REFLECTIONS ON YOUNG LIVES 2000-2005:

Bridging research, policy analysis and advocacy to tackle childhood poverty

Nicola Jones

Young Lives
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

REFLECTIONS ON YOUNG LIVES 2000-2005:

Bridging research, policy analysis and advocacy to tackle childhood poverty

Nicola Jones

Young Lives

An International Study of Childhood Poverty

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 2,000 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, 1,000 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 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 inter-disciplinary 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 author welcomes comments from readers to contribute to further development of these ideas.

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

Contents

The Author

Nicola Jones is the Young Lives International Co-ordinator, and is based in Save the Children UK's Policy and Learning Team in London. She can be contacted by email on n.jones@savethechildren.org.uk.

I. Introduction

Poverty research and assessment have attracted considerable international attention and resources over the last decade, as exemplified by international initiatives such as the UN Millennium Development Goals and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) framework. During the same period, a series of UN international conferences and conventions have highlighted and significantly expanded the concept of human rights beyond the civic and political spheres to encompass economic, social and cultural rights (eg Craske and Molyneux, 2002). These dual developments have provided the discursive and political space for researchers and activists to draw attention to the particular marginalisation and deprivation of women, children and indigenous or ethnic minority peoples living in poverty. However, notwithstanding a growing body of research, there is still much to be done with respect to effectively disseminating research results and strengthening relationships between NGOs, research networks and policy practitioners to ensure substantial policy change. Our knowledge of the most effective types of partnership strategies and how these can best be adapted to diverse political, social and cultural contexts, is still very limited.

This paper explores efforts to bridge multi-disciplinary research, policy engagement and practice to improve poor children's life quality in four diverse transforming societies. It draws on Young Lives (2000-2015), an international longitudinal policy-research project on childhood poverty, tracing 12,000 children (8,000 from birth and 4,000 from age eight) in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. Beginning with a discussion about the importance of mapping the policy context, it supports reconceptualising policy-making as a non-linear dynamic process involving multiple actor networks with varying interests and informed by competing policy narratives (local and global). It suggests that opportunities for influencing policy are more varied, but perhaps also narrower and more incremental than conventionally perceived. This is particularly important in under-researched polities at different stages in democratisation, decentralisation, and economic development processes, and that Northern-derived models of advocacy are likely to be context-inappropriate.

The paper then draws on Young Lives (YL) experiences to identify common factors that either contributed to or thwarted evidence-based pro-poor child-focused change.[i] It focuses in particular on three key aspects: partnership and networking, framing of messages and dissemination/communication methodologies. The concluding section reflects on the particular challenges involved when promoting children's (rather than other vulnerable groups') rights, including children's limited voice in the social and political arena, the dearth of state and civil society champions of children's rights, a limited evidence base to establish macro-micro policy linkages, and the tendency for children's issues to be limited to health and education policies.

II. The Challenge of Non-Linear, Dynamic Policy Processes

Quantitative assessment tools

In the world of development policy, where policy-making has historically been assumed to follow a model of rational application of technical expertise, the failure of poverty reduction policies has largely been interpreted as a problem of assumption-based rather than evidence-based policy-making. Premised on the belief that better research tools would lead to superior policies and outcomes, the 1990s/early 2000s saw the creation of multiple poverty assessment initiatives, as well as an array of international development and poverty reduction targets (McGee and Brock, 2001: 4). In order to monitor and potentially hold national and international policy-makers accountable to their official commitments to poverty amelioration, researchers and activists alike recognised the importance of quantifiable indicators and related data collection. Similarly, in the case of children's issues, in order to measure progress on the World Fit for Children goals and the child-related MDGs, specialised quantitative surveys focusing on children and their caregivers, such as UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and DFID's Young Lives, were initiated.

The penchant for quantifiable poverty assessment approaches is understandable in that they help to address important information lacunae concerning the patterning, distribution and identity of those living in poverty. Nevertheless, quantitative surveys are likely to be of limited value in shaping social policy if not contextualised within the complexities of the policy process itself. Platt (2003: 2), in her survey of the interaction between research on child poverty and related social policies in the UK between 1800 and 1950, aptly notes:

> The impacts of research may occur neither at the time of the research, nor in ways that are predictable. The influence of research is not necessarily in the direction in which researchers intend and is mediated by the options available to policy makers at a particular time. [There is a] …need for research to be both radical and relate to its time and place…Its influence will vary with the political complexion of the country and ideological and religious factors.

Because the expected utility of quantitative surveys is premised on a linear model of policy-making involving the rational execution of technically-informed evidence, we should not be surprised that, in isolation, such methodologies are unlikely to have a significant impact on real world policy processes and outcomes. As McGee and Brock (2001: 8) emphasise: "The view that government officials should be convinced of the instrumentality of poverty knowledge illustrates an obscuring of the political and social dynamics which other commentators suggest are at play in the policy process".

Non-linear dynamic policy processes

In trying to account for the complexities of policy formulation and implementation, a newly emerging body of literature on policy processes underscores the importance of reconceptualising policy-making

as a non-linear, dynamic process. Theorists such as Keeley and Scoones (2003: 27-8) argue for a "structuration approach" which combines the insights of three different schools of thought as to what drives policy change:

- political interests derived from actors' structural interests (ie based on their socio-economic or institutional positioning),

- actor agency stemming from an ongoing process of inter-actor negotiation and bargaining, and

- discursive practices (reflecting a Foucauldian understanding of the inter-relationship between power, knowledge and policy).

Attempting a middle ground between policy as a linear process and policy as chaotic and accidental, this approach recognises structural constraints and the difficulties inherent in negotiating the complex and messy dynamics of the policy process, but, nevertheless, leaves room for agency and change:

> Policy approaches are likely to be influenced by dominant policy discourses and narratives, by powerful combinations of political interests and by effective actor-networks…but this should not lead to the conclusion that policy processes inevitably end in impasses. Each discourse, actor-network or policy network involves institutional practices and interactions that are made up of the activities of individuals. At these multiple interfaces there may be "policy spaces" or "room for manoeuvre" to promote alternative approaches to policy (*ibid:* 29).

Of importance here, is the recognition of policy-making as an iterative process. Rather than assuming a simple linear progression from technical evidence to policy design to accurate implementation, the policy processes school instead sees the potential of multiple opportunities to affect change throughout the policy cycle. It argues that policy is shaped significantly by interpretation and practice, and by policy actors from multiple sectors (eg line ministries and departments) and levels of government decision-making (ie central, regional, local) that are involved in implementation. Because of this complexity, however, the impact that any one intervention may have is likely to be comparatively limited in scope.

Different modes of engagement

If we understand the policy environment as an arena with multiple, shifting, but relatively narrow access points, two basic types of interaction are open to those pursuing policy engagement and dissemination strategies. The first can be characterised as "argumentative interaction" - a more critical or combative approach involving strategies to "build alternative actor networks [and …] dislodge dominant positions and their associated networks" (Keeley and Scoones, 2003: 30). Perhaps one of the most striking examples of "argumentative interaction" is that of the radical feminist movement (particularly in the US and Australia) in the 1960s and 1970s. Women activists involved in this movement called into question standard gender roles and advanced a new worldview which conceptualised society as an oppressive patriarchy that uses hierarchical (and often violent) social power to oppress women (and non-dominant men). Instead of working through existing institutions

and channels, they rejected traditional modes of political organising (including socialism and Marxist groups that claimed to stand for human liberation) and organised small community-based consciousness-raising groups to advocate for alternative ways of organising social life (both productive and reproductive) from the grassroots level upwards. They also relied on highly visible public protests in which they sought to politicise "the personal" by calling for example for reproductive freedoms (especially the right to abortion) and the end of double standards around female sexuality, as well as other public appearances (as vividly made by the oft-cited example of the burning of women's bras in public) (Whittier, 1995).

However, while there is clearly a place for challenging extant paradigms that underlie inappropriate policy decisions, proponents of "participatory" or "deliberative democracy" (eg Frazer, 1989; Dryzek, 1994) contend that political change is often more effective and enduring if proponents attempt to foster more participatory forms of governance and decision-making. This second "communicative interaction" approach seeks to build participatory, consultative partnerships involving research networks, community groups and NGOs, and national and local government stakeholders, in which a diversity of values, perspectives and goals are negotiated and reflected (Keeley and Scoones, 2003: 31). Here, the contrasting trajectories of civil society movements in Latin America and East Asia post-authoritarian rule illustrate this point well. Whereas Latin American movements which had emerged in response to brutal military rule in the late 1980s/early 1990s struggled to reorient their approach to suit the new democratic milieu, Korean and Taiwanese activists made a conscious decision to distance themselves from their historically antagonistic stance vis-à-vis the state ("state as target") and to develop a model of "critical engagement" or "partnership with the state" (Kim, 2000; Huang, 2002). The latter model has resulted in impressive gains in legal reforms, political representation and the recognition by governmental agencies of NGOs as key negotiating partners in the development process (Jones, 2006).

The extent to which these policy engagement strategies are available to proponents of change, however, will depend in large part on the specific political and social climate of a given country. In this context, Court *et al.* (2005: 169) raise an important question: "Do countries or organizations with good governance (accountability, transparency and responsiveness) use research more than others?" They suggest that democratic contexts are more likely to involve policy-making processes that are more transparent and accessible to the public, whereas autocratic regimes tend to limit the gathering and communication of evidence and have weak accountability mechanisms (*ibid:* 169-170). However, given the wide variation among democracies (O'Donnell, 2004), I would argue that a more nuanced analysis is needed which incorporates factors ranging from the presence or absence of multi-year national development strategies, to ideologically-driven or populist parties, to the degree of political and fiscal decentralisation. These factors are mapped out in detail in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Assessing the advocacy environment in Southern contexts

Indicator	Source	Implications for advocacy
Type of regime – Democratic or authoritarian?	Court *et al.*, 2005	Democratic governments are more likely to promote transparency and accountability Authoritarian regimes suffer from a lack of accountability but there may still be some political space due to authoritarian leaders' need to create a degree of public legitimacy
Presence of multi-year National Development Plans		Multi-year plans serve as an overarching policy framework whereas in countries that lack long-term strategic planning national policies are more subject to change by executive whims
Is the political decision-making process centralised or diffuse?	Steinmo *et al.*, 1992	Political decision-making will be shaped by: • the number of access and veto points available to influence policy decisions • the level of decentralisation (administrative, political, fiscal)
Is the ruling party ideologically-driven or populist?	Mainwaring and Scully, 1995	Ideologically-driven: • Greater likelihood of policy coherence Populist government: • Decisions likely to be made on basis of perceived popularity
Degree of stability of governments and bureaucratic personnel	Linz and Stepan, 1996	Stability fosters networks and some level of expertise, while frequent turnover hinders relationship-building and accumulated knowledge base
Degree of professionalism among the bureaucracy	Brock *et al.*, 2001	Meritocratic recruitment and promotion may encourage policy champions, but may also limit cross-over of personnel (due to stringent entry, and re-entry, requirements) and exchange of ideas with the NGO and academic sectors In the case of non-competitive entrance, patronage politics is likely to reduce the emergence of policy champions and advocacy allies
Degree of academic and media freedom	Court *et al.*, 2005	Within a democratic polity academics and media personnel can research/report and speak freely, whereas in authoritarian regimes they are more likely to be subject to constraints on topic choice and analyses that critique regime policy decisions
Strength and role(s) of civil society (advocacy, service provision, research)	Tarrow, 1995	In democratic polities, civil society is more likely to be strong and well-organised, and potentially involved in advocacy and research, whereas in authoritarian regimes civil society tends to be weaker and fragmented and limited largely to service provision work
Relative importance of international influences		Donor influence will vary depending on the proportion of their joint contribution to national budgets
Relative openness to international influences	Keck and Sikkink, 1988	Openness to international influences is likely to lead to active involvement in transnational networks and willingness to adopt new advocacy strategies and discourses
Relative novelty of issue		If the marketplace of ideas is already crowded, the ability to influence will be very competitive. By contrast, the issue/approach novel, under-researched and therefore relatively easy to push through

III. Young Lives Practice

Drawing on the wider theoretical points outlined above, I now turn to a discussion of how YL has sought to grapple with the complexities and dynamism of the policy process in different national contexts. This section is therefore concerned with the following questions:

- What kinds of partnership arrangements and networks facilitate policy change?

- How are policy-relevant research messages best framed?

- Which dissemination and communications methods are most effective?

Partnerships and networking to promote policy change

Establishing credibility

A growing body of research suggests that, in addition to rigorous research, the messenger does matter in facilitating the translation of ideas into policy action (Start and Hovland, 2004; Court *et al.*, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, NGOs and donors valued NGO studies, while government officials and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) expressed greater confidence in research that they themselves had commissioned (Court *et al.* 2005: 162).

In order to bridge such biases, Young Lives has paid particular attention to partnership arrangements and networking from the outset. Whereas other longitudinal studies have been conceived primarily as a data resource with policy linkages often developing later and even accidentally (Joshi, 2001), YL was established as a multi-partner project with an explicit emphasis on social/policy change. Significantly, it involves partnerships between Northern and Southern research institutes, an INGO and, in some cases, local NGOs and government partners. The academic consortium has lead responsibility for the data collection and analysis, while Save the Children UK is charged with leading the policy analysis, engagement, advocacy and dissemination aspects of the project.

Securing stakeholder buy-in

In keeping with Keeley and Scoones' (2003) communicative interaction approach to policy influencing, one of the central aims of YL has been to promote government and community buy-in from the outset. Accumulated learning by researchers and activists alike has shown that a sense of government and community "ownership" of a research project is likely to facilitate the acceptance and recognition of the research findings (Pham, 2003; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2005). Accordingly, country-level advisory panels comprised of experts from academia, civil society, INGOs, international donors and government ministries, have been established. These stakeholders are consulted regularly regarding survey design and content, and the discussion of research findings prior to publication. To foster widespread interest in, and engagement with, the project, a public launch of

Phase 1 was organised in each country to discuss the project's aims and solicit input from participants prior to data collection. As Vietnamese Young Lives national co-ordinator Pham Thi Lan notes:

> Holding public consultative meetings before research findings are available is very new in Vietnam and people were puzzled at first. But over the past three years we have seen the fruits of this consultative approach as policy makers and government officials now identify with the project, and having had some input, view it as legitimate (personal correspondence, 2004).

Meetings with regional and local government officials and community leaders have also been held to disseminate results from the first round of data analysis, and to solicit suggestions for information needs and appropriate policy-relevant research foci in the future. While the logistical and organisational burden of regular stakeholder interaction is high compared to traditional modes of research where interaction is typically limited to the compiling of reports and making datasets available, over the *longue durée* it is likely to be more effective because of the iterative nature of the policy process. That is, policy change does not derive from a single decision implemented in a linear fashion, but is an inherently political process and consists of a "web of inter-related decisions" which evolve over the course of policy implementation (Keeley and Scoones, 2003: 4). In this regard,

> …the interface between national governments and the international donor and creditor community is important…, more important still for successful poverty reduction policy are the interfaces [and the construction and use of poverty knowledge in all these spaces] between national governments, civil society and local policy actors (McGee and Brock, 2001: 35).

One potential danger of such an approach, however, is communication or consultation fatigue among policy stakeholders. Although YL has not yet encountered this problem, we are acutely aware that after an initial phase of awareness-raising about the importance of childhood poverty and distinctions between policies that target aggregate household poverty and intra-household impacts, we now need to provide policy-makers with concrete policy-relevant messages in order to sustain our credibility.

Equally important are links with the populations and communities that will be affected by the policies – first and foremost with children, but also with their families, communities and public officials charged with overseeing child-related policies. Particularly in the case of longitudinal studies it is essential to develop and maintain such relationships in order to demonstrate the relevance of the research and acquire the legitimacy to advocate for change. As Lather (1986: 263-272) argues:

> Reciprocity implies give-and-take, a mutual recognition of meaning and power….the process of theory building should be mutually beneficial to researcher and research group participants. [This] "catalytic validity" entails "the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses and energizes participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it".

In the case of working with children, the need for creative methods of working is particularly high. Examples of good practice from Young Lives in this respect include Vietnam's efforts to organise forums for children to voice their experiences and views on poverty policies to local decision-makers, and the development of YL Young Journalists' clubs to facilitate the development of child-friendly print and radio media.

Networking to facilitate direct and indirect impact of research on policy

Participation in policy networks may have a direct or indirect impact on policy outcomes. In the case of Vietnam, for example, involvement in donor/INGO/government national taskforces on poverty and social services directly contributed to policy change. It enabled research findings on the linkages between a dearth of classroom contact hours and education achievement to be fed into debates on education reform within the Ministry of Education and National Assembly Committee on Education. However, the relationship between ideas and policy is frequently non-linear and the value of networking lies instead in the process of what has been termed "enlightenment" (Weiss, 1977 quoted in Court *et al.*, 2005) or "knowledge creep" whereby ideas gradually filter through to a broader array of policy stakeholders (Crewe *et al.*, 2005). For example, in the case of Young Lives in Ethiopia, the importance of addressing children's rights in the PRSP is slowly percolating through to both civil society and Ministry of Finance officials through involvement of YL Save the Children-based staff as well as YL researchers' participation in networks that are seeking to evaluate and monitor the efficacy of the Sustainable Development Poverty Reduction Programme (2002-2005) as a pro-poor development strategy. Such networking has resulted in a general spillover effect, including the incorporation of children's modules in the government's mid-term and final PRSP reviews and the related Participatory Poverty Assessment Exercise 2004-05 (Woldehanna, 2005, personal correspondence). As Court *et al.* (2005) argue, successful cases of translating research into policy change suggest that the researchers, advocates and policy practitioners involved are often just "two handshakes away".

Establishing inter-sectoral partnerships to promote mainstreaming of children's rights

As will be discussed further below, Young Lives is seeking to go beyond narrowly defined "children's issues" such as education and health, and to raise national and international awareness of the importance of considering broad macro-economic and development policies from a child-sensitive perspective. In order to facilitate this, YL is actively seeking to establish linkages not only with child-related "epistemic communities" (groups with expertise on, and shared commitments to, child rights issues), but also organisations involved in broader pro-poor and good governance initiatives. Accordingly, in Peru for example, we are establishing a partnership with *Grupo Propuesta Cuidana and Cuidanos al dia,* two groups involved in broad political and budget transparency initiatives at the national level in order to integrate a child-sensitive budget monitoring component. Rather than embark on a separate child budget monitoring initiative, we expect that our efforts will be more effective and sustainable if we can also foster champions of a child-sensitive approach among civil society actors concerned with general policy and fiscal transparency issues.

Framing of messages

While research findings might raise important policy-relevant issues and point to particular policy solutions, if these findings are to be taken seriously and acted upon by policy practitioners, it is vital that the messages are framed in a way that resonates with a policy actor's worldview and are culturally sensitive (Tarrow, 1995). Accordingly, for instance, in trying to persuade donors and government officials who come from an economics disciplinary background, arguments of "investment" and "human capital development" are likely to be more compelling than those around the fulfilment of

rights, whereas NGO actors and judicial personnel may be more open to approaches that draw on human rights discourses. Young Lives practice to date has identified a number of other factors of success.

First, while research should not be limited to current policy issues only and should also play a role in moving ways of thinking about childhood poverty beyond existing paradigms and introduce new ideas to policy debates, research findings are more likely to be acted upon if they are topical and respond to policy-makers' demands for information. For example, in the context of Andhra Pradesh, because the crisis of agricultural policy is dominating the political stage at present, research findings on the differential impacts of rural livelihood strategies on women and children have a greater likelihood of being addressed than in Peru, for example, where policy debates are primarily centred around issues of political instability and decentralisation. However, in keeping with Keeley and Scoones' (2003) observation that policy change will be facilitated in issue areas where there is consensus on the nature of the problem that needs to be addressed, it is critical that there is a broader recognition that improvements in children's welfare do not automatically follow from improvements at the aggregate household level. This is important if policy solutions such as conditional cash transfers to support children's education or targeted school meal programmes for children of impoverished households are to be politically palatable.

Second, links to international conventions and standards (eg UNCRC, WHO standards, MDGs) can lend gravity and urgency to policy demands. In particular, because of the current broader political momentum around the achievement of the MDGs by the international community, policy proposals that are framed in terms of the realisation of particular goals are likely to be given greater weight by donors and governments alike. However, even in this context, it is important to be aware of possible national differences – for example, in the Latin American context where many of the absolute goals are within comfortable reach but socio-economic inequalities are the most pressing issues, MDGs are not regarded as relevant as in the sub-Saharan African context where the realisation of citizens' basic needs is still a distant reality.

A third, but related, factor is the degree of novelty surrounding a policy issue in a particular national context. If research findings relate to a relatively under-researched area or have historically been limited to developed country contexts, policy actors may be eager to take action in order to demonstrate their progressiveness. For example, in the Vietnamese context, mental health is a very new issue, but Young Lives quantitative research has served to persuade cross-sectoral policy actors that it is a pressing issue among Vietnamese children and care-givers. They are now piloting the introduction of mental health screening and services as part of primary healthcare. The fact that the initiative is being piloted in conjunction with the World Health Organization adds greater legitimacy (Tran, 2005, personal correspondence).

However, it is also important to ensure that child-sensitive policy proposals do not unnecessarily trigger cultural and/or politico-ideological sensitivities. Remaining with the mental healthcare example, in the Ethiopian context, regional policy leaders were reluctant to discuss the Young Lives' findings on child mental health as they believed that the measures used to assess mental health were culturally-inappropriate and amounted to imposing a particular, Western-derived view of child

wellbeing. As a result YL is planning to carry out more context-appropriate qualitative research on children's psycho-social development in all four YL countries.

Lastly, the Young Lives experience suggests that policy actors are not necessarily opposed to introducing more child-sensitive policies. Rather, their understanding of what this might entail is limited, and in the face of multiple competing civil society and donor demands, they do not have time to translate research findings into creative policy solutions. It is therefore the role of advocates of children's rights to not only critique current policies, but also to present viable, concrete alternatives with measurable indicators. This can usefully involve the identification of good practices from NGO or donor pilot projects or examples from other country contexts. For example, Young Lives advocacy efforts to incorporate children's rights more holistically in the Ethiopian PRSP (2005-10) and the Vietnamese Social and Economic Development Plan (2006-10) have involved a content analysis of more than 15 PRSPs and identification of clear goals and measurable targets covering the four broad principles of the UNCRC – survival, development, protection and participation. In particular, whereas most PRSP documents include a focus on child education, infant mortality, nutrition, etc, attention to child protection (eg from familial, school or community violence, as well as harmful or excessively taxing work) and child participation (eg opportunities to voice their opinions on issues impacting on children and their communities; opportunities to be informed about their rights) are too often ignored (Marcus *et al.*, 2002). It is worth emphasising that in both country contexts, senior policy officials and donors involved in drafting the PRSP documents have emphasised the importance of children's rights advocates suggesting specific, easily measurable indicators rather than making general demands for more child-focused policies. Unless projects like Young Lives are able to deliver on these demands, it is unlikely that the consultation process with civil society will translate into verifiable change.

Dissemination and communication methods

Effective dissemination and communication strategies are an essential part of enabling policy-makers to act on new evidence. This process entails two key dimensions: a) understanding the specific characteristics of the policy process and advocacy environment, and b) adopting an interactive communication approach involving multi-pronged, flexible and context-sensitive communication methodologies and framing tactics.

In order to work effectively in distinct political contexts, Young Lives communications and dissemination methodologies have been informed by conceptualisations of the policy process, and by advocacy and the discursive environments of our four research countries (see www.younglives.org.uk). Key points identified include the importance of mapping appropriate dissemination and advocacy targets, spaces and civil society/state partners; understanding the "access" and "veto points"[ii] at both the national and decentralised government levels; and unpacking existing discourses on children and poverty in order to identify tensions between local and international discursive strategies. Based on these conceptual maps, efforts have been made to develop policy engagement and dissemination strategies in a context-sensitive manner. The Young Lives team in Vietnam, for instance, has recognised that policy change requires alliances with government officials and parliamentarians in all stages of the research process. To take a specific example, in order to address the lack of attention to child

wellbeing issues in the Vietnamese PRSP, International Save the Children Alliance, including Young Lives collaborated with the governmental Committee for Population, Families and Children to identify priority areas. This alliance resulted in the successful incorporation of child-specific goals in the final version of the document. However, attempts by international organisations to address the neglect of HIV/AIDS in the same document was largely unsuccessful due in part to a lack of efforts to foster government allies (Pham, 2003). In contrast, in Peru – a country characterised by high political instability and low levels of policy planning,[iii] monitoring and civil servant accountability – there are fewer opportunities for effective partnerships with government bodies. Instead, YL has sought to maximise the potential of a comparatively open media by using, for example, video documentaries and public photo exhibitions to raise awareness of childhood poverty among the public and government officials (Villar, 2003).

As can be seen in Box 1 below, in the first phase of Young Lives the project has utilised an eclectic range of public communication methods. In keeping with the non-linear dynamic nature of the policy process, the project has adopted an interactive communication approach. Because "continuous interaction leads to greater chances of successful communication than a simple or linear approach" (Court *et al.*, 2005), Young Lives project partners are in regular contact with stakeholders through advisory panel meetings, working paper and policy brief presentations, media work, participatory photography and essay projects with local children. Particularly successful examples have involved visual materials. Video case studies of Young Lives children to highlight poverty experiences have been widely used including during capacity-building initiatives with parliamentarians in Ethiopia, to persuade policy-makers of the need to invest in a national community crèche programme in Peru, and for development education materials in UK classrooms. Similarly, photography exhibitions documenting children's poverty experiences have, in the words of the Peruvian Young Lives national co-ordinator, Eliana Villar, "served as a mirror for communities and children to reflect on their lives" (2004, personal correspondence) and sensitise authorities to their differential needs. These exhibitions have involved both professional and amateur adult photographers, and children, and have been displayed in diverse public spaces – the Peruvian National Congress building, the Peruvian embassy in the US and UK, regional administrative offices, public universities, the BBC website, on the streets of Peru, at policy stakeholder meetings and in local schools.

Box 1: Young Lives Dissemination Methodologies
- Working papers and related policy briefs
- Print, radio and television media work – both local and international
- Discussion forums with experts, as well as children
- Face-to-face interactions with policy leaders
- Photography projects with children
- Video case studies of children and their care-givers from diverse project sites
- Essay competitions about poverty experiences for children
- Newsletters to stakeholders
- Participatory poverty assessment projects with children
- Interactive websites (both international and in local languages)
- Journalism fellowships and media workshops to encourage more in-depth coverage of child poverty issues
- Workshops using regionally-disaggregated data with local government officials

---

IV. Particular Challenges in Promoting Children's Rights

While many of the strategies and challenges involved in translating research findings into policy change discussed above are relevant to a broad range of policy areas, this concluding section draws attention to some of the particular challenges involved when undertaking policy research involving children.

First, not only do children have limited or no voice in policy decision-making, but in many Southern contexts there is also a dearth of state and civil society champions for children's rights. Accordingly, advocacy efforts need to be concerned not only with persuading policy actors about the importance of approaching policy formulation and implementation from a child-sensitive perspective, but also need to be involved in raising awareness among a broader array of civil society and state actors about the relevance of children's rights to broader poverty and development policy issues.

A second challenge involves overcoming a broad tendency to view children as a target population to be researched, rather than as agents in their own right. Involving children in evidence-based advocacy is still an under-explored area, particularly in Southern contexts, but one which necessitates innovative capacity-building with children, communities and policy actors. Similarly, children are seldom included as active participants in the research process; this is particularly the case in research linking macro-economic issues such as poverty and poverty reduction strategies to children's wellbeing outcomes. However, as Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000: 61) stress: "The reality experienced by children and young people … cannot be fully comprehended by inference and 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).

Third, whereas advocates of gender equality have been relatively successful in mainstreaming gender into broader political, economic and development agendas, there is still much to be done to effectively mainstream children's needs and rights, especially in the area of macro-economic policies. There is a strong tendency for children's issues to be viewed as only pertaining to the health/nutrition and education sectors, rather than attempting to unpack the "black box" of the household and analyse the differential impacts of development policies on children and their care-givers. As a result, there is only a limited evidence base of the linkages between macro-development policies and children's wellbeing. This means that researchers and advocates interested in tackling childhood poverty must contend not only with a dearth of understanding about the links between children and economic/development policies, but also under-developed research methodologies for disaggregating the impacts on children.

Lastly, it is necessary to emphasise that, given the complexity of the policy process, the timescale for translating research findings into action is likely to vary considerably from country to country, even within a project like YL which has an explicitly resourced advocacy and dissemination component. Although concrete changes may thus far be relatively small and incremental, we can hypothesise that the sensitisation of policy-makers to the importance of adapting a child-sensitive approach to development and poverty reduction strategies will provide a more conducive and responsive platform for subsequent dissemination of detailed policy recommendations.

References

Boyden, J and J Ennew (1997) *Children in Focus: A Manual for Participatory Research with Children,* Stockholm, Radda Barnen

Brock, K, C Cornwall and J Gaventa (2001) *Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy*, Working Paper 143, Brighton, Institute of Development Studies

Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2005) I*nnovation in Action: Knowledge Translation Strategy 2004-2009,* Ottawa, Canadian Institutes of Health Research

Court, J, I Hovland and J Young (eds.) (2005) *Bridging Policy and Development: Evidence and the Change Process,* Warwickshire and London, ITGD Publishing and ODI

Craske, N and M Molyneux (2002) *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America,* Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan

Crewe, E, I Hovland and J Young (2005) 'Context, Evidence, Links: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Research-policy Processes' in *Bridging Research and Policy in Development: Evidence and the Change Process,* Overseas Development Institute, London

Dryzek, J (1994) *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Frazer, N (1989) *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory,* Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press

Huang, C (2002) 'Democracy and the Politics of Difference: Gender Quota in Taiwan', paper prepared for delivery at the 2002 *Annual meeting of the American Political Science Association* 29 August – 1 September, Boston

Jones, N (2006) *Gender and the Political Opportunities of Democratization in South Korea,* Palgrave, New York

Joshi, H (2001) 'Longitudinal data as an aid to the policy maker: some British Examples', paper for the *Annual Conference of the Economists,* Perth, Australia

Keck, M and Sikkink, K (1988) *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics,* Ithaca, Cornell University Press

Keeley, J and I Scoones (2003) *Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: A Review*, IDS Working Paper 89, Brighton, Institute of Development Studies

Kim, S K (2000) *The Politics of Democratization: The Role of Civil Society,* Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press

Lather, P (1986) 'Research as Praxis', *Harvard Educational Review,* 56, 257-277

Linz, J and A Stepan (1996) *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe,* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press

Lloyd-Smith, M and J Tarr (2000) 'Researching children's perspectives – a sociological dimension' in A Lewis and G Lindsay *Researching Children's Perspectives,* Brighton, Open University Press

Mainwaring, S and T R Scully (1995) *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America,* Palo Alto, Stanford University Press

Marcus, R, J Wilkinson and J Marshall (2002) 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) – What can they deliver for children in poverty?' *Journal of International Development* 14(8) pp. 1117-1128

McGee, R and K Brock (2001) *From Poverty Assessment to Policy Change: Processes, Actors and Data*, Working Paper 133, Brighton, Institute of Development Studies

O'Donnell, G (2004) *The Quality of Democracy: Theory and Applications,* University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana

Pham, T L (2003) 'Managing Research and Advocacy in Vietnam', paper presented at *Childhood Poverty: Longitudinal Studies for Policy Making,* Young Lives Conference, 8-9 September

Platt, L (2003) *Putting Childhood Poverty on the Agenda: The Relationship Between Research and Policy in Britain 1800-1950*, Young Lives Working Paper No. 7, London, Save the Children UK

Start, D and I Hovland (2004) *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers,* London, ODI

Steinmo, S, K A Thelen and F Longstreth (eds.) (1992) *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Tarrow, S (1995) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Villar, E (2003) 'The Experience of Policy Making for Childhood in Peru', paper presented at *Childhood Poverty: Longitudinal Studies for Policy Making,* Young Lives Conference, 8-9 September

Whittier, N (1995) *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement,* Philadelphia, Temple University Press

Wilson, I and S Huttly (2003) 'Young Lives: A Case Study of Sample Design for Longitudinal Research', *Young Lives Working Paper No. 10,* London, Save the Children UK

Personal Correspondence

Tassew Woldehanna, YL Principle Investigator, Ethiopia

Eliana Villar, YL National Co-ordinator Peru

Pham Thi Lan, YL National Co-ordinator Vietnam

Tran Tuan, YL Principle Investigator, Vietnam

Endnotes

i   YL was established under the auspices of the UK DFID's Millennium Development Fund in the context of debates on how to monitor the MDGs to ensure substantive progress by 2015. Partially influenced by the Blair administration's use of longitudinal data in the "war on child poverty", the YL project aims to draw attention to the complex, often indirect, but far-reaching impact of macro-economic policies on the physical, cognitive and psycho-social wellbeing of children born in 2000 until their adolescence in 2015.

Young Lives' longitudinal, purposeful sentinel site surveillance methodology affords some distinct, but complementary, advantages. First, born in the tradition of the British Birth Cohort Studies and Seven Up (a life-course study of British citizens followed up at seven-year intervals), and modelled partly on the South African Birth to Twenty analysis of children begun in 1990, Young Lives' longitudinal methodology should provide firmer ground for causal inference than cross-sectional snapshots. In particular, with data sweeps of index children at ages 1, 4, 8, 11 and 14 years, the survey is designed to reveal transitions, processes and histories which one-off studies are ill designed to capture (Wilson and Huttly, 2003). For example, YL will be able to examine whether "tendencies toward advantage or disadvantage cumulate over time, generating increasing long-term inequalities" (Joshi, 2001), whether direct interventions enable disadvantaged children to catch up fully or only partially with their peers, and to explore the characteristics of children living through transitory as compared to chronic poverty. Such information will enable researchers and policy practitioners to better understand the relative costs and timing implications of preventative policies compared to policies that seek to reverse earlier disadvantage.

Second, although YL's non-representative sampling technique limits the kinds of national-level conclusions that can be drawn, its purposeful over-sampling of the poor and the selection of community sites that represent a range of different infrastructural, agro-ecological, livelihood, socio-cultural, ethnic, administrative, etc, characteristics, facilitates in-depth analyses of the causes, manifestations and consequences of poverty in a variety of settings. In other words, it provides a useful middle ground between national-level, but limited, descriptive statistical statements, and single, qualitative case studies that tend to have little credibility with target audiences and are difficult to integrate into the policy formulation process (*ibid:* McGee and Brock, 2003).

ii   Access points refer to the channels of access available to advocates to influence the political decision-making process that are provided by political institutional arrangements. For example, a centralised political system is likely to provide fewer access points (but greater potential for influence if agents of change succeed in swaying the government) whereas decentralised federal systems provide both vertical and horizontal channels of access. Veto points by contrast are "areas of institutional vulnerability, that is points in the political process where the mobilization of opposition can thwart policy innovation" (Steinmo *et al.*, 1992: 7). These may include

presidential vetoes, unstable congressional majorities, public referenda, limited party discipline allowing members to cross the floor, etc.

iii   Unlike other YL countries where policy formulation and implementation is taking place in the context of PRSPs (Ethiopia) or five-year Socio-Economic Development Plans (Vietnam and India), Peru lacks a comparable plan.

The Young Lives Partners

Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS), India

Department of Economics, University of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

General Statistical Office, Government of Vietnam

Grupo de Análisis Para El Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru

Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK

Instituto de Investigación Nutricional (IIN), Peru

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK

Medical Research Council of South Africa

RAU University, Johannesburg, South Africa

Research and Training Centre for Community Development, Vietnam

Save the Children UK

South Bank University, UK

Statistical Services Centre, University of Reading, UK

Young Lives is an international longitudinal study of childhood poverty, taking place in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, and funded by DFID. The project aims to improve our understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty in the developing world by following the lives of a group of 8,000 children and their families over a 15-year period. Through the involvement of academic, government and NGO partners in the aforementioned countries, South Africa and the UK, the Young Lives project will highlight ways in which policy can be improved to more effectively tackle child poverty.

Designed and typeset by Copyprint UK Limited