

# From Infancy to Adolescence: How Inequality Takes Hold



YOUNG LIVES POLICY BRIEF 25

July 2015

Inequality of opportunity is ‘a universal challenge that the whole world must address’, the UN Secretary-General wrote recently in his synthesis report on the post-2015 agenda. Many of the disparities seen between individuals and social groups take hold during childhood, and as new findings from Young Lives show, too often opportunities close to the poorest children well before they become adults. Using unique cohort data, which follows the same children over time, Young Lives is able to identify how and when the high hopes young people typically have for their education and job prospects are blocked, by barriers related to income, nutrition, schooling and social norms. This enables us to provide insights into key entry points for social investments that can support children’s development at critical ages, and overturn the obstacles the poorest children face as they grow up. As these findings show, such policy interventions are imperative not only to address the increasing needs of labour markets for skills gained through formal schooling, but to help mitigate the increasing inequality within countries that currently sees so much human capital wasted and the poorest children ‘left behind’. In short: there is no better public policy investment than in children.



Young Lives findings show that children and young people have high hopes for their lives, and expect that education will enable them to escape from poverty and disadvantage. When the Older Cohort of Young Lives children were aged 12, between 75% (Ethiopia) and 92% (Peru) of them aspired to vocational training or further education. However, many of them have not achieved these aspirations and we find that the poorest children, those in rural areas and from marginalised social groups, are being consistently ‘left behind’ in terms of nutritional status, learning and opportunities to continue in education. So what is preventing these young people from realising their hopes?

## High hopes

One of the key challenges for a post-2015 development framework is to reverse the growth in inequality within countries witnessed over the past few decades, and ensure that in making progress towards the new Sustainable Development Goals, there is ‘no one left behind’. Currently, nearly half of all people living in extreme poverty worldwide are children, making them a key target group for social investment.

### How the poorest children are ‘left behind’ during childhood

- Stunting is common, particularly among the poorest groups. Early malnutrition is profoundly damaging to health and learning, amplifying inequalities.
- Differences in learning levels develop before children even start school and are often exacerbated, rather than overcome, by education
- Gaps in school enrolment rates widen during adolescence, with young people from the poorest groups most likely to leave school early.
- Gender disparities also increase during adolescence, with different patterns emerging in different countries.
- Poorer girls are the most likely to marry and have children well below the age of 18, leading to the transmission of poverty and inequality across generations.

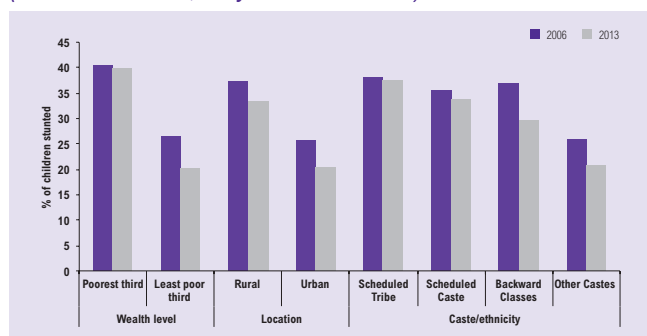
## Stunting and its long-term consequences

One of the earliest and most damaging barriers that poor children face is chronic under-nutrition. Stunting in young children is a key risk factor not only for child mortality and illness, but also for later learning, with evidence showing clear links between physical growth and cognitive development.

Gaps between the average stunting levels of different groups of children are already well established in infancy, and unsurprisingly, children’s early development is closely related to their household circumstances. It is often the poorest children who experience the worst health, and illness within their families may affect children profoundly, through lost household income and greater costs or care needs. Equally, it is often the poorest children whose families can’t afford good food, and who are therefore at highest risk of under-nutrition – a key channel through which childhood poverty affects inequalities later in life.

While stunting rates varied considerably among children at the age of 12 – from 20% in Vietnam to 30% in Andhra Pradesh – the rates of stunting affecting the poorest third of children were much higher. Poor children face between 1.7 times (Ethiopia) and 3.1 times (Peru) the risk of being stunted in infancy than better-off children, with children in rural areas and those with low levels of parental education also much more likely to be stunted.

**Figure 1. Inequalities in stunting rates by social group (Andhra Pradesh, 12-year-old children)**



Comparing outcomes for the Older Cohort (aged 12 in 2006) and the Younger Cohort when they were also aged 12 (seven years later, in 2013), we found that stunting rates had fallen. However, analysis of data from Andhra Pradesh shows that the smallest gains were made for the children who were most disadvantaged to begin with. In other words, the problem of stunting has become increasingly concentrated among the poorest children.

Cross-country evidence shows that after infancy, some children recover from early stunting and others falter in their growth, but it is better-off children who are more likely to gain. New analysis also shows that growth recovery is associated with better performances in cognitive tests. This suggests that both early intervention to counteract under-nutrition, and efforts to maintain good nutrition later in childhood, are equally vital.

## How inequalities in learning are reinforced

Policies associated with the Millennium Development Goal on universal primary education have seen a huge increase in access to schooling and inequalities in enrolment fall dramatically. However, schools vary greatly in the degree to which they enhance children’s knowledge and capabilities, and too often education actually works to reinforce existing inequalities.

Systematic differences in the children’s learning levels are established early in life, with poorer children and those in rural areas performing least well in cognitive tests at the age of 5. Household characteristics are also associated with different opportunities to learn, and with systematically different experiences of pre-school services.

We found consistent differences in learning levels among 12-year-old children across our study countries. Children in rural areas, or with low maternal education, poorer children and those from marginalised ethnic and caste groups the most likely to score poorly on tests of literacy, vocabulary and numeracy. At age 12 35% of children in Ethiopia had a reading problem, and poor children were 1.6 times more likely to experience difficulties than average. The least-poor children were half as likely to experience these problems, and had, by the age of 12, completed on average two more grades of schooling than the poorest children.

We also found different patterns of learning gain both between the four countries, with a higher gain observed in schools in Vietnam than in the other countries – and within them; the growing private-school system in Andhra Pradesh, for example, is linked with worsening socio-economic and gender equity. As school is the key determinant of learning progress for children in middle childhood, this highlights the critical need to invest in improving education within the national context to counteract inequalities in learning levels.

## High enrolment rates can mask slow progress

Simple enrolment rates can mask slow progression through school. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, of the 49% of 19-year-olds still enrolled, one in five of these had still not completed secondary school.

Ethiopia shows high rates of retention in education, with 59% of young people still studying at 19, but there is considerable evidence that many of them had been delayed in their progression through school. By the age of 19, young people who had enrolled on time (at age 7) and then completed one school grade each year would have reached Grade 12. In fact, one in five young people had not passed Grade 8 by the age of 19, and a further third had not passed Grade 10.

## Diverging school enrolment in adolescence

Marked differences in school enrolment emerge in early and middle adolescence, with the steepest decline seen among the poorest children after the age of 15. Yet we know that young people across the board have high aspirations for education and work, and wish to delay marriage and parenthood until they have obtained good jobs. So what is it that's stopping them?

At the age of 19, we found that substantial numbers of young people are still in some form of education, often combining this with work. However, it is better-off young people, those whose parents had higher levels of education, and those growing up in urban areas who are most likely to remain in education.

Across all four countries, the gap in enrolment between children from the poorest and least-poor households yawns wider in adolescence. The gulf ranges from a difference of 23 percentage points in Ethiopia, to 34 percentage points in Vietnam, where young people from more advantaged backgrounds are twice as likely as poor young people to be in education or training at age 19 (69%, compared with 35%).

As children grow up, other pressures compete with schooling, such as the need to work to support the household. This is particularly the case for more disadvantaged children, for whom the opportunity costs of studying increase. Comparing data from the Older Cohort at the age of 12 and again at age 19, we can trace the roots of some of the disadvantages that are apparent as they grow up.

Overcoming these differences provides a strategy for improving equality of opportunity. And as the skills gained through formal schooling become increasingly valued within labour markets, supporting young people to achieve their stated aims would at the same time mitigate the waste of much-needed potential talent and so reap rich results.

## Adolescent fertility and how it perpetuates poverty

Early marriage and childbirth is associated with higher infant and maternal mortality; health risks due to physical immaturity and sexually transmitted infections; and higher overall fertility. It is also linked with the transmission of poverty across generations, as adolescent mothers tend to be less well-nourished and less educated; have lower access to economic opportunities and information; have reduced autonomy and agency; and be more exposed to abuse.

The Young Lives survey shows that young people want to delay starting families. We asked the Older Cohort (aged 19) what age they think it is best for men to marry and have children, and the answers ranged from 25 (in Andhra Pradesh) to 27 (in Peru and Vietnam), while for women it ranged from 21 (in Andhra Pradesh) to 26 (in Peru). Despite this, in reality 37% of girls in Andhra Pradesh had married by age 19, as had 25% in Peru (or were co-habiting), 19% in Vietnam, and 13% in Ethiopia.

What's more, in Andhra Pradesh and Ethiopia, many young women who had married had done so below the legal age; an average of 16.7 years in Ethiopia and 16.5 years in Andhra Pradesh. By the age of 19, between 8.8% of girls in the Young Lives sample (Ethiopia) and 24% (Peru) had given birth, with poorer girls and those living in rural areas more likely to have married and had babies.

To understand why the poorest girls are more likely to marry younger, it is important to recognise the economic drivers. Poorer households may see early marriage as a way of ensuring that girls are provided for in adulthood, and protected from financial risks. Families are also influenced by social norms that suggest girls must be protected from the dangers and stigma associated with pre-marital sex, which may prove an obstacle to their marrying and being protected in the future.

Globally, the decline in rates of early marriage and adolescent fertility remains slow, despite serious health risks and loss of education for the individual, and the cost to wider society through lost social and economic contributions, and the perpetuation of poverty. Overcoming this barrier that poorer girls face to fulfilling their potential requires addressing both poverty and the social norms that lead some communities to perceive marrying later to be a risk.

*"In all countries studied to date, whether low-, middle-, or high-income, there is a divergence as early as age three in the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of children in households at the bottom of the national wealth distribution and those in households at the top. The disparity stems in part from problems that policy can address." World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society and Behaviour, World Bank.*

## Reversing the growth in within-country inequality

The unique cohort data collected by Young Lives, which follows children's trajectories from infancy to adulthood, enables us to capture learning on the links between poverty, nutrition, schooling and social norms, and children's outcomes in terms of health, education and employment. And by disaggregating the data to view changes in the circumstances of different groups based on age, gender, ethnicity, location and so on, we can see where, when and how inequalities are being created, reinforced and exacerbated.

Our life-course analysis shows clearly the absolute centrality of the early years and the importance of investing in children at an early age, since later outcomes for children are shaped by this period. However, our findings also reveal that outcomes are seldom wholly 'fixed' at the earliest point in life; change happens at other stages too. There is, for example, increased recognition of adolescence as a second key period for social investment in children's lives. Policy interventions aimed at mitigating the development of inequalities are therefore crucial from infancy throughout childhood and into early and middle adolescence.

## Key entry points for policy interventions

Household circumstances play a key role as an immediate mediator of children's chances. Poverty reduces caregivers' capacity to invest in children, and one of the challenges for policymakers must be to extend the coverage of social protection programmes and support families through strong preventative and curative health services.

Early-childhood primary health, nutrition and antenatal services are key to supporting children while they are very young, though there is also potential for investments made later in childhood to have a remedial effect – for example, through in-school feeding programmes – to support subsequent development and prevent faltering.

We've seen that different groups of children have different opportunities to learn, and there is a clear need for school-improvement programmes to have both a focus on equity and a greater awareness of what it is about the school that adds value to learning. Such questions require country-specific answers, but Young Lives evidence points to teaching practices and the importance of understanding children's experiences at school.

As children enter adolescence and school enrolment rates start to drop, it's critical that both they and their parents can see opportunities in the jobs market to use hard-earned skills gained through education, so policymakers must ensure a better match between education and skills and work opportunities. Increased livelihood options would also support girls to stay in school for longer, as would a safer school environment and journey to school. Meanwhile improved access to health services and information and stronger social support networks would help young people make informed choices about reproduction.

Children who have poor outcomes in one domain, such as physical health, typically have poorer outcomes in others, such as cognitive development, and these domains interact. It's therefore vital that different government sectors collaborate to provide joined-up, integrated policies.

Above all, if no child is to be left behind, it is imperative to identify the most disadvantaged groups and ensure that policies are reaching them. Adopting an 'equity-proofing' approach to interventions means acknowledging that children from different groups experience public services in different ways, and addressing the reasons for these varying results. For example, poorer children may be treated differently to others in the same school if the teachers do not expect children from their background to do well.

To achieve this, policymakers must heed the call made by the UN Secretary-General for 'broader and systematic disaggregation (of data) to reveal inequities', which he argues will play a fundamental role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Global and national monitoring data must be disaggregated not only by age, but by key social indicators such as income, location and ethnicity, in order to identify the most disadvantaged groups. Where gaps exist, this is a case for improving data availability rather than reducing the scope of disaggregation.

As our study shows, poor children themselves have high hopes for their futures, but too often are prevented from accessing opportunities and achieving their aspirations, leading to the waste of human capital on a huge scale. As our findings also show, early is best but it's never too late to invest in a child's development. Policymakers can and must intervene if we are to reverse the growth in inequality and ensure no child is 'left behind' in future.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Paul Dornan and Kirrily Pells (2014) *From Infancy to Adolescence: Growing Up in Poverty*, Young Lives Policy Paper, Oxford: Young Lives.

Abby Hardgrove, Kirrily Pells, Jo Boyden and Paul Dornan (2014) *Youth Vulnerabilities in Life Course Transitions*, UNDP Occasional Paper, New York: UNDP.

Ban Ki-moon (2014) *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet (Synthesis Report of the UN Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda)*, UN, New York: United Nations.

Abhijeet Singh (2014) *Emergence and Evolution of Learning Gaps across Countries*, Young Lives Working Paper 124, Oxford: Young Lives.

Martin Woodhead, Paul Dornan and Helen Murray (2013) *What Inequality Means for Children: Evidence from Young Lives*, Oxford: Young Lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

This brief was written by Emma Feeny, based on the preliminary findings paper *From Infancy to Adolescence: Growing Up in Poverty* by Paul Dornan and Kirrily Pells. Data are also drawn from the preliminary data from the Round 4 survey published as country fact sheets (2014).

Young Lives is funded by UK aid from the Department for International Development (DFID) and co-funded by Irish Aid. The views expressed are those of the author(s). They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, Young Lives, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.

[www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

### Funded by



© Young Lives July 2015