

Less Opportunity, More Risk, Greater Vulnerability: How Inequalities Undermine Children's Development



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Inequalities combine in a range of ways to undermine the development of children's full potential. Not having access to pre-school education, for example, contributes to the inequality of opportunity experienced by poorer children, while inequalities of risk mean they are more likely to experience illness in the family, and their family is less likely to have the financial resources to cope. Children's experiences of inequality in themselves undermine their development, and can also affect their self-confidence, their relationships and their sense of well-being. Cohort data from Young Lives reveal how poverty intersects with inequalities linked to gender, ethnicity, urban-rural location in varying ways during different stages of childhood, creating inequalities in health, nutrition and education. Our evidence shows how inequalities in children's circumstances feed through into inequalities in their outcomes, which in turn create inequalities in the opportunities open to them as they grow up.



Evidence from Young Lives shows that inequalities originate in multiple disadvantages. The children who are most at risk come from the poorest households, in rural locations, belong to an ethnic or language minority or low-caste group, and have parents with little or no education. These children consistently fare worse than their peers in terms of their poor health and their learning outcomes.

Understanding the interaction between multiple disadvantages is key, because it compounds negative impacts on children's development, highlighting the need to look at the whole picture rather than focusing on only one dimension. In Peru, for example, child stunting is lower in urban than in rural areas, but the poorest children in urban areas are four times more likely to be stunted than their better-off peers.

Key findings

- Inequalities in children's development stem from multiple disadvantages which combine to produce negative impacts on their outcomes. Policies and services must take a holistic approach in response to the multidimensional nature and consequences of inequality.
- Education does not always compensate for background disadvantage, and may reinforce inequalities. Well-designed school curricula that focus on supporting all children can help to narrow gaps in achievement.
- School attendance and achievement may be affected by illness or death in the family and pressure on children to work. School systems need to be flexible if they are to meet the needs of children combining school with work and/or caring responsibilities, and retain pupils who may otherwise leave early.
- Early malnutrition has serious, long-term consequences, but there is evidence some children may recover. Investments in nutrition and care targeted at the most vulnerable can mitigate the negative effects of malnutrition in early life.
- Gender differences become more significant as children get older, but boys are not always advantaged. Policies to reduce gender-based differences need to engage with the context that influences parents' and children's choices, as well as discrimination.
- Social protection is a key way of underpinning pro-poor policy, but must be well-designed, targeted and implemented, and must take into account how programmes are perceived.

Inequalities of opportunity and risk

Structural inequalities result in disparities in both the opportunities open to children and the risk of adverse events such as economic or environmental shocks, illness or death in the family. Not only are the poorest children and their families most at risk of experiencing such events, they are more vulnerable to the effects because they have fewer resources to cope.

Evidence from Ethiopia, for example, shows large differences in the numbers of adverse events experienced by children in the Young Lives sample. Multiple shocks were concentrated among poor rural communities, which were most affected by crop failures or the death of livestock, frequently compounded by high levels of illness or death among family members. Household responses included eating less, selling assets and taking on more debt.

In this way, multiple disadvantages in household circumstances combine to create inequalities of opportunity, risk and vulnerability. These inequalities work to progressively undermine children's development, with long-term consequences for their prospects.

How inequalities undermine children's development

Poor children quickly fall behind

Inequalities in household circumstances rapidly translate into inequalities in learning outcomes across all of the Young Lives countries. Vocabulary, reading and maths tests we administered to the children at age 8 show the factors often associated with large gaps in achievement were level of parental education, urban-rural location, and household wealth.

We found that children from many poorer families who did well in our tests at age 5 fall behind their better-off peers by the age of 8. Conversely, less able children from better-off families made rapid progress and within three years had caught up or overtaken their poorer peers, including those who had done better initially.

There are multiple factors at work here, including inequalities of opportunity – for example, in access to good early education services and primary school – as well as inequalities of risk and vulnerability. Our evidence shows that while early disadvantages in test scores persist, the growth of gaps linked to disadvantage plateau during the middle years of childhood, suggesting that schooling can play a role in mitigating the growth of differences. However, these can open up further during later childhood (see below).

Early malnutrition has consequences for well-being as well as performance

Early stunting has many serious, long-term consequences. The link between malnutrition and cognitive development is

well-known, but Young Lives shows that low height-for-age at age 8 years was associated with lower self-confidence, self-esteem and educational aspirations at age 12.

The links between socio-economic disadvantage and stunting are also clear: in Peru over 50% of Younger Cohort children from the poorest households were stunted in 2006 (at age 5), compared to less than 10% of the wealthiest children. In Peru, Vietnam and India, there is a higher prevalence of stunting among children from ethnic minority or lower-caste groups.

The first 1,000 days of life – from the beginning of pregnancy until the age of 2 – are key to a child's long-term development, and inadequate nutrition during this window has a profound and lasting impact. Our cohort data show that some children's nutritional status may falter after the first year, while for others there is some recovery after a poor start. This highlights the need for policy interventions to be both early and sustained into middle childhood.

Strikingly, stunting persists despite economic growth in Young Lives countries, revealing the entrenched nature of inequalities. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, GDP doubled between 2002 and 2009, but our data show the stunting rate at age 8 fell by just four percentage points, with no improvement at all among the poorest 40% of children. The result of this is that the negative effects of stunting are increasingly concentrated among more marginalised children.

Gender-based inequalities vary

Within the Young Lives sample, inequalities in household circumstances are more closely linked to development outcomes rather than gender inequalities, especially at younger ages. Analysis of pre-school access for children aged 3 to 5, for example, found only small differences between boys and girls compared with gaps related to household wealth.

Gender differences become more significant as children get older, but take different forms within and between countries. Gender bias is more typically pro-boy in India, and to a lesser extent in Ethiopia, whereas in Vietnam some gender gaps favour girls who seem to do better in school and outperformed boys on maths tests at age 15.

Our evidence shows how household factors such as poverty, ethnicity or caste, and mother's level of education intersect with gender, shaping opportunity costs and as a result the different treatment of boys and girls. When resources are short, parents' choices about how to invest in their children (for example by buying a school uniform) are influenced by their (and their children's) understanding of the future economic and social opportunities open to boys or girls to create disparities. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, parents are more likely to pay the fees required to enrol boys in the low-fee private schools they hope will deliver a better education, resulting in girls being more likely to be sent to government schools.

Inequalities widen as childhood progresses

Some inequalities develop progressively through childhood, some are linked to specific life events, and some are amplified by key life transitions, such as the onset of adolescence. Gender, for example, plays an increasingly significant role, as poverty reinforces differing expectations and attitudes towards boys and girls. These include perceived opportunities such as employment prospects, and perceived risks, which in Ethiopia may reinforce early marriage, seen as a way of 'safeguarding' girls' reputation and economic security.

Gender differences are amplified by the increasing pressure to work felt by older children from poor families, which can compete with their schooling. Boys typically spend more time doing unpaid work on the family farm or business, while girls spend more time caring for other family members or on domestic tasks. As the opportunity costs of staying in school rise and children's ability to contribute to household income increases, children from the poorest families are most likely to drop out of school early, but there are gender differences which vary between countries.

Illness among children and parents and parental death were also found to be major reasons for patchy attendance at school and slow progression. The higher risk of illness faced by poor children interacts with their greater vulnerability, as healthcare may be expensive and difficult to access even for common illnesses. Staggeringly, in Ethiopia one in five of the Young Lives children had lost at least one parent by the age of 12.

Education may reinforce rather than reduce disadvantage

Expectations that schooling can be transformative are high among Young Lives children and their parents. Sadly, the reality is that a combination of differential access to pre-school and primary school, infrequent attendance and variability in the quality of teaching, all of which contribute to early drop-out, may serve to amplify rather than reduce inequalities.

This process often begins even before a child starts school. Young Lives evidence reinforces global findings that early childhood programmes currently benefit better-off children more, and so perpetuate cycles of poverty. In general, parents and children who require most support are doubly disadvantaged: by the poverty of their circumstances, and by difficulties in accessing good early childhood programmes, with minority groups especially at risk because of language and cultural barriers. Extending pre-school programmes to those children who can benefit the most is therefore a pressing priority.

In Andhra Pradesh, even some of the poorest urban families (and increasing numbers of rural families) are 'voting with their feet' in favour of low-cost private schools, which parents think are better despite limited evidence that this is the case. Unsurprisingly, access to private schooling is closely

linked to household wealth, ethnicity/caste, urban or rural location, and parental education levels. And with parents choosing to invest limited resources in boys' education rather than in girls, school choices are increasing gender-based inequalities.

In later years of schooling, the large gaps that can be seen in pre-school provision but 'plateau' in middle childhood start to widen again. Late enrolment, infrequent attendance, slow progression and early drop-out are all more common among the most disadvantaged groups, and the effects of inequalities on children's education outcomes are increasingly apparent.

Social protection programmes are important but can have unintended results

The Young Lives data show the potential for social protection as a way to underpin pro-poor policies. However, our findings also highlight the risks of unintended and possibly adverse consequences for children from poorly designed or implemented schemes, and in particular, the limitations of narrow targeting.

Evidence from Ethiopia suggests it was hard to identify clear differences between the beneficiaries of the Productive Safety Net Programme and the non-beneficiaries in poor communities. In addition, poverty-based targeting may reinforce existing negative attitudes and exacerbate stigma or discrimination experienced by ethnic minority groups, making it unlikely that the scheme will achieve widespread support.

Children are well aware of inequalities

How children understand and experience poverty is often a neglected dimension in development debates, but is especially important in relation to inequality, as children can be very aware of their household circumstances. Children are sensitive to their relative social position, and the opportunities open to them. Mediated by their family, peer group and community, their experience of inequality shapes their personal and social identities, their relationships, self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities.

The Young Lives children are asked to judge their position on a ladder, where the ninth step represents the best possible life and the first step represents the worst. We found that children's subjective well-being mirrors more objective indicators of their circumstances, underlining their acute awareness of their relative disadvantage.

What children often find most distressing about their lack of material goods is the sense of shame that comes with 'not having' or 'not fitting in'. Bereket, a 16-year-old orphan in Ethiopia, finds it difficult at school when the other pupils have better clothes. "I don't like to feel inferior to them," he says. Determined to earn some money, he is now focused on his job washing cars. "I used to think and hope that education would change my life, but now I only hope that having a business will change me," he says.

Broadening opportunities, reducing risk and vulnerability

Investments in the earliest years of life are a crucial foundation, but our research also draws attention to other opportunities to sustain and bolster gains during middle and later childhood. A key priority must be improving life conditions for marginalised groups to prevent early malnutrition, which has serious, long-term consequences for children's development. Our findings that some children appear to recover from early stunting, with improvements in their cognitive development highlight the need for long-term support for good nutrition to sustain early gains, but does not take away from the critical importance of the first 1,000 days of life.

Our evidence also highlights the potential for effective school governance systems to ensure access to quality teaching for disadvantaged children. Findings from Vietnam across the school year at age 10 show evidence of the narrowing of existing achievement gaps between majority and minority groups. There are a number of factors which may have contributed to these results. Firstly, Vietnamese teaching is focused on the class as a whole reaching an acceptable level, rather than stretching the most able pupils; secondly, the curriculum appears well-suited to appropriately develop children's ability; and thirdly, the centralised teacher-training system means that the qualification levels of teachers in poorer locations tend to be similar to teachers in more advantaged areas.

Policymakers must also invest in increasing the flexibility of school systems so that they fit better with the reality of the daily lives of poor children, who feel increasing pressure to work as they grow older and are most likely to drop out of education early as a result.

As we've seen, gender differences grow during middle and later childhood, shaped by perceptions about economic and social opportunities and risks. Policy interventions aimed at reducing gender-based differences need to engage with the context that influences parents' and children's choices as well as discrimination per se, in order to change expectations about how choices or investments will play out in later life.

Well-designed, accessible social protection schemes have considerable potential to support access to health and education policies, including in the crucial early years. In addition to reducing risks and providing households with more resources to cope, such schemes can reduce the ways in which the tensions caused by inequalities impact on children. As the *World Development Report 2015* notes: 'Anti-poverty programmes and social policies can have a powerful indirect effect on child development by reducing key psychological stresses that prevent parents from attending to and engaging positively with their children.'

In short, as inequalities in children's development stem from multiple disadvantages that combine to produce negative impacts on their outcomes, so policymakers must take a holistic approach in response. Equitable policies for education, health and economic growth, underpinned by effective social protection schemes, all have a role to play in increasing the opportunities open to children, reducing the risks they face, and enabling them to reach their full potential.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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