL project is carried out in five provinces: Lao Cai, Hung Yen, Da Nang, Phu Yen and Ben Tre. They represent a diverse range of geographical, economic and socio-cultural contexts in the country.

5 These include fora where children speak out on topics including HIV/AIDS, child labour, child trafficking, education, etc.

6 In Vietnam, the International Save the Children Alliance consists of SC UK, Sweden, US, Japan and Australia.

2.1 Participants

Five children's groups, totalling approximately 60 children from each province, were selected to take part in the fora based on the following criteria. They had to be:

- i. aged 10-15 years and living in villages or communes across the province;
- ii. from varied family circumstances (poor, non-poor, better-off, etc);
- iii. willing to participate; and
- iv. have a gender and ethnic balance
- v. and include children from the Young Lives' sentinel sites (two of the five groups).

2.2 The organisational process

Formulation of collaborative partnership: The provincial-level CPFC - the YL official partner - collaborated with the provincial Youth Union (a governmental mass organisation that is charged with organising activities for children during their school holidays and which has considerable experience in organising similar fora for children and youth). Co-operation between the CPFC and other relevant provincial agencies such as the People's Committee, Department of Education, Department of Culture and Information, Department of Labour and Social Affairs, provincial media, etc, was also very important to ensure the fora's success.

Children were selected from both YL survey sites and non-survey sites. In the case of YL sites, children were selected from both the eight-year-old cohort and the siblings of children in the one-year-old index cohort.⁷ Two facilitators with experience working with children were selected for each group of children. Most were CPFC staff, teachers or staff of the Vietnam Youth Associations (VYA) at the district level.

Pre-forum activities: Facilitators were given training on the CRC and child participation skills. There was a particular focus on how to effectively encourage children to participate and express their views relating to childhood poverty. After the training course, facilitators developed action plans for their own groups. These included helping children identify their own poverty concerns, developing key policy messages to be conveyed, and role-play practice in order to best express the messages.

Two workshops to share experiences of involvement in the pre-forum activities (including methods, approaches and lessons learned) were organised within two months of pre-forum activities to help facilitators and provincial CPFC monitor and evaluate the initiative. Participants included Young Lives staff, CPFC leaders, monitoring and evaluation experts, children's fora facilitators and child participants.

Official forum: Each forum was organised over a two-day period. On Day 1, each group of children gave presentations on their experiences of poverty in the form of plays, dances, songs and stories. By the end of Day 1, children decided which presentations should be selected to carry forward policy-relevant messages to the forum with officials. On Day 2, children presented their innovative role-plays, the children summarised their overarching policy messages on childhood poverty into formal messages for provincial leaders. The next step involved an hour-long dialogue between the children and local authorities on issues of concern that they had identified, including the importance of better healthcare for the poor, education, and targeted policies that aim to support poor households.

Given that these messages were the culmination of a two-month process of regular meetings between children and fora facilitators, the presentations did not represent the experience of an individual child living in poverty, but were rather a composite picture of the experiences of both children participating in the forum initiative and children who had been interviewed in peer-to-peer child interviews during field trips in other communities (see discussion below). Here, the role of facilitators was very important in providing an opportunity for children from a range of different socio-economic backgrounds to share their experiences and reflect on similarities and differences.

2.3 Initial achievements

a) Children doing advocacy – how realistic is it?

For advocacy to be effective, a wide range of skills is needed. These include skills to advocate and negotiate, skills to draw out key policy messages from the project, and skills to contextualise the messages and link them with broader development policies, etc. Given this complexity, a number of important questions remain about effectively involving children directly in the advocacy process. To discuss these questions, let us take the example of a role-play performed by a group of children in Young Lives' Lao Cai's children's forum.

In the provincial forum in Lao Cai, children designed a role-play that showed how people fall into the poverty trap. It talked about Gia's family where the mother suddenly fell ill, leaving the father as the family's sole breadwinner. Lacking sufficient money for health treatment for his wife and for securing an adequate standard of living for his family, the father turned to alcohol in order to forget the family's hardships. Gia, the oldest boy in the family, had to leave school in order to support his parents and his three younger siblings. Everyday he had to go to the forest to collect wood for sale, but this was a risky endeavour as flooding and landslides are becoming more commonplace due to deforestation.

What lessons can we derive from this case study? Firstly, the role-play was performed by a non-professional group of children who were selected from the community. This helped to lend a sense of authenticity to the story. The play poignantly depicted the ordinary daily life of a child who would have had a better life if the mother had not fallen sick and had had better access to healthcare services. Behind the specific case study of Gia's family is a broader story of poor households that are highly vulnerable. The children wanted to highlight the fact that economic shocks, diseases and accidents that impact on family breadwinners can easily push the whole family into a poverty trap. Their high dependence on natural resources (e.g. forest and river) may further exacerbate this vulnerability given the growing problem in Vietnam of environmental degradation. Without a safety net and emergency support, families like Gia's will find it very difficult to break out of the poverty trap. In this way, the play underscored the direct impact of poverty on children. Today's poor health and low economic status will produce tomorrow's next poor generation.

Secondly, the role-play had a local focus. Gia's story of having to leave school to collect wood for sale can only be found in a mountainous province like Lao Cai, not in other provinces like Hung Yen in the Red River delta area. Because each province has its own typical characteristics, the audience is easily convinced because the play highlights issues happening in their own localities and thereby stimulates their commitment to address the problem. In this way, provincial fora differ significantly from

national fora because they bring local-based evidence to the attention of policy-makers who have the responsibility to improve the situation.

After the role-plays, children were given an opportunity to raise or discuss issues of concern with local leaders. The following are some of the questions and answers from one such dialogue:

- Q. I know that in our province we have a shortage of teachers. How are you addressing this problem?
- A. That is a reality in a province like Lao Cai. The central government has initiated a policy that favours teachers working in highland areas. Those who work there receive 1.5x higher salaries and double the length of annual leave of teachers working in low land areas. Besides this central policy, the provincial government of Lao Cai also created a favourable condition to attract them to work by providing housing for those without a house in the area. So if you want to become a teacher, please pursue it. We will make our best effort to make your dream a reality.
- Q. Children in our village don't have a playground like those from the town. When are we going to be able to have the same playgrounds as our friends in cities and towns?
- A. Providing playgrounds for children is also a central government policy and is also a priority of our provincial government. However, as our province is still facing many difficulties, we can not address the problem quickly. At the moment we are piloting a model of joint contribution in order to build a playground for children. If this works well it will be expanded to other communes such as yours.
- Q. In our commune there are many poor people who are sick but don't have money for health treatment. Do you have a special policy to help them?
- A. You have raised an interesting question. We have provided poor households with a poverty certificate that they can use for free health treatment in public hospitals.

What can we learn from such a dialogue? First, children were able to voice their concerns with policy-makers. Issues like the shortage of teachers, the lack of playgrounds and the inability of poor households to treat serious health problems are all issues that are relevant to their context and are impacting on their lives and those of their friends. Second, many issues raised by the children are on the local policy agenda, suggesting that the fora may serve to reinforce awareness of these problems and lend urgency to the fact that greater commitment is needed to tackle the problems.

However, although the policy-makers responded to all the questions the children posed, their answers were sometimes inadequate or superficial, as illustrated in the example above. For instance, poor households with poverty certificates often lack adequate access to healthcare for various reasons, including the fact that these poverty certificates are only made out to the head of the household rather than all family members. Indeed, the efficacy of these poverty certificates is currently being questioned and debated more broadly in Vietnam. Ideally, children would have been able to raise further questions with policy-makers on these issues based on their observations and experiences. However, children's limited familiarity in engaging in such dialogues and, no doubt, hesitancy to question local policy-makers' authority, led to a far-ranging rather than in-depth conversation focusing on root causes and future actions.

Through the Children's Fora in Lao Cai and Hung Yen, it is clear that children have the capacity to directly participate in the YL project's advocacy. This can be seen as an innovative channel to effectively present and transfer policy messages to policy-makers. Role-plays, stories, photos/pictures of children and by children themselves, will have a greater, more emotional impact on people than any wordy speech by adults. However, it is also clear that future capacity-building efforts with children involved in the fora will need to focus on children's skills at asking follow-up questions to policy-makers and also developing the confidence to speak more openly with figures in authority.

b) Greater interest in child participation at local levels

Both children and policy-makers gave positive feedback on the fora. Children said that the forum was a real opportunity for them to understand more about poverty, to access information, to make friends and share experiences, and to voice their concerns to policy-makers, while the Committee for Population, Family and Children (CPFC) and provincial leaders welcomed this innovation as an effective and interesting channel to listen to children's voices and promote children's participation.

"I have not previously participated in any activities like the forum. I would like to be involved in other activities of the project" (a child from Hope group, An Thi District, Hung Yen province).

"Pre-forum activities were very useful for me. Now I understood more about how poverty impacts on families and on children's lives. After the forum, I changed my behaviors in daily life, for example, saving more to help poor children" (Pham Huy Thach, a child forum participant from Tuoi Hoa group, Van Giang District, Hung Yen province).

"The forum is a good chance to formally talk with children and to understand children's concerns", the head of Hung Yen CPFC said (personal communication).

"The forum was a real opportunity for local authorities to listen to children's voices, then to make policies more pro-child", a Hung Yen newspaper said.

"Many thanks to the Young Lives project. Children liked this event very much. During the forum children spoke out on their hopes and concerns. They improved their knowledge" (an official from CPFC, Hung Yen).

"At first I was very worried because children might come up with something politically sensitive that may damage the relationship between us and the provincial authorities. Now I feel relieved and want to hold another child participation event because I learnt that many issues children raised are not new but are of particular concern to them, and thus stronger efforts are needed to address these concerns" (Head of CPFC, Lai Cai province).

"Such an activity should be encouraged. I think it is very interesting" (Vice chairman of Lao Cai provincial People's Committee).

These positive comments from children and adults notwithstanding, there is still considerable room for improvement. Because children are reflecting on problems that are part of their daily lives, they are often able to offer fresh insights into how broader development issues directly impact on them. However, in order to have an impact on policy dialogues with leaders, the fora need to work towards equipping children with the skills and knowledge to contextualise these micro-level problems within

the developments taking place at the commune and provincial levels in order to better reflect on how their local situation could best be ameliorated. Children also need to be given the opportunity to develop more skills to negotiate with, and seek more comprehensive explanations from, adults and policy-makers, as well as the confidence to provide feedback to policy-makers on how policies are playing out among their own families. This would lead to a more constructive and balanced conversation.

c) Findings on difficulties facing children

In order to identify the key issues facing children living in poverty in the province, a two-step process was undertaken. Children were first asked to list the difficulties they, their families and communities were facing. During this stage, children were encouraged to conduct peer-to-peer interviews with other children in order to get a deeper understanding of issues the children thought were of most concern. They were also provided with cameras and basic photography training in order to capture visual images of children's poverty experiences. This initiative reinforced the view that children are able to participate in research on, and with, children if they are given the opportunity and receive sufficient support from adult facilitators.

In the second stage of the process, each group of children was asked to select three top priority issues which local leaders should address; this led to very animated discussions. With an emphasis on proposing actions for social change, children were encouraged to discuss the root causes of the problems they had identified. The following issues were identified in different Young Lives' provinces:

In Ben Tre province:

Education: Drop-out rates and potential drop-outs because education is undervalued by parents, especially in the coastal areas.

Health: Healthcare and treatment for poor households in case of serious diseases.

Poverty: Lack of food and clothes among the poorest children.

- Children working in factories (e.g. coconut-related products) which involve hazardous conditions.
- Lack of playgrounds which result in children playing dangerous games such as bathing in rivers and canals and scaling trees to pick coconuts.
- Polluted water sources which leads to serious health problems in their communities.

In Phu Yen province:

- *Child migration* to Tuy Hoa town in Phu Yen province or to Ho Chi Minh city to become involved in activities such as lottery ticket selling or shoe polishing.
- *Dropping out* of school at lower secondary level (12-15 years) to work in sea fishing (for boy children) and to get married (for girl children).
- Lack of playgrounds.

In Lao Cai province:

- *Dropping out* of school to support families.
- *Discrimination* against poor and working children.
- *Healthcare* burden is a root cause of all family difficulties.
- *Harmful traditions* such as men's over-consumption of local alcohol and reliance on traditional healers for health treatment.

In Hung Yen province:

- *Child migration* to Hanoi.
- *Son preference* which leads to greater burdens for women and girl children.
- *Insufficient parental care* and children becoming household heads due to parents' migration to Hanoi.

In Da Nang city:

- *High cost of education* and pressure to be sent to special schools for talented students.
- *Intensive learning* leaving no time for leisure.
- *Children working in hazardous environments* such as garbage collection and rock breaking or in small factories and trade villages.
- Polluted air.

d) National impact of Young Lives

It is still too early to evaluate the impact of the YL provincial fora on policy at the national level. However, some participants from the children's fora were also involved in a national workshop organised in Hung Yen province. The workshop focused on social policies to tackle childhood poverty and was organised jointly by the National Assembly's Committee of Social Affairs and Save the Children UK. The participants included members of the National Assembly and the provincial People's Councils⁸ from more than 20 provinces. In this workshop, two groups of children who had taken part in the Hung Yen "Children speak out on poverty" forum were invited to perform their role-plays. Son preference and child migration to Hanoi are among the biggest issues facing poor children in this province and were well captured by children through their role-plays. These plays were very moving because they depicted the real situation facing children in Hung Yen province. Indeed, the chair of the workshop, the Parliamentary Social Affairs Committee head, made the following remarks as she closed the conference:

'We are very sorry that we could not perform our task well leading to the abandonment of a number of poor children. They were put in a difficult position without proper care and support of parents and society. It is our mistake, not yours.'

That the role-plays performed by children raised issues that touched policy-makers, suggests that this is a good beginning for more inclusive, child-sensitive national-level policy-making. It also contributes to identifying themes for YL researchers to study further in order to inform more detailed and context-appropriate policy solutions. In this way, these participatory initiatives could become an integrated part of the research and advocacy process rather than parallel events.

8 People's Councils are legislative bodies while People's Committees are the agency responsible for implementing policies.

3. Young Journalists' Club (YJC)

The Young Journalists' Club (YJC) is a nationwide children's programme which is jointly implemented by Voice of Vietnam and the Youth Union. Its overall aim is to strengthen the implementation of the CRC, particularly children's right to participation. Through participating in club activities, children have an opportunity to express their concerns and aspirations which are then broadcast by Voice of Vietnam on two children's radio programmes – “*A Close Friend of The Child*” (broadcast every Tuesday) and “*The Forum of Childhood Aspirations*” (broadcast every Thursday) – and via a monthly newsletter, “*Voice of Children*”. YJC is a forum for children to convey child-related messages to policy-makers, social workers and other stakeholders who play a vital role in changing their lives. Children's messages are expressed through their articles, pictures and photos of the life experiences of children and their families. Thus far, the YJC has been established in 16 provinces.

The initial idea of establishing a Young Journalist Club originated from a proposal by children in Hung Yen after the Young Lives forum in that province. Children expressed their wish to have a children's dissemination group on the CRC and on societal issues such as HIV/AIDS, crop loss, natural disasters, etc. With a common advocacy mandate, the YL team discussed with Voice of Vietnam (VOV) representatives the expansion of the YJC to other YL provinces. It was agreed that the YJC model would be established in Lao Cai, Hung Yen, Phu Yen and Ben Tre provinces, and be strengthened in Da Nang city where a YJC already existed. These YL YJC would be able to tap into national technical support provided by VOV and the Youth Union.

Like other Young Journalist Clubs under VOV's framework, Young Lives' YJC aim to:

- Create opportunities for children, especially poor children, to express their opinions about their lives through articles and photos.
- Create more opportunities for policy-makers to listen to children's voices.
- Raise awareness and improve children's knowledge about their rights, especially the right to participation.
- Set up a network of children's groups who will participate in YL fora and other project activities.
- Improve awareness of child participation and build the capacities of the project's partner (CPFC) in working with children.

However, in addition to these common objectives, Young Lives' YJCs are distinctive from other VOV clubs in the following ways:

- They were conceived as part of a broader long-term advocacy strategy on childhood poverty to enrich the dissemination of messages derived from the Young Lives' quantitative analysis. Articles by children are published in VOV's national “*Voice of Children*” magazine and also broadcast through provincial media, both of which reach a large audience. In the future, it is hoped that these children will become involved as potential young researchers in YL research activities.
- As Young Lives is a project on childhood poverty, children in the club are guided to focus on poverty-related issues by telling stories and taking photos of their lives, friends and

communities at local levels. In each province, two YJCs were organised – one in a YL site (where, due to over-sampling in the YL project of poor households, most children are poor) and one in a non-YL site (where children tend to be better-off). The rationale was to promote a dialogue among children of diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

- All articles and photos by Young Lives Children will be posted on the Young Lives' website under the “*Voices of Children*” and “*Eyes of Children*” sections.

3.1 The organisational process

Akin to the Children's Fora, a collaborative partnership was again sought in the case of the YJC. Provincial CPFC, the YL official partner, collaborates with the provincial Youth Union, People's Committee, Department of Education, Department of Culture and Information, provincial media school, etc, to ensure that children are given all necessary opportunities to interview leaders and policy-makers, to write articles and have their output such as articles, photos and publications broadcast through provincial media channels.

Children in the age range of 10 to 15 years were selected based on the following criteria: gender balance, inclusion of minority ethnic children and a willingness to participate by children and their families. Children in the YL sites were chosen from the eight-year-old child cohort (children who are now 10+ years old), and from children who are siblings of the one-year-old child cohort. SC UK, in co-operation with VOV and the National Political Institute (Communication and Information Division), conducted a training needs assessment before establishing Young Journalist Clubs to determine children's knowledge levels, as well as their wishes and expectation of the club. Training programmes for writing articles and taking photos were then developed to be appropriate to the knowledge levels and characteristics of children in each province. To ensure that the process is as child-focused as possible a YJC management board composed of participating children was established and provided with training on necessary skills to co-ordinate and manage the club themselves.

3.2 Initial achievements

a) Awareness-raising about childhood poverty from children's perspectives

National radio can clearly play a key role in raising public awareness about societal issues, and given that the “*Program for Children*” of Voice of Vietnam is a programme for and by children, this promises to be a particularly exciting channel to sensitise the public to issues about childhood poverty. All the articles and stories on the programme are by children, and can therefore impress the audience because of their fresh, honest and innovative perspectives.

In addition to these national broadcasts, articles by children in YL sites will mainly be broadcast through provincial media. We consider this to be a very important channel because opinions of local children should first be heard at the local level. Difficulties and issues facing children in Ben Tre and Phu Yen will differ from those living in Da Nang, Hung Yen and Lao Cai. Moreover, given limited broadcasting time on national radio and the increasing number of young journalist clubs nationwide, many interesting articles of YL's journalist clubs might not have an opportunity to be aired through VOV. Therefore, it is also necessary to document all children's articles, post them on the project's website and broadcast as many as possible in the local media.

b) Children's active participation in YJCs and provincial agencies' support

Children were eager to participate in YJCs as demonstrated through the large number of articles sent by children to VOV. Only in March and April of 2005, 126 articles were sent to VOV, of which 16 were broadcast. Similarly, there was widespread support from local authorities for the initiative. In the launching ceremony of YJC in Ben Tre in June 2005, for example, 34 representatives from relevant agencies in the province participated. All the participants from the Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Culture and Information, Farmer Councils, Department of Justice, Department of Labour and Social Affairs, and national radio and TV channels expressed their support and interest in the YJCs.

c) Poverty-focused children's input for VOV's children's programme and monthly newsletter, "*Voice of Children*"

Articles from children in five YL provinces provide useful and interesting input for VOV's children's programme and its monthly newsletter. As the YL provinces span south to north Vietnam, children's articles covered a wide range of issues which helps VOV's children's programme reflect a greater diversity of children's voices nationwide.

4. Conclusion

Let us turn briefly back to the three key questions about research and reciprocity that we posed at the beginning of the paper regarding: 1) the sustainability of relationships with local collaborators and project partners; 2) the challenge of ensuring that research is designed and disseminated in a way that translates into pro-poor and child-focused policy; and 3) the particular challenges of adhering to the principles of research reciprocity when working on a child-focused project.

First, policy and advocacy-focused research projects such as Young Lives need to develop effective communication strategies with local communities to convince them of the importance of knowledge generation and move beyond expectations of immediate, but more superficial, tangible benefits. It is nonetheless important to foster improved relations between children, their families and local decision-makers in order to sustain ongoing community interest in the project. In this regard, developing capacity-building opportunities for project collaborators and partners to make better use of the project's research findings and facilitating fora and media channels for children to voice their views, constitute important models of good research ethics. One of the key challenges, however, will be ensuring the sustainability of these initiatives over the duration of the project. While it is too early to discuss institutionalisation at this juncture, given the longitudinal nature of the Young Lives research we will need to think carefully about how to develop this work over time and integrate it carefully into other dimensions of the research processes in a way that maximises synergies. It will also be particularly important to consider in which ways a multi-year investment in fostering the articulation of children's voices within community decision-making processes can effectively be translated into deeper cultural change. In other words, what processes would facilitate greater community acceptance and buy-in to the concept of children's active citizenship?

Second, our experience to date with Young Lives in Vietnam strongly suggests that opportunities can be created to enable children to have a meaningful say in the formulation of policies and programmes that affect their lives. Initial evaluations of the provincial Children's Fora and the children's journalists' clubs indicates that these initiatives constitute an effective tool to promote children's rights and improve children's status in society, which in turn will serve to raise awareness among policy-makers and the broader community about the need to approach development from a child-sensitive perspective. However, we also realise the importance of not conflating changes in discursive practices about listening to children's views on poverty and solutions to tackle it, with policy change itself. Instead, this will necessitate the development of ongoing and careful monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess whether greater awareness is being transmitted into child-sensitive policy actions. We envisage that this will require a three-pronged strategy. First, as part of Young Lives' policy monitoring work, we are designing a local policy monitoring framework which will involve monitoring changes in child-related policies on an annual basis through a combination of in-depth interviews with key informants and collection of data on key policy impact indicators. Second, children should also take part in this monitoring and evaluation process as it is important for them to discover when and how their ideas are translated into real actions by provincial leaders. Third, it will also be important to in turn ensure that the issues and perspectives raised by children are reflected upon and integrated into the design of Young Lives' future quantitative and qualitative research instruments.

Finally, while it is clear that Young Lives has much to gain from the insights of the literature on participatory research processes and research ethics, implementing the principle of research reciprocity in a project which works with children involves moving beyond conventional methods of providing feedback and dialoguing about the research findings to adult research participants. In particular, it necessitates much more than as a token invitation to a few selected child “spokespersons”. Instead, taking into account children’s different ages, learning styles and motivations, it is necessary to invest in building longer-term relationships with children and their families by inviting their participation in novel and interactive activities which simultaneously provide opportunities for children to develop the skills to articulate their views (verbally, visually and in written form) in a way that is meaningful to them as well as convincing to community and policy leaders. Therefore, it will be important to equip fora facilitators with adequate skills to draw out policy-relevant messages from far-ranging discussions, and for children to understand the links between their own experiences, those of other children from different socio-economic backgrounds and the actions of local leaders.

We also need to take care to explain the value of this work to partners accustomed to working in more conventional research frameworks. In particular, we need to ensure that local leaders are adequately informed of the rationale behind children’s participation, and that they view the fora as partnerships between leaders and communities rather than as a source of threat. There is no doubt that children talking about poverty experiences can be perceived as politically sensitive. Young Lives Vietnam’s experience in Da Nang – where city officials cancelled a planned children’s forum because they argued that the presentations would call into question the region’s efforts to combat poverty (official statistics show that the poverty rate in the city is just 3 per cent) – represents a case in point. This incident taught the project a valuable lesson: it is essential to secure stakeholder buy-in from the outset so that leaders view this type of event as an opportunity to learn from children’s perspective, and to address issues with a real impact at the grassroots level rather than as a threat to their public legitimacy.

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