



# Young Lives **Theory of Change**

# Background

Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years. We are one among many actors working to bring about positive change in children's lives. We believe that the policies and programmes intended to support children and young people are more likely to be effective (and cost-effective) if they are based on rigorous evidence about children's experiences, development and outcomes, and that longitudinal analysis has a particular role to play by allowing us to see how children's lives change over time and how children's outcomes are shaped, both by their earliest circumstances as well as risks and opportunities through to adulthood.

Our role is:

- to generate high-quality longitudinal evidence about the impact of poverty on children's lives in contexts of economic and social change;
- to disseminate that evidence in accessible ways to a wide range of global and national stakeholders; and
- to try to ensure it is used to improve the policy and programme work of governments and other organisations across all sectors and at all stages of children's lives.

We do not work in isolation and we recognise that the world is a complex and messy place. Research is only one element in a long process to bring about change for children and young people – a process which also involves advocacy and campaigns to generate political will and shape policy agendas; accountability and good governance within government and systems; adherence to human rights standards and observing children's rights; positive resource allocation by ministries, donors and international organisations; and community change. Evidence from our research is just one input into those processes of political change, among others.

Our theory of change expresses our role in and contribution to these processes, the strategies we implement, and the outcomes we want to achieve. It is a working document, developed as part of the iterative process of longitudinal research and long-term policy engagement, and sits alongside our research and policy plans (which give more detail on specific outputs and activities, and which are summarised below).

We revisit the same children and communities many times over many years to understand how their early circumstances affect their later outcomes. Young Lives core agenda is about childhood poverty, but specific priorities for research shift during the life of the project, as children mature and access health and education programmes, as their families and communities change, and as economic and political changes affect their lives. Policy engagement is equally dynamic, both as new research findings become available, but also in response to changing times and changing regional, national and global policy priorities, especially within government and the donors and other agents for change who are actively working on these issues in our four countries and elsewhere. Our theory of change offers a framework for moving forward on our core agenda, and reflects our processes of sharing, learning and reflection.

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Young Lives theory of change (Figure 1) starts with our analysis of:

- The core challenge of childhood poverty
- Features of country contexts in which we work
- The stakeholders with whom we work, who can potentially deliver change for children and young people
- The barriers to using evidence to tackle child poverty and the entry points through which Young Lives can deliver change.

Our strategy is organised into four broad and interconnecting 'channels' of activity:

CAPACITY > < RESEARCH > < UPTAKE > < INNOVATION

For each of these channels, Figure 1 summarises:

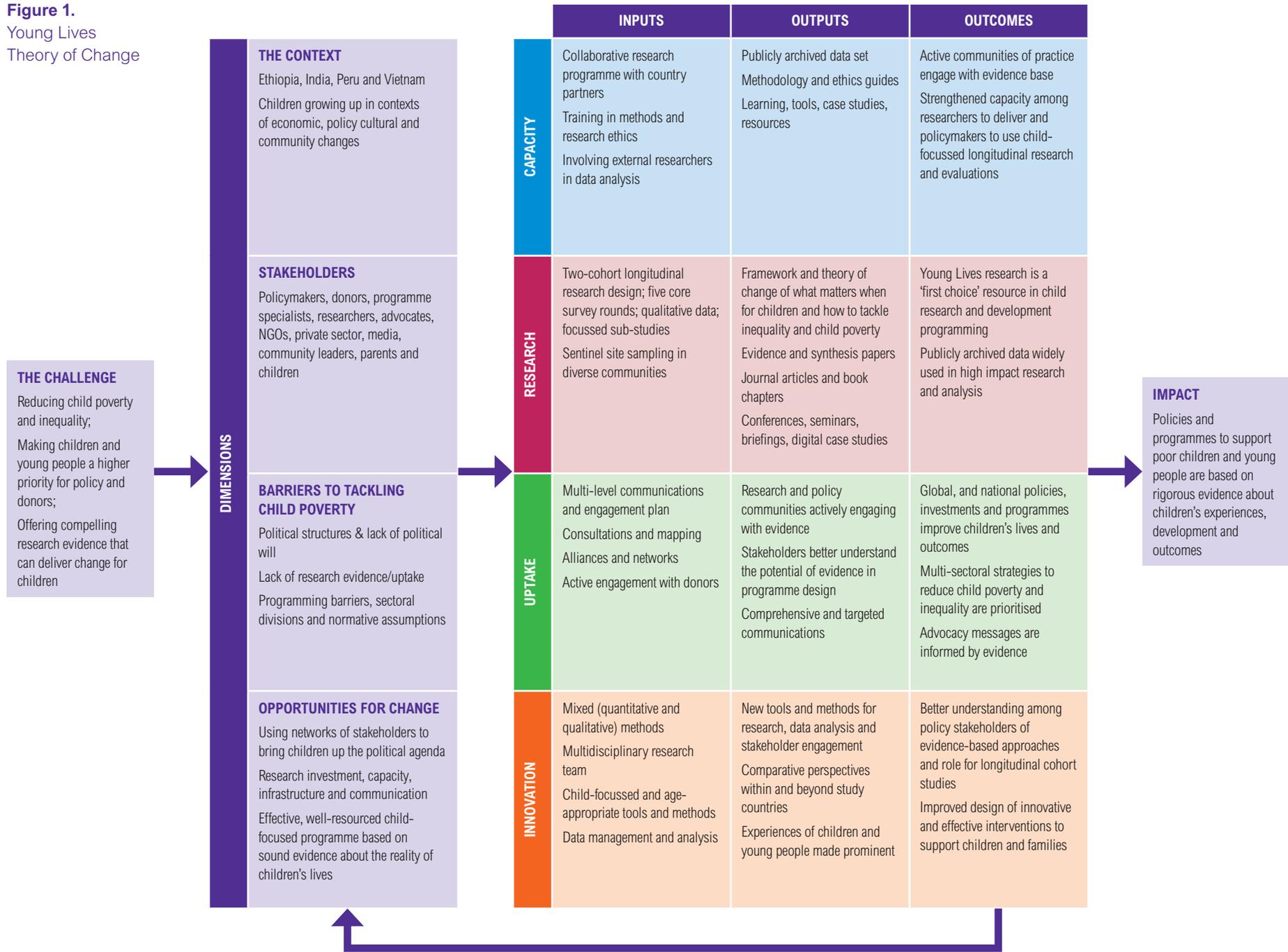
- The inputs we bring to the task
- The specific outputs we deliver
- The outcomes we aim to achieve to contribute to better policies and programmes for poor children and young people in changing societies.

An over-arching theory of change sets the direction but cannot do justice to the many facets of the Young Lives programme, and we encourage specific components (e.g. on nutrition, education, youth or gender) to elaborate their own more nuanced theory of change and specific work plans, tailored to the country contexts, research questions, policy opportunities and challenges of the work.

The sections which follow elaborate on each element of the theory of change in Figure 1.

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**Figure 1.**  
Young Lives  
Theory of Change



# The challenge

Poverty and inequality are still pervasive, even in the rapidly growing economies of many low- and middle-income countries. Children are typically most vulnerable: they are more likely to be living in poverty than other age groups, and the impacts of poverty are greatest during childhood. Poverty affects children's development and well-being, through the resources available to communities and households to support their children, as well as directly through for example under-nutrition, unhealthy environments, risks, opportunities and adverse events, lowered aspirations, capacities and well-being. The impacts of poverty have repercussions throughout their lives, and across and between generations. Poverty is multi-dimensional and often closely linked to inequalities in access to healthcare, education and other services. Poverty and inequality are harmful for children and are a violation of fundamental rights. They are also harmful for societies in terms of social injustice, social exclusion and loss of human capabilities to contribute to economic and social development. Children and young people are often neglected in policy processes, invisible in social statistics and overlooked as a source of evidence in research, despite their perspectives being vital for understanding child poverty and identifying appropriate policies and practices. Through delivering high-quality research focussed on the impact of poverty on children from infancy through to adolescence and into adulthood, we draw attention to the centrality of this life-phase in planning for national development in LMICs.

# Contexts for our work

Young Lives is focussing on four contrasting country contexts each undergoing rapid economic and social change:

- Ethiopia,
- India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana)
- Peru
- Vietnam.

While our research is primarily focused on these countries and the diverse communities within them, the relevance of the research is broader in terms both of comparative analysis across these four diverse contexts as well as potential lessons for other comparable contexts, economies and political systems.

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# Stakeholders

We recognise multiple, multi-directional patterns of power and influence (to greater or lesser degree) among politicians, policymakers, administrators, donors, programme specialists, researchers, advocates, NGOs, private sector, media, community leaders, parents and children. We identify entry points for consulting with and influencing stakeholders, including engaging with existing networks and fostering new groups to engage with child research and policy.

Our networks lend us legitimacy and include:

- Children and young people, their caregivers, peers, teachers and other key community stakeholders are our primary source of data about child poverty and development;
  - A core team at University of Oxford provides overall management and leadership of the research, policy and communications activities;
  - Institutional partners in each study country embed the findings and goals of the study within specific contexts, operationalise data collection and data management, and engage with local policy opportunities;
  - The wider research community provides expert guidance on survey methodologies, measurement and analysis and carries out collaborative research programmes on priority topics;
  - Local policy community and programme experts are the focus for messaging as well as shaping specific research directions, including through research-policy forums and other consultations;
  - Global policy community, INGOs etc. commission specific analyses and draw on our evidence in their policy work, advocacy and reporting;
  - The media report events and articulate key findings as part of public debate;
  - Donors fund the research, including the core survey and focussed sub-studies, and engage with us in diverse ways.
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# Barriers to change and opportunities for change

We believe that child poverty can be reduced through effective policies and programmes to support poor children and young people, their families and communities; that well-designed, innovative and well-communicated research is a crucial tool for governments and other agents for change to make better programme and policy choices to support children; and that building research capacity and investment are important first steps. However, there are barriers to the development of effective evidence-based policies and programmes, which are widely documented in the literature on research uptake, and which inform our strategy, including:

- a) Political barriers, such as power structures and marginalisation that make it difficult to break poverty cycles and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, or that short policy cycles and political imperatives hamper incorporation of research into policy decisions.
- b) Research barriers, such as the fact that cross-sectional data are widely used for researching children's lives, but are not suitable for showing links between early circumstances and later outcomes. There is limited longitudinal research expertise globally and high-quality analysis is technically complex, and analysis is often not provided in a way that is timely or useful for policymakers.
- c) Programming barriers, such as the fact that preconceived notions and assumptions about children dominate and reduce the effectiveness of programmes and interventions, and debates are often framed in sectoral or disciplinary terms, which do not take into account the interrelated nature of the different influences in their lives. Programmes are often managed along sectoral lines and within line ministries (e.g. health or education) which hampers the development of multi-sectoral programmes which look at children's lives in a more holistic way.

These barriers can, however, be seen as opportunities for Young Lives – and we aim to support the development of:

- a) Networks of stakeholders who are committed to tackling child poverty to support learning and better disseminate research on children, to ensure advocacy and policy messages are evidence-based, and to bring children up the political agenda;
  - b) Investment in research capacity, particularly for longitudinal analysis and better research communication in our study countries;
  - c) Cross-sectoral programmes that are child-focused and based on strong evidence to support children and young people across the life-course.
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# Four channels for achieving change

This analysis translates into the 4 key channels through which we organise our work.

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## Capacity

The skills and capacity Young Lives brings to bear on our research includes not only disciplinary expertise but also wide and deep social, political and cultural knowledge of the context we are working in as well as languages and local networks, the value of which cannot be underestimated (see Jentsch 2004 about international research collaborations).<sup>1</sup> We have an ongoing programme of capacity-building at all levels: within our research team and among fieldworkers; and also for external stakeholders to be better able to use our data and evidence, and in turn conduct high-quality independent research. We also create opportunities to build the capacity of policymakers and other stakeholders to use research messages and adopt evidence-based approaches.

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## Research

Generating and communicating research is at the heart of our aims, objectives, outputs and indicators of success. Up-to-date scientific knowledge about the causes and consequences of child poverty and inequality is an essential starting point for developing effective policies, programmes and services. Child poverty and inequality require multi-sectoral and multi-level solutions, which can best be addressed through cross-disciplinary research, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies in contrasting socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. We are building a body of rigorous and credible evidence, in particular through the creation of a high-quality longitudinal dataset, supplemented by focussed sub-studies on specific themes. The features of Young Lives research include:

- **Research design:** Our core goals are realised through a comparative, two-cohort, sequential, mixed-methods longitudinal design (or panel study), conducted over 15 years and spanning infancy to adulthood. Findings from the four study countries enable us to report on trends and the policy implications for other low- and middle-income countries and contexts.
- **Our core sample:** 12,000 households, families and children in 2 age cohorts born approximately 7 years apart (in each country 1,000 children born in 1994–95 and 2,000 older children born in 2001–02), with sentinel site sampling across more than 80 diverse sites in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.
- **Core surveys:** Five rounds of household, caregiver and child surveys with the full sample in 2002, 2006, 2009, 2013, and 2016 to track changing poverty circumstances, health, nutrition, education, and personal histories, migration, risks and opportunities; access to key services such as health, education and social protection; children's cognitive, psychosocial, educational and other developmental outcomes; aspirations for and of children and their caregivers, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Birgit Jentsch (2004) 'Making Southern Realities Count: Researching Agendas and Design in North-South Collaborations', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 7.3: 259-69.

- **Qualitative research:** Qualitative longitudinal research with a sub-sample of approximately 200 children and their caregivers, nested within the wider Young Lives sample across all four countries provides: in-depth data on life-course trajectories, and key transitions; the views and perspectives of young people themselves, as well as the views of their peers, parents and caregivers, and other community members.
- **School surveys:** School surveys are embedded within country-specific education systems, curricula and achievement test instruments. Primary school surveys introduced in 2010 across all four countries are being followed up by secondary school surveys to provide data on school quality and outcome variables alongside multiple other factors shaping children's lives and trajectories, and evidence on the impact of schooling on inequalities through 'school effectiveness' studies.

The power of the dataset continues to grow over time and as each round of new data is added. We provide accurate evidence about what it means for children from diverse social and economic groups to grow up in different environments, the changing nature of children's lives in the early twenty-first century, how inequality affects children's lives, the key stages in the life-course where policymakers can intervene to support poor children, and the impact of policies and programmes on children and households.

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## **Uptake**

Our research is planned and communicated to maximise usefulness to external audiences and stakeholders to inform their understanding and their actions in ways that contribute to positive change for children and young people. Evidence-based policy and programming is now at the heart of development processes. This is the foundation principle that shapes our research design and the articulation of our findings. 'Research into policy' takes multiple forms, ranging from accumulated knowledge shifting the balance of policy priorities through to specific programmatic evaluations providing evidence on cost-effectiveness. We consider there are three ways in which our research might have direct and indirect impact:

- **Conceptual:** shifting thinking, opening up new lines of enquiry, creating new opportunities for research, and opening up knowledge in new areas;
- **Instrumental:** responding to existing policy concerns and improving the evidence available on which decisions can be taken;
- **Capacity:** building the capacity or capabilities (of Young Lives or others) to collect data and the capacity of policymakers and others to use that evidence.

We build the constituency for our research through consultations and mapping to ensure our work is useful. We build relationships with policymakers and other stakeholders, so that they know and trust our work – and will turn to Young Lives evidence. This requires different approaches in each of our study countries, depending on the political environment and communications context. We work with networks and alliances who can take our findings further than we can, including major international organisations (e.g. UNESCO and UNICEF) and donors (e.g. DFID, World Bank), with international NGOs such as Save the Children and World Vision, and with many stakeholders in our study countries. We have a proactive publications strategy that ensures the highest quality publications are disseminated through respected outlets to build credibility and the authority of the study and its findings. Through making our methods and data publicly available we amplify the influence of our data. We support networks of scholars to ensure full utilisation across all topics and contexts, as well as opportunities for open scientific debate about the significance of key findings. Archiving the survey data is a legacy for

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future generations of researchers, providing unique insight into child development during the early decades of the twenty-first century.

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## ***Innovation***

Young Lives contributes to innovation through its unique sequential cohort, mixed-methods, multi-country design, which delivers context relevant and globally significant evidence. We also develop new age-appropriate and context-appropriate tools and methods for survey and qualitative research with children and young people, multi-disciplinary research and mixed-methods and analysis, and integrate perspectives of children in to all we do. We are innovative in our approach to policy engagement, as well as in our use of new media to communicate key research messages and analysis. Global and country-level policy developments are routinely scanned for entry points for research engagement and policy influence with senior politicians, key organisations etc. We identify specific opportunities for targeted policy engagement, e.g. Research to Policy forums on specific topics, and work with donors (e.g. the Oak Foundation, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation) to support specific areas of research of particular relevance to their work. Developing alliances with other longitudinal and cohort studies maximises the influence of our research design and is a core element of our communications strategy, particularly in partnership with the UNICEF Office of Research.

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# Outputs, outcomes and impact

Figure 1 summarises the major categories of outputs and outcomes designed to deliver impact. These are operationalised through our ongoing programme of research and policy publications and engagement activities (detailed on our website). As a multi-faceted research programme, these cover a wide spectrum of topics. Notable areas of influence include:

1. A strong evidence-base showing when and why differences emerge through the early life-course; with a framework of how policy can respond to inequality and poverty to equip policymakers and advocates looking for how to improve policies for poor children;
  2. Detailed evidence on factors influencing school effectiveness for policymakers aiming to address the global learning crisis and Sustainable Development Goal agendas around learning quality;
  3. That international agencies and national policymakers have a better understanding of when and how gender disadvantages emerge, and a better recognition of how gender disadvantage intersects with poverty;
  4. That the consensus over the importance of the early years is strengthened, supporting proponents of the 'first 1000 days' but also making the case that early gains have to be sustained by later investments, with wider recognition of the potential of remedial actions such as school feeding;
  5. That the methodological and partnership story of Young Lives is articulated and disseminated in ways and through networks that improve the design, cost-effectiveness and impact of future cohort studies in low- and middle-income countries;
  6. The legacy of a mature and unique longitudinal dataset, which can continue to be mined, and provides important social science infrastructure for research, teaching and learning in low- and middle-income countries, and indeed globally.
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# Young Lives

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