

"THE FUTURE WE WANT"

Learning from children's experiences of sustainable development

Children bear much of the brunt of the human impacts of environmental shocks and climate change, not only on account of their age and stage of development, but because more children live in poverty than do other age groups. Unpredictable and extreme weather, such as droughts and floods, rising pollution levels, poor access to sanitation and other public services, combined with global economic instability, are undermining children's healthy development and reinforcing the poverty cycle.

It is widely acknowledged that the poorest households face a disproportionate burden from environmental stresses and have the fewest resources to cope with them. This policy brief examines children's relationship with their environment in three ways: it looks at the impact of shocks, particularly environmental shocks; the effects of food insecurity on children's lives; and children's relationship to the environment in which they live. It uses quantitative and qualitative data from four countries (Peru, Ethiopia, India and Vietnam) to demonstrate children's vulnerability as a result of environmental insecurity, and to highlight children's hopes and concerns for the future.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Shocks, food insecurity, and poor living environments have long-term impacts on children's physical and cognitive development and wellbeing. Policies which reduce the extent of shocks, or help build family and community resilience, will therefore reap benefits in terms of better outcomes for children.

- Shocks are a common experience for poor children, with environmental shocks hitting rural and poorer households hardest. In Ethiopia, the poorest households were six times more likely to be affected by drought than the least poor. Ensuring that economic growth is pro-poor, and benefits families in rural areas, has the potential to build resources and resilience in communities, which could buffer poor children and families from the impacts of shocks.
- The poorest families are most at risk of food insecurity, which has been exacerbated by recent food price rises and environmental shocks. The poorest households spend a higher percentage of their incomes on food than better-off households, leaving them at greater risk from food price inflation. Food shortages have serious health consequences for families and impair children's development, raising policy questions about the cost of food, or the ability of poor families to afford a nutritious diet.
- Children's development and well-being are influenced by the quality of their living environments and access to services. In urban areas, children are concerned about lack of sanitation, rising pollution, the threat of violence and crime, and growing social and economic inequalities between poorer and richer households. In a rapidly urbanising world, sustainable development is both an urban and a rural concern.
- The growing interest in social protection demonstrates the vital role that policy can play in building resilience and helping poor households cope with shocks. There are many positive examples of schemes offering protection for the most vulnerable children. Short-term protection from shocks may have longer-term benefits for children's development and well-being. Increased coverage of programmes helps households to manage both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks, as well as underpinning the potential of health and education in supporting children's healthy development.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, Agenda 21 of the first UN Conference on Environment and Development recognised that children and young people “bring unique perspectives” to inform economic and social development and environmental protection, especially given their high vulnerability “to the effects of environmental degradation”.¹ In June 2012, world leaders will gather once again for the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD). The intervening years have witnessed progress in each of “the three pillars of sustainable development – the economic, the social and the environmental”. However, “multiple interrelated crises”, including the global economic crisis, volatile energy and food prices, food insecurity, climate change, and biodiversity loss, have all “adversely affected development gains”.² In Ethiopia, for example, between 2006 and 2009, over half of the households surveyed reported three or more shocks or adverse events (such as droughts, floods, food price changes or family illness).³ Understanding how children experience shocks or adverse events is integral to developing strategies for sustainable development.

This policy brief explores the impacts of shocks on children and particularly seeks to highlight children's personal experiences, whether environmental shocks (such as drought or flooding), food insecurity (which is often linked with environmental shocks), and the quality of everyday living environments. It concludes that poorer households experience more shocks than wealthier groups, live in areas with poorer quality services and infrastructure, and have fewer resources to cope with multiple crises.

This paper draws on three rounds of survey data and in-depth interviews with children and their carers⁴ in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam, as part of the Young Lives international study of childhood poverty. Young Lives is following two groups of children over 15 years of age in each country: 2,000 children who were born in 2000–01 (the younger cohort);

and 1,000 children who were born in 1994–5 (the older cohort).⁵ The qualitative data was collected from a smaller group of around 50 children in each country. All the names used are pseudonyms. The study is pro-poor and therefore not intended to be nationally representative.

We now discuss the key findings from the Young Lives study in more detail, outlining key implications for policy-makers. In section 2 we consider children’s and households’ experiences of shocks, particularly environmental shocks. In section 3, we examine food insecurity. In section 4 we look at the impact of shocks on children’s development and long-term wellbeing. In section 5 we turn to living environments, we consider households’ experiences of multiple crises in section 6, and finally, in section 7, we tease out the key policy implications.

ENVIRONMENTAL SHOCKS ARE COMMON, ESPECIALLY FOR THE POOREST CHILDREN

All four countries in the Young Lives survey have witnessed recent strong economic growth and reductions in absolute poverty levels, reflecting trends that are typical of other low- and middle-income countries. While consumption levels are rising for most groups in society, those with already higher levels of consumption have tended to gain the most. Between 2006 and 2009, the cash gain for the top decile of household consumption in Andhra Pradesh, India, was 4.4 times that experienced by the poorest decile.⁶ It is against this backdrop of persistent poverty that families and children experience recurrent shocks.

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of urban and rural households that reported economic shocks, environmental shocks and family illness between 2006 and 2009. Economic shocks include increases in input prices, decreases in output prices, death of livestock and loss of income. Environmental shocks include drought, flooding, soil erosion, frost, hailstorm and pests. Health shocks include the illness of a child’s father, mother or other family members.

Table 1: Percentage of Young Lives older cohort children in urban and rural households affected by shocks, 2006–2009

		Economic shocks	Environmental shocks	Health shocks
Ethiopia	Urban	39.5	14.6	45.2
	Rural	75.4	71.6	44.6
Andhra Pradesh (India)	Urban	5.2	6.6	24.3
	Rural	24.3	51.1	33.7
Peru	Urban	14.6	13.1	21.6
	Rural	22.0	52.2	19.5
Vietnam	Urban	27.5	10.3	32.8
	Rural	33.0	42.2	28.4

Table 1 also illustrates how environmental shocks are concentrated in rural areas, where the poorest households largely depend on agricultural for their livelihoods. Environmental shocks such

as drought and flooding affected a large proportion of households, especially in Ethiopia and Vietnam. Children and their carers reflected on how changing climatic patterns and weather conditions are putting pressures on their livelihoods:

“There was always reserve food in the barn. There were also good pasture lands for animals. But these days, shortage of rainfall has become frequent and there are only a few reliable rivers.” (Caregiver, rural Ethiopia)

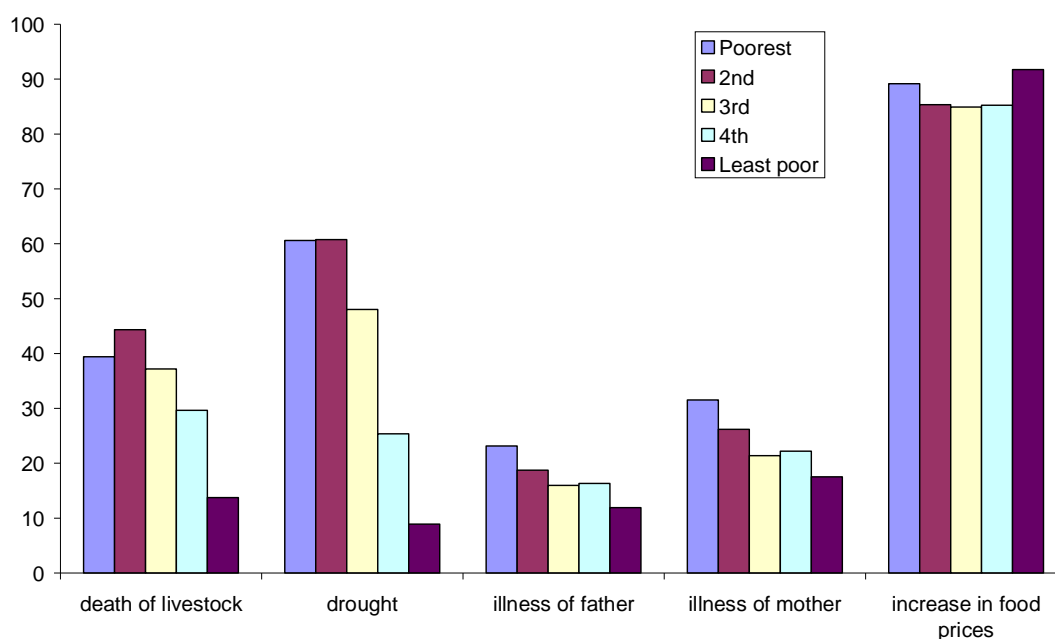
Alongside environmental shocks, economic shocks such as food price fluctuations, and increases in input prices and decreases in output prices (economic shocks) affect both urban and rural areas; but in Ethiopia and Andhra Pradesh, for example, the incidence is much higher in rural areas. Illness is more evenly spread across urban and rural areas.

The co-occurrence of environmental, economic and health shocks is illustrated by the story of Kassaye’s family. Kassaye is 14 years old and lives in rural Amhara, Ethiopia. His father broke his leg and was unable to work for six months. As it was the sowing season, the household was short of labour and the harvest failed, forcing the family to go hungry. Kassaye’s mother says: “We were eating 50 kilos of any cereal for three weeks. Now we have reduced and we consume the same amount of cereal for one month.”

The family were unable to sell household assets because of a drop in the price of sheep and other livestock. As a consequence, Kassaye education suffered, as he explains: “Food shortage means I go to school hungry. I cannot properly attend class if I am hungry, so it affects my schooling.”

The level and type of shocks experienced differs according to the economic status of the household. Figure 1 demonstrates that whereas economic shocks affect households across the wealth spectrum, environmental shocks are more concentrated among poorer households. This raises worrying questions about the ways in which shocks may entrench poverty and existing inequalities. Pro-poor growth and appropriate, context-specific protective measures are essential to harness economic growth and to translate it into social development, in order to buffer poor households from the impacts of frequent shocks.

Figure 1: Percentage of Young Lives households in Ethiopia affected by shocks, 2006–2009, by wealth quintile



POOR FAMILIES ARE MOST AT RISK OF FOOD INSECURITY

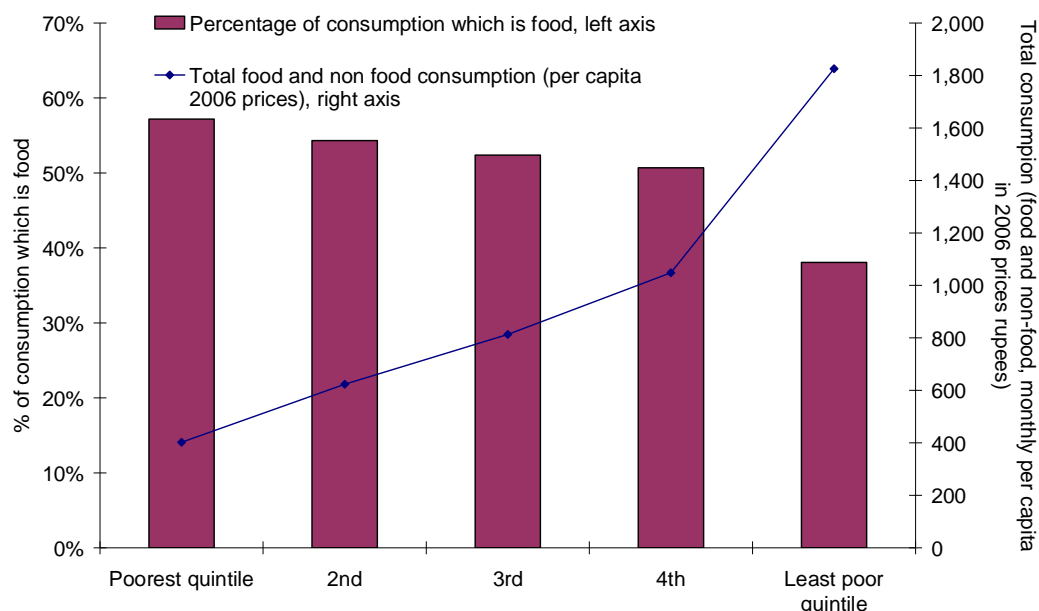
Food is both a large and relatively fixed element of household spending. If inadequate resources or food price inflation force cuts to the amount or quality of food that households consume, as illustrated by the case of Kassaye's family, the consequences for children's health and development may be severe.

From 2006 to 2009, economic shocks increased by 20% in Ethiopia and 39% in Vietnam. There was a small increase in Andhra Pradesh and a small decrease in Peru (perhaps due to the country's already high level of inequality, meaning that only a small percentage of the population were affected. Since our respondents are not necessarily nationally representative samples, this may not be the same as the concurrent national experience).

In 2009, households were also asked if they had experienced food price increases in the previous three years. Of the children in the younger cohort, one in three in Vietnam, nearly four in five in Andhra Pradesh, and nearly nine in ten in Ethiopia were in households that reported food price increases since 2006. Though food price increases were reported by households across the board, the poorest households are more vulnerable, as figure 2 illustrates.

Households in Andhra Pradesh were grouped into quintiles (fifths of the sample, ranked by spending level). The graph presents average spending level (on all items) on the right hand axis, and bars representing the percentage of household spending on food plotted against the left axis. Food is a priority area for families, absorbing much of the family budget, and is hard to cut back on without damaging results. This means that although poorer people spend less overall than richer groups (including on food), spending on food actually represents a much higher percentage of their consumption, leaving them particularly vulnerable to rising food prices.

Figure 2: Household food and non-food consumption, Andhra Pradesh, 2009



The surveys included questions about perceptions of food security. In 2009, one in four households (25%) in Andhra Pradesh were worried that they would run out of food before they had the money to buy more, and one in ten households (9%) reported that they sometimes or frequently did not

eat enough. Kareena's family live in Hyderabad and are struggling with the rising cost of living, education-related expenses and health costs, as both Kareena's parents spent time in hospital in the year prior to the survey. Her grandmother explained:

"Children go hungry all day, even at this time, they don't have food. Whatever is there, I feed them. In the morning, sometimes they go hungry to school... Her [Kareena's] mother worries and this upsets her health. She saves 50 and 100 rupees with me and collects the money and tells me to go and pay the fees of this child, and again she saves and pays another child's fees. That's how these people are managing. Somehow they [the children] have to study. These days, if the girls are not educated, they will not get married."

Kareena describes her future aspirations as being "to study well" and to help her parents. She would like to continue studying beyond tenth grade, which is the end of compulsory education. However, she says: "There are problems in the house, so first I will finish tenth grade and after that I will think of further studies."

This suggests that food insecurity is not only affecting children's wellbeing today, but that it will have longer-term consequences for children's physical development and wellbeing. Here, again, policy can play a major role in protecting children from the impacts of environmental shocks and food shortages. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, the government's Midday Meal Scheme provides children from first to eighth grade with a hot midday meal, which consists of 400 calories and 12g of protein. The scheme aims to increase enrolment, retention and attendance rates and improve levels of nutrition. Children in the younger age group (born between 2000-01) from households which were affected by the 2002-03 drought (India's most severe drought for two decades) had a lower height-for-age and weight-for-age than their counterparts who were not affected by the drought. However, there was no difference if the children participated in the Midday Meal Scheme, suggesting that the scheme protected children from the impact of drought.⁷

SHOCKS HAVE SHORT- AND LONG-TERM IMPACTS ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING

Experiencing shocks and food insecurity can have a series of impacts on children's physical and cognitive development, and subjective wellbeing, with long-term implications for their life chances. These effects can be particularly profound when children are young, as this is a crucial period in their development. Early malnutrition is associated with stunting (being shorter than expected for age) – an indicator also frequently associated with lower performance on cognitive tests.⁸

Food shortages are also associated with poorer outcomes for children. Analysis of children's outcomes when they were 15 years old demonstrates that experiencing food shortages when the child was 12 years old was associated with poorer health and wellbeing (after controlling for a range of factors, including ethnicity, location and household wealth). Children with a past household experience of food shortage:

- were 60% less likely to have a healthy body mass index (BMI)-for-age in Peru
- scored lower in cognitive achievement tests in Andhra Pradesh and Ethiopia⁹
- reported lower self-rated health in Vietnam and Andhra Pradesh
- reported lower subjective wellbeing in Ethiopia and Peru.

Interviews with children and their carers illustrate the different ways that shocks have an impact on children's life chances.

Fabricio is nine years old and lives in rural Peru. He helps on the family farm, harvesting potatoes. Heavy rains and hail had damaged the crops in the months before the survey. This is a great worry for Fabricio. He said: "People are sad. People say, 'What are we going to do without our produce and if we have to buy food from market?'" Fabricio's mother says she is struggling to feed the family and that they can only eat rice once a week. Although the family were promised help with food items, this never arrived.

Fabricio's mother has suffered from gastritis for the past six years but does not have money "to be cured well", and his father has bronchial pneumonia. Fabricio explained: "Sometimes my father is sick with the flu, with a cough... He gets back pain as well... He was not able to work, my father nearly cried." Fabricio is scared because he feels that "the hail has also killed people with the flu" and he cries when his mother is ill. "Who will I live with if you die?" he asks her.

In Ethiopia, Yenealem's account suggests that the struggles of balancing work and school and the precarious nature of the family's livelihood are affecting her studies and health, even though she feels it is important to work to earn an income. Yenealem is 17 years old and lives in rural Amhara. She works picking haricot beans to support the family; her father and brother are both ill with typhoid and hepatitis. Although her family are supportive of her education, she describes how "my school performance is dropping down because I become exhausted after picking haricot beans... our crops are failing and all the responsibility lies on my mother's shoulders."

Yenealem feels that being exhausted has increased her susceptibility to disease, and she was recently off school for a week because of illness. She feels that her future may be affected by these events: "I have to assist [my mother]... It is my obligation to be engaged in the job... So this is a threat to my future education."

Children and young people's worries about environmental shocks and food insecurity also shape their future aspirations. Hanan is nine and lives with her parents and five-month-old baby sister in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She has big ambitions: "I want to be a doctor. And I will give treatment for children and adults... If I study hard and complete my education, I will make my dream come true." Yet she also explains that her family have been running out of food and had to borrow money in order to eat. Hanan's mother hopes her daughter will be able to achieve her dream: "I really want her to go to university. I will be able to afford it by then." But she also says Hanan first needs to have "enough materials and equipment" to continue in school, and is afraid that "since I do not fulfil all her needs, she may go to do bad things in the future. It is very scary."

In Andhra Pradesh, India, the struggles faced by Harika's family in earning a living from agriculture mean she aspires to a better life but her present difficulties also make her wonder if she will ever achieve it. Harika's family belong to a caste with a very low socio-economic status. Her father had an accident three years ago and was unable to work in the fields. Harika explains: "That was the time we did not take care of the cotton fields and that was the reason the crop was not good."

She supported the family by doing extra work around the house and in the fields, but this meant she often missed school. She found it difficult to manage school and work, and struggled to perform well in exams. Harika sees education as a route to a better life, because "if you study well, you will get an educated husband". This would enable her to escape from farming: "If you get a husband who is in agriculture, you will have to go to the fields and work, but if you get an educated husband, you can be happy... We see our parents working and we feel that we should not be like that... They work in the fields and work hard daily."

POOR-QUALITY LIVING ENVIRONMENTS HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

Environmental insecurity affects children's development not only through shocks and rising food prices, but also by determining the physical spaces in which children grow up – where they live, study, work, play, access services (such as water and sanitation), and experience accidents, injuries, violence, crime or pollution. This is particularly apparent in urban areas, where almost half the world's children live. Aggregate data obscures the vast disparities in living conditions and access to services among different sections of the urban population.

Peru, like other South American countries, has experienced rapid urbanisation. According to the 2007 national census, 76% of the population live in urban areas. The types of risk experienced by children in urban environments often differ greatly from those experienced by their rural counterparts, but may be no less detrimental to children's health and wellbeing.

Children involved in the Young Lives study in Peru were concerned by the lack of public services in their cities, such as street lighting and regular waste collection. In the San Roman neighbourhood, on the outskirts of the mountain city of Juliaca, 16-year-old Carmen described how her house was flooded by dirty water when the drains were blocked by rubbish, and it started to rain heavily:

"I got up in the night and my sister said 'The street is like a river', and I didn't believe her – how is that possible? She said to me, 'Let's go to the roof', and when I got up, I saw that my aunt was there sweeping. We went running up towards the roof, and there was water everywhere."

Public spaces, which are littered and dirty, can cause children to feel ashamed of their day-to-day surroundings. On a community walk around San Roman, 18-year-old Luz told Young Lives researchers she wished the streets were not so dirty and "ugly", as they make her feel bad. Similarly, 16-year-old Fabian described how the waste collection was suspended in his community in Lima for six months, which made him feel annoyed, as "the neighbourhood looked bad". He also mentioned that street lighting was only recently installed:

"It's better now...It used to be so dark, all dark. You could fall, anything could happen."

Perceptions of rising crime and insecurity, resulting from increasing socio-economic inequalities in urban centres, emerge as a critical concern for children. Luz worries about robberies in San Roman. When asked whether her community is a good place to live, she replied:

"Well, more or less. Well, not so much, not so good... The noise and a bit...Well, the thieves frighten me... Whatever time of day, they can come in. When you're not home, they can come inside and take everything, leaving your house practically empty."

Some Young Lives children are disillusioned about the future. Many feel that "everything stays the same" because political leaders such as local mayors do not take their concerns seriously. Children also describe feeling disempowered, as they feel they lack voice and agency to secure positive changes. This is illustrated by Carmen, who finds it difficult to challenge adults who fail to respect the local surroundings:

"I would like [my locality] to be more green, and cleaner as well. People don't have awareness. They throw things over there in the gutter, thinking it's the rubbish bin. They throw stuff there. It makes me angry. Once, a lady... I think it was orange juice, she threw the bag into the gutter. I didn't say anything, but I think that if I had complained, I would have said 'What's the matter with you? Why are you throwing that there, if that is not for rubbish?'"

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that not all children report negative experiences of living in urban environments. In Peru, Sergio and Peter, both 16, are content living in their communities in San Roman. Sergio enjoys mixing with friends and having the space to play football, whereas Peter enjoys living in one of the more 'calm' streets, as he is able to sleep well and ride his bike. He would consider staying there in the future as long as it stays calm: "That's the most important thing for me."

Even though Peru is a middle-income country, similar issues are faced by children living in low-income countries like Ethiopia. Afework lives in the capital, Addis Ababa. He says he likes his local area but is "sick of the rubbish" and is "afraid of the dirty places that would give us colds". At school, Afework says there are places he avoids "because it smells bad and exposes us to flu". Previously, he caught typhoid from drinking undistilled water. He believes that having good sanitation is essential to having a good life, along with respect for your family and playing football.

Some young people also cited urban inequality as a concern. Denbel lives with his mother in urban Amhara, Ethiopia. His father died eight years ago, when Denbel was eight. Denbel, now 16, reflects on some positive local developments: "Roadside lights have been installed. New schools have been built, clinics have also been opened." However, things have become more difficult for his family: "We don't buy foods in large quantity as we used to do before. Now, we buy little by little because it is very expensive." He says: "There are days when we don't have enough food. Sometimes we eat dinner and skip the next breakfast", and their house leaks when it rains. Consequently, Denbel thinks that poverty "makes a person unequal with others".

He gives the examples of inequality in clothing and in schooling, as "the poor won't be able to learn properly as he/she tries to concentrate on fulfilling their basic needs rather than learning. Some would stop; some would work, and as a result may not attend their education seriously."

FAMILIES EXPERIENCE MULTIPLE SHOCKS, WHICH STRAINS THEIR RESILIENCE

Shocks are not usually one-off events for children growing up in poverty. Many households experience multiple adverse events, either recurrent experiences of the same shock or multiple, different shocks. Shocks may be community-wide (such as drought), sapping the resources of households and their neighbours, or idiosyncratic (such as illness, affecting the household specifically). In Ethiopia, from 2006 to 2009:

- only a minority of households surveyed (13%) reported no shock or adverse event
- about a third of households (35%) reported experiencing one or two shocks
- more than half of households (52%) reported experiencing three or more shocks
- about one in eight households (13%) reported experiencing seven shocks or more.

Multiple shocks wear down household assets and coping strategies, and may increase the likelihood that families remain trapped in poverty, reinforcing the intergenerational transmission of poverty.¹⁰

In Ethiopia, households that were affected by a shock were more likely to become poor than the average unaffected household. For instance, of those households living above the poverty line in 2006, about two in five (39.6%) had fallen below the poverty line by 2009.

However, more than half (54.7%) of those households above the poverty line in 2006 who subsequently experienced an environmental shock were poor in 2009 (this was also higher than the chances of becoming poor in rural areas, so illustrating that this is not just as a result of living in rural areas).

Case study 1 illustrates how families that are hit by multiple shocks gradually lose their asset base – the resources they would use to cope.

Case study 1: Hung, 17, from Vietnam

Hung is 17 years old and lives in the Red River Delta in Vietnam. His family have suffered a series of environmental shocks. First, a severe hailstorm in 2006 damaged 500 ornamental kumquat trees, costing the family an estimated 14 million Vietnamese dong (VND). This was followed by floods in 2008, which damaged the crop of oranges the family were growing, at a loss of 40m VND. Hung's mother explains:

"Some people told me the government would help us, so I tried to register for support. Then, [the district leaders] said they would help in the following year. In addition, they told me that they subsidised vegetables, not oranges. They tried to pass the buck to each other. Poor me! My family only grew oranges, not vegetables. All of the oranges were damaged because of the flood. When they refused to help me, I had to come back home without receiving anything."

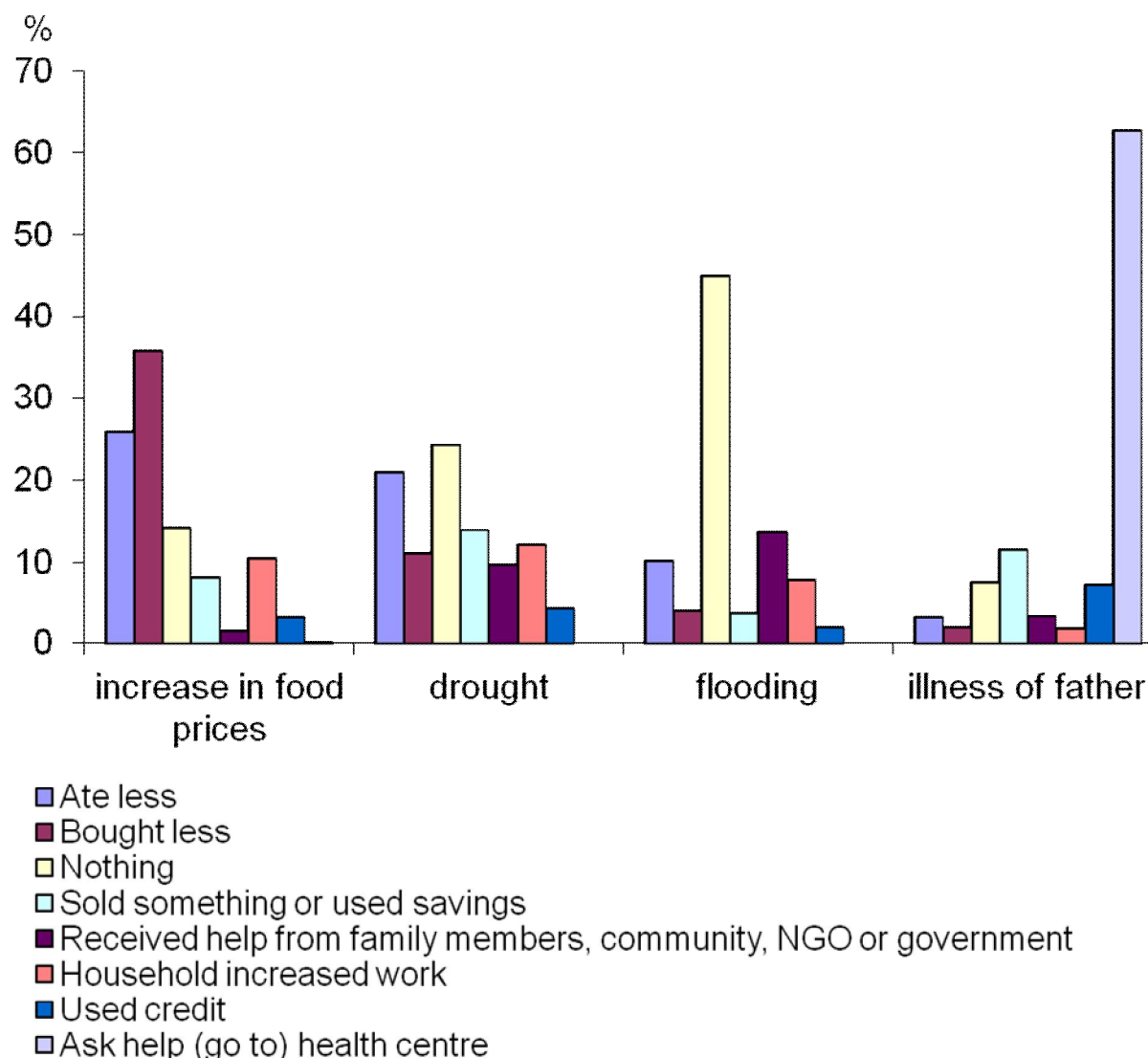
This was followed by foot and mouth disease. Hung describes how "there was a month when a disease killed all of our pigs... On the first day, only three pigs died. But on the second day, they all died. We lost more than 100m VND." Then Hung's brother required surgery, at a cost of more than 30m VND. Hung failed his secondary school exams and started work in a construction company.

His mother explains: "My children told me that we didn't have to worry any more. They also told me that when they are strong and healthy, they could earn money. Unless they are weak, everything can be solved. They made me understand that I didn't need to worry about anything because if they are healthy, they could earn even 50m VND. Thanks to their encouragement, I could get over all difficulties despite of the financial loss, which is too hard for a farmer to suffer."

The entire household, including children, are involved in the management of risk, which can have longer-term consequences for children's life chances. For example, in India, the amount of time that children had to work (whether paid or unpaid) increased by two hours if the household suffered a loss of income, with girls being more affected than boys.¹¹

Figure 3 illustrates how households in Ethiopia respond to different types of shocks. While most families report no action being taken, this could be for a number of reasons: it may be that household members felt more comfortable giving this answer; that the shock was not severe enough to warrant action; or that they lacked the capacity to respond.

Figure 3: Household responses to shocks, Ethiopia



Other responses to shocks include eating less (as illustrated by Kassaye’s family), receiving help from family members (Hung’s family), increased household work (Yenealem), and increased debt. Households depend heavily on family or community sources of support in coping with shocks, and poorer households tend to be less well connected socially and less able to access credit from formal and informal sources.

Shocks that affect large numbers of people, such as drought or rising prices, limit the ability of families to ask relatives for help. As Kareena’s grandmother (Andhra Pradesh) explained: “People will help once in a while, but how can they help all the time? They don’t have money at all. If you go to any relative, they will not give 10 rupees. You have to stand on your own feet. That’s how they are managing their families.” Families are also worried about falling further into debt. In rural Andhra Pradesh, community members discussed responses in the aftermath of floods, which washed away houses and crops. One carer explained how “we take credit from the landlords in times of need, and we have to work for them until the amount taken is recovered. But we again fall into a circle of debts before the former is cleared.”

One important recent policy development in India is the introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). This is a social protection scheme that

provides 100 days of employment a year at a minimum wage rate to every adult in a rural household willing to undertake unskilled manual work. One positive aspect of the scheme is its potential as an insurance against environmental shocks. For example, households affected by drought are 10.7% more likely to register for the MGNREGS. Similarly, households whose primary occupation is agriculture are 12.7% more likely to register. Registration and take-up of work are positively correlated with positive impacts on children's nutritional outcomes.¹² Social protection schemes like MGNREGS therefore have the potential to target all three of the pillars of sustainable development – the economic, social and environmental, as illustrated by Rajesh's family (see case study 2).

Case study 2: Rajesh, 16, from Andhra Pradesh, India

Rajesh is from one of the 'scheduled tribes' living in rural Andhra Pradesh. He describes how environmental insecurity has affected his family's access to food: "We faced some problems, they happened this year. There were floods and all the fields were inundated. Heavy rains damaged the crops and everyone's farmland was badly affected." As a result, he says, "We were forced to buy rice and other things since then from outside... Whatever little money we earned was spent on buying rice."

The family's situation has improved since then, as both Rajesh's parents have been working as part of the MGNREGS. With the money earned, he says: "We bought clothes. I got money to buy notebooks. My sister is studying for a degree, and she will be studying the final year in the next year, so we were able to send her some money for her studies as she was in need of it." He thinks that his family's financial situation has improved, "all due to these government schemes, which provide us with work and wages."

The community environment has also been improved by the scheme: "They dig ponds, level up mounds, they spread the earth evenly. The potholes are filled up with stones and earth. Next, farmland is developed."

Social protection schemes can, therefore, promote children's life chances by reducing poverty and acting as a safety net in the event of shocks.¹³ The Midday Meal Scheme in Andhra Pradesh, discussed earlier, improved children's health and reduced their risk of malnutrition. While these schemes are valuable, they need to go further to be child-sensitive. For instance, they should ensure that families are not forced to make trade-offs, such as children having to substitute for adult labour around the household while adults attend public works schemes.

Coverage also remains a problem, as there are considerable numbers of children from poor families in Andhra Pradesh who are not covered by MGNREGS. Finally, the performance of social protection schemes depends on the context in which they operate. Chronic poverty and deeply entrenched inequality will make it harder for basic services and social protection schemes to function.¹⁴

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This policy brief has explored some of the ways in which families and children relate to their environment. It has considered the impact of environmental and other shocks, food price fluctuations, and poor-quality living environments on children and young people. Understanding children's perspectives, and those of their families, is essential in shaping policies, particularly those seeking to deliver on the outcomes of Rio+20. The Rio+20 discussions foreshadow discussions on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and whatever framework is put in place beyond 2015. Children and their families' experiences illustrate the need to connect

sustainable development with poverty eradication. Their experiences highlight three important lessons for policy-makers:

- *Creating an enabling environment for children*

Environmental sustainability is both an urban and a rural concern. Rural development is an important element of pro-poor growth, but the evidence presented here reinforces the importance of sustaining natural resources, and the consequences of environmental degradation for rural communities who are often more disadvantaged than urban communities. In urban areas, inequality and the quality of the lived environment are both pressing concerns for children and young people (this includes lack of adequate sanitation, pollution, the threat of violence and crime, and growing inequality between poorer and richer households).

- *Mainstreaming equity concerns to reach the poorest children*

Many countries have seen rapid economic growth in recent years, yet poorer households still experience regular shocks (especially environmental and health events). Because such households have fewer material resources to call on, it is also likely that they will be less well equipped to deal with adverse events. This has the potential to entrench inequalities and reinforce rather than break the poverty cycle. Since poorer households spend a higher proportion of their income on food, they are at greater risk from food price inflation (the result is that many families eat less frequently or eat cheaper, less nutritious food). Rio+20 discussions need to consider strategies for pro-poor growth as well as sustainability. Growth strategies which lead to greater inequality are inefficient in tackling poverty and may well prove to be ineffective in the long term. If the gains of growth accrue disproportionately to the richest in society, this will be less efficient in tackling poverty than if the gains were shared more equally.

- *Delivering integrated solutions in response to multidimensional poverty*

This policy brief has demonstrated that families often experience multiple and recurrent shocks. Shocks may be community-wide (such as drought), sapping the resources of households and their neighbours, or idiosyncratic (such as illness, affecting the household specifically). In some of the cases we have referred to, households experience both types of shocks, as food shortages or crop failure are often linked to illness among household members. These shocks can then have multiple impacts on children and their families (for instance, if crop losses worsen access to nutrition, or undermine health and weaken the ability to work or study). The development of more comprehensive systems-based approaches to social policy could provide an effective answer to this. Good coverage of social protection interventions may buffer the impacts of environmental and other shocks, therefore supporting children's ongoing participation in school.

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You can find more information about this study, and all other Young Lives publications, on the website: www.younglives.org.uk

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