

How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium?

This survey report presents initial findings from the third round of data collection by Young Lives in Vietnam, carried out from late 2009 to early 2010. It gives a broad outline of some of the key indicators of childhood poverty and changes that have taken place in the children's lives between the first round and second rounds of data collection in 2002 and 2006 and this third round. Data are mainly presented for the entire age cohort, in most cases separated into gender, wealth groups, rural/urban location and ethnicity. In particular, we are able to make comparisons between the older children at age 8 in 2002 (in Round 1), and the younger cohort at age 8 in 2009 (Round 3) – to highlight changes that have happened in the study communities over that time. The full richness of the data is not reflected in this preliminary report, but we hope that it contains enough information to prompt other researchers, policymakers and stakeholders to start to engage with the data.

For this third survey round, the Young Lives team visited 2,939 of the original sample of 3,000 children and their households (1,963 of the 8-year-old Younger Cohort and 976 of the 15-year-old Older Cohort). The accumulated attrition rate since the first survey round in 2002 is 2 per cent.

There have been many changes in Vietnam since the first round of the Young Lives survey in 2002. Rapid growth and poverty reduction have continued, and Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization in January 2007 is widely seen as an important milestone in the process of Vietnam's integration into the global economy. However, the Vietnam economy has also suffered due to the global economic slowdown following the banking crisis of 2007 and the global food price rises of 2007-08. These international shocks represented a real test to the process of poverty reduction which has been impressive since 1993, but has showed signs of slowing down. The most recent Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey shows that the proportion of people living before the official poverty line was 10.7 per cent in 2010, down from 16 per cent in 2006.

This impressive overall success conceals the fact that chronic poverty persists and the disparities are widening, between the rich and the poor, the Kinh majority and ethnic minorities, and between urban and rural areas. It is the girls and the boys within these persistent pockets of poverty who must be reached and the Government has introduced a range of policies and programmes to address access to education for minority children, quality of education, child health and nutrition, and support for vulnerable communities.

Levels of wealth, consumption and poverty

The Young Lives data suggests that progress in absolute poverty reduction continued with the proportion of

children living below the poverty line (defined as 2,100 calories per day) falling from 22.7 per cent to 10.7 percent. These are progressive changes and were most substantial for ethnic minorities and children whose caregivers had had no schooling, where poverty rates are highest. However, great disparities persist particularly between urban and rural areas, with quarter the number of children living below the poverty line in urban areas compared to their rural peers (12.5 per cent). This progress in poverty reduction, however, should not be interpreted as a true reflection of national progress, it also reflects life-course changes in the Young lives sample, in particular that the households in the sample have either 8-year-old or 15-year-old children was instrumental in the reduction seen in the Young Lives data.

Progress in poverty reduction occurred because more poor households ceased to be poor than non-poor households slipping into poverty. Poverty in the rural sector was more dynamic than in the urban sector, in the sense that a greater percentage of poor rural households escaped poverty (18.5 per cent) and non-poor rural households became poor (4.5 per cent) over that period than did urban households, although urban households are typically better off.

Over the years from Round 1 to Round 3 (2002 to 2009), the wealth index increased for all the groups of households considered.¹ However, as with poverty, notable disparities between regions and ethnic groups persist. While the average wealth index of the Young Lives households in Da Nang is high, the corresponding figure for the Northern Uplands is just half that. In all the rounds of the surveys, the wealth index is positively associated with the level of schooling of the caregivers of the Young Lives children, so households with better-

¹ The wealth index used by Young Lives is an important measure of a household's socio-economic status, and is calculated as a simple average of the following three components: 1) housing quality; 2) access to a set of consumer durables (scaled); and 3) access to services, expressed as a figure between 0 and 1.



educated parents are likely to have higher wealth levels and, as we observed in the Round 2 survey, families with low levels of parental education are increasingly likely to find themselves in the poorest wealth index quintile.

Shocks and adverse events

Recent events, however, have led to a situation where more people experienced economic and livelihood shocks than in previous rounds of the survey. We find that this was in large part because of the global economic recession and the increase in food prices in 2007–09, with one-third of all Young Lives households reporting that this had affected them negatively. Economic and livelihood shocks hit both poor and non-poor households in all the regions, but the biggest increases happened in the Central Coast region, in both the rural and the urban sectors, perhaps due to the economic slowdown. There is also a general trend of increasing numbers of households reporting environmental shocks, and illness and family death are also frequently reported as adverse events (by 26 per cent of households), reflecting our finding from other Young Lives countries about how significant a burden ill health is for poor families.

Access to services

Access to safe water in the urban sector has largely been universal (99 per cent), and therefore the progress made in supplying safe water was mostly because of the rural sector (which increased from 75 per cent in 2006 to 80.7 per cent in 2009). For both sectors, the rate of access to improved sanitation facilities increased gradually from Round 1 (48 per cent), and in 2009 62 per cent of the Young Lives sample households had access to improved sanitation.

Health

The continuation of economic growth and the implementation of poverty reduction programmes have brought about an overall improvement in children's health. The Younger Cohort children (born in 2001–02) have better measures of weight-for-age than the Older Cohort (only 24.6 per cent are underweight at age 8, compared to 36.7 per cent of the Older Cohort in 2002) and height-for-age (with only 19.8 per cent of them stunted, compared to 27.6 per cent of the Older Cohort at age 8). There was a reduction in rate of stunting in all the sub-groups under study (although rates remain very high among ethnic minorities with almost 50 per cent of children underweight or stunted). The group where levels of malnutrition had not fallen was children whose caregivers had no education.

Education and school

Primary school education is nearly universal in Vietnam. The overall rate of enrolment among Young Lives children is 98 per cent and has not changed since we started the survey in 2002. The 2 per cent of children who are not in school are mainly from ethnic minority groups and for some disadvantaged groups (ethnic minority children and those whose parents have low levels of education) enrolment is lower at about 90 per cent. Most of the children started school at the age of 6 and the late starters were concentrated among the children whose caregivers had no schooling.

Vietnam's favourable record on primary education enrolment, however, is now being undermined by country's increasing body of older out-of-school children. Vietnam now has the largest number of out-of-school children in

South-East Asia, and is one of ten countries with more than 1 million out-of-school children. By Round 3 of the Young Lives survey, over 20 per cent of the Older Cohort had already left school. The differences in the enrolment rate for the 15-year-olds between urban and rural sectors, and between the poor and the non-poor groupings, are sizable. Less than half of the poor 15-year-olds attended school in Round 3, while the figure for their non-poor counterparts was 78 per cent. This is particularly evident for children whose parents have no education – only 46 per cent of whom were still in school, showing how low levels of parental education are closely linked with lower wealth and lower outcomes for their children.

Tuition fees and extra classes

Virtually every Younger Cohort child who goes to school is exempted from tuition fees because of government regulations with respect to primary school children. That is not the case for upper secondary education, and our data show that only 18.6 per cent of the Older Cohort adolescents still attending school are receiving school aid, mostly in the form of reductions in or exemption from tuition fees. The main reasons for these adolescents being eligible for school aid include their household's poverty, residence in communities with difficult socio-economic conditions, and being from an ethnic minority. Nearly half of the adolescents from the lowest wealth index quartile get some school aid, and over 70 per cent of the 15-year-olds from ethnic minorities are exempted from tuition fees.

Extra classes (paid for by parents) are taken by students from all sections of the population, including the bottom wealth index quartile, the poorest communities, and the children whose caregivers did not complete primary school, indicating the importance that parents give to

their children's education. In the Red River Delta and some districts of the urban sector in Central Coast, nearly every student takes extra classes, but in other communities in the Northern Uplands or Central Coast rural, only a minority of students do so. Ninety per cent of students say that they take extra classes to improve their academic performance in their regular classes. The next most important motivation is the perception that the extra classes help students prepare for exams. Only a few students say that they attend extra classes because they do not learn enough in their normal school classes. Although we see some children from the poorest families are taking extra classes, we find that for both cohorts, higher wealth index and level of schooling of caregivers are likely to increase a child's participation in extra classes. For the Older Cohort, girls are more likely to take, and spend more time on, extra classes than the boys. There is not such a significant gender gap for the Younger Cohort.

Children's time use and child work

There are almost no children working for pay among the 8-year-old children in the Young Lives sample, even among children from poor households. For the children who do some work on their household farm, or herding for their households, the average time spent was about two and a half hours per day. However, the time spent doing this kind of work varies widely between regions and sections of the population. Most children spent about five hours a day at school. As far as other activities done by the Younger Cohort are concerned, the evidence shows that the higher the caregiver's level of schooling, the more time the children spent on study at home and taking extra classes.



A very small minority of the Older Cohort work for pay (just 6 per cent). This is higher, however, for some groups, such as poorer quintiles and the young people whose caregivers did not complete primary school. For many of the young people who do paid work, the working day is longer than eight hours and for teenagers in the Northern Uplands and from ethnic minorities it is nearly ten hours.

Conclusion

Young Lives evidence demonstrates that children born after the millennium in Vietnam have more favourable indicators in health and education than our Older Cohort children born in 1994–95. However, progress in care for children has not been even across regions, sectors and ethnic groups. The government commitment to the development of children in Vietnam is well reflected in a series of major policy documents, such as the National Plan of Action for Children 2001–2010, the National Strategy for Education Development 2001–2010, the National Educational Strategy 2011–2020; the 2010–2015 National Program for Child Protection, and a number of Decisions by the prime minister, and Decrees by the government. The real impacts of the documents are yet to be seen. What is certain is that the government needs to step up measures to ensure that adequate



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healthcare and education services are available to the children in disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the interventions have to reach the children at a very young age. This country report may help to identify some major groups of children and the areas of services policymakers may consider for interventions.

About Young Lives

Young Lives is a long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in four developing countries – Ethiopia, India (in Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam – over 15 years, the timeframe set by the UN to assess progress towards the UN Millennium Development Goals. Through interviews, group work and case studies with the children, their parents, teachers and community representatives, we are collecting a wealth of information, not only about their material and social circumstances, but also their perspectives on their lives and aspirations for the future, set against the environmental and social realities of their communities.

We are following two groups, or cohorts, of children in each country: 2,000 children who were born in 2001-02 and 1,000 children born in 1994-95. These groups provide insights into every phase of childhood. The younger children are being tracked from infancy to their mid-teens and the older children through into adulthood, when some will become parents themselves. When this is matched with information gathered about their parents, we will be able to reveal much about the intergenerational transfer of poverty, how families on the margins move in and out of poverty, and the policies that can make a real difference to their lives.

In Vietnam the Young Lives research team is based within the Centre for Analysis and Forecast, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (CAF-VASS). The survey is carried out by a team within the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO).

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