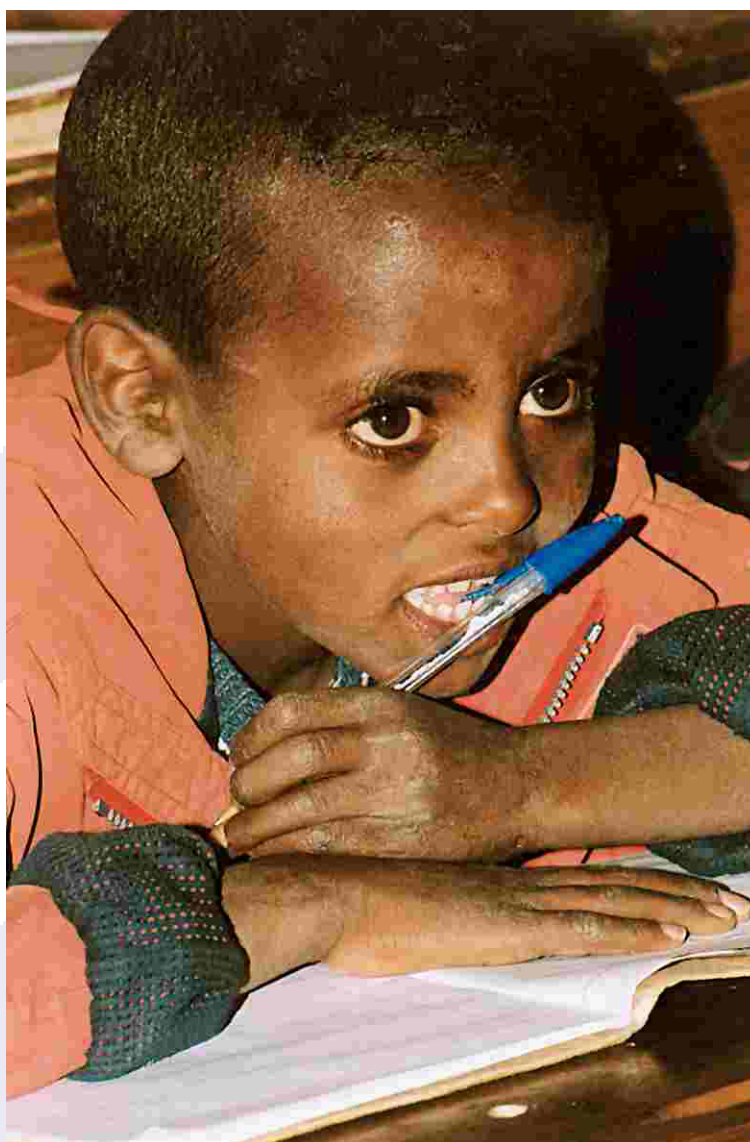


Executive Summary

**Children's educational completion rates and achievement:
implications for Ethiopia's SDPRP II (2006-10)**



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Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

Children's Educational Completion Rates and Achievement: implications for Ethiopia's SDPRP II (2006-10)

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I. Key concerns

Educational expansion at the cost of retention and quality

One of the main objectives of the Ethiopian SDPRP (2002-05) is to expand primary school enrolment through providing more equitable educational coverage with improved quality. Despite important reforms in the Education Sector Development Plans I (1996-2001) and II (2002-05), performance indicators show that only access-related targets (such as gross enrolment of 65 percent by 2004/05) have been achieved so far (MoFED, 2005). However, the quality of primary education declined in most respects over the same period, with particular shortfalls in the numbers of qualified primary school teachers and access to textbooks, as well as increasing class sizes. This in turn contributed to a doubling of primary school dropout rates between 1999/00 and 2003/04 to 19 percent, and although they subsequently declined in 2004/05 to 12 percent they still fell well short of that year's target of 4 percent. Only the repetition rate for grades 4-8 in 2003/04 (5.6 percent) was on target.

What matters most for child completion rates and achievement scores?

Understanding the determinants of completing primary education, poor achievement, inefficiencies such as repetition and dropout, and inequity in terms of gender and urban/rural and regional disparities is crucial for effective policy-making. However, little information is available concerning these issues in Ethiopia. To help fill this gap, this paper examines the following key issues:

- What is the relative importance of school characteristics (such as school availability and school quality), family characteristics and individual child characteristics in determining child grade completion or dropout in primary school?
- What is the relative importance of investment in school quality vis-à-vis family and child variables in determining students' educational achievement?

¹ This summary is based on a longer Young Lives paper by the same title written by: Tasew Woldehanna (Department of Economics, University of Addis Ababa), Nicola Jones (Save the Children UK, London), and Bekele Tefera (Save the Children UK, Ethiopia). The research was generously funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre and the UK Department for International Development.

- To what extent are the components of the Education Sector Development Program (SDPRP) consistent with the determinants of children's primary school completion rates and educational achievement scores identified in this paper? What policy implications are raised with a view to contributing to debates around the revised SDPRP (2006-10)?

The paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Ethiopia Young Lives study on childhood poverty. It involves survey data from 1000 households with eight-year-old children collected in 2002 and qualitative data collected in 2005.

II. Key findings

- School completion rates are shaped by the following variables:

Birth order effect: Children with older siblings are less likely to drop out as labour burdens are shared among more family members. Older siblings also often serve as positive role models in encouraging younger children to continue with their education.

Sex of the child: Boys are less likely to drop out than girls due largely to the differential effect of traditional gender roles. Although the bias in favour of boys in the labour market means that boys' labour is often in higher demand by both individual households and communities, historically girls have been more likely to face pressure to leave school prematurely due to a tradition of early marriage and a lower valuing of girls' education, combined with parental fears about vulnerability to rape and abduction. However, our qualitative findings strongly suggested that more recently, changes in the 2001 Family Law to ban marriage below the age of 18 years, community initiatives to stem sexual violence, and concerted efforts by the Ministry of Education, local authorities and communities to increase girls' education since the Second Education Sector Development Plan (2002), are increasing the likelihood of girls remaining in school.

Household wealth: Even with significant improvements in the overall number and geographical distribution of schools, more resources allocated to teacher and education administrative capacity building and greater community-school interaction mechanisms, our findings indicate that *household wealth and indebtedness* still act as an important barrier to children's schooling. Moreover, our qualitative findings underscored that the promise of free education in Ethiopia is far from reality. Not only are parents compelled to provide their labour and construction materials for school construction, but in many areas they also need to make cash contributions, in addition to covering expenses for uniforms, books etc.

Household composition: Despite high education costs, children in large families are more likely to be able to continue their education than in families with fewer children aged five years and older. This reflects the greater availability of labour for agricultural and domestic work in large families.

Parental education: Higher levels of parental education were found to facilitate child educational completion. However, whereas government policy emphasises that education will bring about more modern farmers, our research suggests that most parents were promoting their children's education in order to provide them with a means to escape agricultural drudgery and enter more lucrative non-farm occupations.

School access: Availability of schools was found to be highly significant (in light of both cost and safety implications) suggesting that although the government has dramatically increased the number of schools, it is still a major constraining factor for school completion.

School quality: However, beyond availability, in order to avoid school dropouts many school quality issues need to be addressed. In keeping with the strong correlation between pupil satisfaction and school dropouts, the following factors all served to undermine family and student confidence in the educational system and to attach lesser importance to school completion: excessively large teacher: pupil ratios, a dearth of textbooks, the lack of segregated toilets for girls and boys, violence by students and teachers, discrimination by teachers based on children's wealth status and family connections, as well as poorly trained and motivated teachers and unrealistically arduous 8th Grade examinations and non-promotion policy in some regional states.

Post-1996 policy changes: The probability of children dropping out of school after the 1996 introduction of the First Education Sector Development Program, which aimed to increase educational access and quality was significant. The increase in dropout rates in recent years is largely due to stagnated development in other sectors, particularly limited poverty reduction.

➤ Children's scholastic achievement is significantly affected by the following factors:

Sex of the child: Boys performed better overall in terms of overall test scores, but when the test scores were disaggregated by skill area, there was only a significant difference in numeracy test results. This suggests that in addition to existing targeted tutoring programmes for girls, concerted efforts have to be made to improve the acquisition of literacy skills for all children.

Child labour: Involvement in child labour (both paid work activities and household chores) was found to be insignificant. However, this may be due to data constraints as well as the fact that our analysis focused on eight-year-old children, an age at which combining school and labour activities is likely to have a less detrimental impact on attainment than in more advanced grades. Our qualitative research highlighted the difficulties children face in doing justice to their school activities because of work pressures, which is in turn reflected in the difficulties so many children have when they reach the terminal 8th Grade examinations.

Child satisfaction with school: If children evaluate their school environment poor positively they are more likely to perform better in basic achievement tests. While it is widely recognised that children are more likely to dropout if they are dissatisfied with school and the educational environment, our findings take us one step further and suggest that children's positive assessment of school quality will also be reflected in their learning achievements.

Caregiver social capital: The negative impact of absolute structural capital (measured by participation in community organisations) on child attainment is best attributed to the fact that community organisations in Young Lives sites disproportionately represent traditional conservative religious organisations and funeral groups which tend to emphasise traditional values and gender roles rather than modern education. By contrast, however, our qualitative findings suggest that the positive impact of caregiver cognitive social capital (ie their sense of belonging to a community) could be linked to the growing community mobilization efforts around children's education. Accordingly, caregivers who feel well-connected within their community and support such efforts may provide additional support and motivation to their children, which is then reflected in superior scholastic achievement.

Parental education levels: Surprisingly parental education levels were not linked to child educational achievement, but instead parental *commitment* emerged as a more decisive factor. Such commitment was manifested in efforts to provide material support, help with homework, and lessen children's household work burden.

Household wealth: Household wealth only had a significant impact on children's writing skills, and not their numeracy or reading abilities. In the qualitative research, however, child respondents emphasised that children from wealthier households have more time to study and are also favoured by teachers, suggesting that poverty still functions as a multi-dimensional barrier to child achievement.

III. Policy implications for the Second Round of the SDPRP

Measures to combat the poverty effect: While the policy focus of the 1996-initiated ESDP and the SDPRP (2002-05) on increasing educational access for all has been broadly successful, children from poor and/or highly indebted families still face significant constraints because they have to contribute to household survival through paid and unpaid work. This suggests that although the education sector budget was substantially increased, it has still been inadequate in terms of overcoming the effect of poverty on schooling. Increased emphasis on policies to improve the livelihood options of the poor—including greater income generation opportunities, particularly in rural areas and for women—is thus imperative, especially given that poverty levels in Ethiopia over the last six years are not showing any significant reduction.

However, such strategies need to be child-sensitive. Are they exempting or propelling children into labour activities? For instance, income-generating opportunities for women should be simultaneously accompanied by *community childcare systems* in order to prevent older children from shouldering their mother's childcare burden. If *credit programmes* are encouraging the purchase of livestock, community cattle-keeping mechanisms need to be encouraged to reduce pressures on children to drop out of school to attend to additional household livestock. Other policy solutions could include the introduction of targeted conditional cash transfers programmes that enable poor households to send their children to school by offsetting the costs involved.

Similarly, greater attention needs to be placed on whether the ESDP is sufficiently addressing the needs of poor children and families. Proposals to replace the shift system with a *full-day school system* need to take into account the demands of seasonal agriculture. Moreover, given that *distance to school* remains a significant cause of dropout rates, there is still much scope for expanding the availability of schools (whether regular, low-cost or non-formal alternatives) to poor and isolated communities.

Gender equality: In keeping with the MDG goal of providing girls with equal access to primary school, the SDPRP recognises girls' disproportionately low enrolment rates as a problem in its poverty analysis. Moreover, as the 2004 Joint Donor Review of the ESDP II emphasised, a number of innovative programmes to address gender equality have been initiated across the country and have enjoyed relative success in narrowing the gender gap. Our YL results found that boys are already performing better at 8 years old, suggesting that the current concern about girls' education is well-placed and that existing programmes need to be evaluated, and then expanded or intensified.

A further important issue is ensuring girls' safety if they are having to attend additional classes or are involved in textbook sharing arrangements before or after school. In addition, given the widely reported positive impact of the Family Law ban on early marriage and initiatives to tighten the implementation of the anti-sexual violence regulations on girls' education, these efforts should be continued and related laws rendered consistent.

Adult education: Because of the importance of parental education on school completion rates, and particularly the positive influence of maternal education, improving educational enrolment now will continue to have a positive spill-over effect on subsequent generations. It also suggests that adult

education programmes should be considered as part of a comprehensive approach to achieving universal primary education for all by 2015.

Educational quality: In light of the rapid expansion of school access since ESDP I, it is not surprising that indicators of educational quality have struggled to keep pace. This said, given that both our qualitative and quantitative research found that school quality had an important impact on education achievement, and on parents' and children's commitment to education, addressing shortcomings in school quality remains urgent. Particular concerns include: the quality of school facilities, teacher capacity and safety issues (vulnerability to violence from teachers, students and strangers). Given that complaints about teacher beatings were identified as the leading complaint by children about school and were significantly associated with poorer school performance in our findings, it suggests that measures to address child abuse in school need to be urgently implemented. In addition to establishing centres where children can report teacher (and other) violence, measures to reduce teacher stress and improve teacher training curricula to equip teachers with the skills to cope with often over-crowded classrooms are needed.

Community mobilization: Community mobilization and attitudinal changes have played an important role in improving familial commitment to child education. A number of parent respondents emphasised that through the new policy directives they had come to realize the importance of educating their children, for the sake of the household as well as children themselves. These attitudinal changes were in turn shown to translate into support from parents, siblings and neighbours for child scholastic achievement. Our findings on social capital, however, suggest that assumptions about community empowerment have to be carefully contextualized within the realities of the composition and roles of community groups and networks. For example, while some groups may have a pro-development orientation (such as government-affiliated women's and youth associations that were found to have a positive influence on especially girls' education), other groups may be more tradition-bound and resist change (including some traditional religious and funeral groups).

Community involvement is often very burdensome in that it involves high financial or labour and time inputs to construct school infrastructure and cover new teachers' salaries. Thus the government and donors alike need to be cautious about not romanticizing the concept of "community empowerment and participation"—especially when it is often utilized as a euphemism for monetary contributions—when in practice it could lead to civic resentment towards education and increasing dropouts over time. While communities may be able to subsidize the cost of new school infrastructure by contributing their labour and local materials, funds needed for purchasing adequate quantities of books and other educational materials should be allocated by the government and donors. Moreover, if parents are to remain committed to their children's education, it will be important that they are given a more substantive role in determining school policy issues.

Children's participation: Children's positive evaluation of school and the school environment was positively correlated with basic skills acquisition. This suggests that the government's current efforts to bring about a student-centred education system involving active input from students, their families and communities, represents a positive development and should be extended.