

# Children's Experiences and Perceptions of Poverty in Ethiopia

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# Abstract

This paper presents children's experiences and perceptions of poverty. It draws on survey and qualitative data from the Young Lives study of poor children in Ethiopia. Through group exercises, discussions and interviews, children and young people aged 13-17 collectively and individually provided their perceptions of the causes, indicators and consequences of poverty in their communities. They felt that they were more victims of the consequences of poverty while they rarely contributed to its causes. Their poverty experiences suggest the multidimensional, contextualised and intergenerational nature of child poverty.

The children and young people have also demonstrated their agency and resilience by providing their lived accounts and suggestions for tackling poverty and by practically contributing to family incomes. They identified what they believed to be the root causes of poverty and suggested what the Government, parents and children should do to reduce it. For example, they thought that child poverty could be addressed by changing some of the societal values that contribute to its perpetuation.

The paper argues that children's lived experiences of poverty place them in an optimum position to provide us with strong evidence to advance our knowledge of childhood poverty and develop apt policies to reduce it. Through this argument, this paper aims to provide both theoretical and practical contributions.

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His research focuses on childhood poverty, life-course poverty, intergenerational transfer of poverty, intergenerational relationships, children's educational and occupational aspirations, the sociocultural construction of child well-being and transition, and social protection.

## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

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# 1. Introduction

Child poverty remains a global problem and concerns children and adults alike. For those who strive to reduce child poverty, a major challenge is first to understand its causes, consequences and characteristics. Childhood poverty has traditionally been considered as embedded in household poverty. Falling below a certain level of resource ownership, expenditure or consumption (e.g. a poverty line) could identify a household as poor. Children living in such households are regarded as poor. In determining household poverty, surveys are often used as core methods and adults are the main respondents.

These approaches, however, have limitations. As a result, different studies are emerging aiming at understanding childhood poverty better and developing enhanced mechanisms for intervention. One major advance in understanding childhood poverty is the focus on getting information from children themselves using qualitative methods (Ridge 2009; Attree 2006; Witter and Bukokhe 2004; Chafel 1997).

This paper contributes to the new advances by presenting children's perceptions of poverty as they experience it. It is based on the Young Lives study of children living in poor communities in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> Using mixed methods, the paper builds on children's experiences of poverty. The paper argues that their lived experience of poverty places children and young people in an optimum position to provide us with strong evidence to advance our knowledge of childhood poverty and develop apt policies to reduce it.

In producing this paper, I analysed data from children's and young people's participatory group exercises and discussions, individual interviews and home observations, with the aim of capturing a wide range of poverty experiences. Descriptive statistics were generated from quantitative surveys to identify the broader patterns regarding children's schooling situations and their perceptions of their access to food, clothing and housing.

The paper continues with a brief review of relevant literature on understanding childhood poverty in Section 2. Section 3 describes the data sources and methods. Section 4 presents the results, while Section 5 discusses the findings. Finally, concluding remarks are provided.

## 2. Understanding child poverty

Children are usually considered as poor when their families or households have low incomes (Bradbury 2003; Busby and Busby 1996). However, there is little evidence that the income of a household is shared equally among the household members. Accurate data are lacking on the share of household resources received by children. Besides, there are no firm guidelines as to the relative needs of adults and children of differing ages. Parents normally allocate resources within the household in accordance with their views on the relative needs of family members (Bradbury 2003). Monetary concepts do not allow for the fact that children and young people experience poverty differently from adults (Fajth and Holland 2007); furthermore, they fail to capture its impact beyond economic deprivations (Busby and

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<sup>1</sup> Young Lives is a 15-year study of childhood poverty in four developing countries: Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam. For more information, see [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk). Detailed information on the data used in this paper is given in Section 3.

Busby 1996: 69). Consequently, using 'household or family income as an indicator for the level of child commodity consumption can be misleading' (Bradbury 2003: 10). Such limitations in the understanding of childhood poverty suggest the need for a more comprehensive approach, which is clearly expressed by Alberto Minujin and his colleagues as follows:

Children experience poverty as an environment that is damaging to their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual development. Therefore, expanding the definition of child poverty beyond traditional conceptualisations, such as low household income or low levels of consumption, is particularly important. (Minujin et al. 2006: 483)

Instead of only regarding children as attributes of the family, with the unit of analysis remaining the family or household, it is also necessary to consider children as a unit of observation and childhood as a unit of analysis (Saporiti 1994).

Noble et al. (2006), in their attempt to develop a child-focused model for measuring child poverty in South Africa, paid particular attention to the fulfilment of children's basic needs, and their access to education and information. They argued that addressing child poverty needs to tackle children's resource deprivation and ensure their full participation in society. Their final model, suggested to policymakers, considers health, material needs, human capital development, social participation, living environment, adequate care, protection from abuse, and physical safety.

Based on different literature reviewed by Christian Children's Fund poverty research, Wordsworth et al. (2005) categorise children's experiences of poverty into three domains: deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability. 'Deprivation' denotes a lack of the material conditions and services necessary for development; 'exclusion', being excluded from certain social groups; and 'vulnerability', exposure to risks. These are considered as 'dimensions' of child poverty that can be simultaneously manifested in the same child.

Others explain child poverty in terms of its outcomes and multidimensional nature. For example, Bradbury (2003) suggests that to understand child poverty 'it may be most useful to focus on final child 'outcomes' such as health and educational attainment'. Ridge (2009), in her review of empirical studies on children's experiences of poverty in different contexts, summarises children's experiences of poverty as economic, material, social and educational deprivation; tension with parents; additional responsibilities (such as engagement in paid work); poor-quality housing or homelessness; living in poor neighbourhoods or rural areas (with low levels of services); and visible differences from peers such as poor clothing. In a related review, Attree found that 'the costs of poverty are not only material but also profoundly social' (Attree 2006: 54). The multifaceted, dynamic and contextualised nature of poverty (Boyden et al. 2003) can be manifested in child poverty. Such studies indicate that there is increasing attention to multidimensional aspects of poverty that go far beyond economic deprivation.

However, little attention has so far been directed to children's own perceptions of poverty. The literature available on children's perceptions is sparse, and the limited studies that do exist have mostly used related concepts such as 'social class, occupational stratifications, and economic inequality' (Chafel 1997). Chafel has reviewed some studies in the United States. For example, Estvan (1952), in his study in a Midwestern city, found that children perceived poverty mainly as a 'problem'. On the other hand, Ramesy (1991), in her study of poor and middle-class children in a town in New England, explored children's abilities to categorise people as rich or poor and their understanding of the nature and causes of class differences (reviewed in Chafel 1997).



A study by Witter and Bukokhe (2004) in Uganda showed children's perceptions of the causes and consequences of poverty in their own locality. Children aged 10–14 explained what poverty meant to them and suggested how it could be mitigated. Their poverty indicators included personal, emotional, spiritual, environmental, political, physical and material/financial deprivation.

An important step in understanding children's poverty is involving them in generating data. The growing interest in getting data from children recognises children's ability to give information about their own lives (Clark 2005). The new sociology of childhood (e.g. Qvortrup 2000; James 2007) presumes that children are competent enough to provide data on their lives. Competence takes for granted that children are 'social actors', and have 'voices' on things essential for their lives (Clark 2005: 30). Relying on children's voices requires recognising their agency. For researchers, 'asking children about their lives and responses to living in poverty [assumes] that they [children] are competent actors' (Redmond 2009: 541). Agency, as the capacity to act, is a possibility for young people even though they live under economic constraints and the authority of adults. More empirical studies are needed to understand children's perception of their lives in poverty that 'could help plug the gap between the rhetoric and action' by policymakers (Redmond 2009: 548). Strong policy intervention requires a good understanding of childhood poverty.

Phenomenology, which considers actors' perspectives as crucial in the process of generating knowledge, could be relevant to the understanding of children's experiences of poverty because it 'points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from actors' own perspectives' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 26). An important reality is what people perceive it to be, and I would argue that children's lived experiences provide the foundation of our knowledge of their poverty.

Asking poor children about their experiences poses a methodological challenge (Attree 2006). Any research into children's poverty needs to address such challenges. Alongside changes in approaches to children's poverty, there has been parallel development of methods useful for understanding child poverty. For example, in the Young Lives study, children provided their perceptions of their well-being and ill-being in Ethiopia (Tafere 2011; Camfield 2010; Camfield and Tafere 2009). Children's understanding of ill-being was very much associated with their economic deprivation, making it akin to material poverty.

This paper moves forward to investigate children's lived experiences of poverty. It follows research questions and methods different from those usually used in understanding children's ill/well-being and risks/vulnerabilities. Its main research questions were: (1) What are children's perceptions of poverty in terms of indicators, causes and consequences? (2) How do poor children define child poverty? and (3) What are children doing to cope with and move out of poverty and what are their suggestions about what they and others should do to alleviate child poverty?

### 3. Data sources and methods

This paper is based on data from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia, and draws on survey results from 20 sites, with further qualitative data from children living in five of these sites.<sup>2</sup>The households included in the Young Lives study are generally poor; most of the rural sites are situated in food-insecure *woredas* (districts), with about 43 per cent of sampled households in these sites depending on the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), a programme run by the Government to give cash or grain to food-insecure households in return for labour in public work (although direct support is given in some cases). The urban households are located in poor neighbourhoods in two big cities. Young Lives, as a childhood poverty study, has oversampled poor households. The Round 3 survey, carried out in 2009, indicates that about 68 per cent of the households were living below the official poverty line (set at daily consumption of 2,200 kilocalories per adult plus essential non-food expenditure) as opposed to the national average of 39 per cent (Woldehanna et al. 2011). Young Lives classifies those who are below this poverty line as 'poor' and those above the poverty line (about 32 per cent) as 'non-poor.'

The Round 3 survey represents data from 973 children aged 14–15. It focused on finding out whether children's basic needs were met and whether they had access to schooling, as well as establishing their perceptions of these. The qualitative data is drawn from two rounds of fieldwork carried out in 2008 and 2011 when the children were aged 13–14 and 16–17 respectively. About 50 children participated in group exercises followed by discussions, while 30 of these were further involved in individual interviews and home observation. In each community, two group discussions were organised, one for girls and one for boys). In the participatory group exercises, a poverty tree exercise (see Johnston 2006), was used to initiate group discussions on children's perceptions of poverty. Children were asked to draw a big tree on a flip chart. Each child was asked to list up to five indicators, causes and consequences of poverty, with each list on a different coloured sticky note. Then children were then asked to stick the causes on the roots, the indicators on the branches, and the consequences of poverty on the fruits of the tree. A description of their lists by each child was followed by group discussion, which ended with the group choosing three to four issues and ranking them. In individual interviews, children were asked about their experiences of poverty and their definitions of it. Field researchers observed and recorded children's living conditions inside their houses.

Asking children about their poverty was not an easy task. However, the longitudinal nature of the study and Young Lives' ethical guidelines helped to minimise the challenges. A good rapport between the researchers and the children has been developed over the years of fieldwork. Young Lives families had at least four visits in five years from the same researchers, who speak the children's language. Moreover, children who were also involved in the group activities during the previous field visits found it easier to interact with each other. In group discussions children were asked to talk about 'children in the community of their age and gender', not just themselves. It was only in the individual interviews that children were asked about their personal experiences and their views of poverty. In the group

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<sup>2</sup> These sites are Bertukan (Addis Ababa), Leku (a community in Hawassa, capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's region), Tach-Meret (Amhara region), Leki (Oromia region) and Zeytuni (Tigray region). The first two are urban, while the others are rural sites. Names of sites and children have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to maintain children's anonymity.

exercises, two children were not happy to be involved – a boy because he could not write or draw as he had never been to school and a married girl<sup>3</sup> who was not willing to participate in the group exercise and discussions with her unmarried friends. Another girl, who had limited writing skills, was assisted by a Young Lives researcher to record her views. This was in conformity with the component of the Young Lives ethical guidelines concerning informed consent (see details in <http://www.younglives.org.uk/what-we-do/research-methods/ethics>).

## 4. Results

In this section, the results are presented. It begins by presenting data on the children's living situations, gathered both from the children themselves and from caregivers and other sources. It then gives their perceptions and definitions of poverty, followed by their suggestions for how poverty could be reduced.

### 4.1 Children's situations

Data on the sampled children's situations and living conditions, including food, clothing, housing, schooling and work, are presented below.

#### 4.1.1 Food

The 2009 survey results indicated that most children were unable to access balanced diets. As Table 1 shows, they mainly consumed the staple food, *injera* (a type of flatbread), with limited access to other foods. Very few households could afford to provide meat, eggs, fruits, vegetables<sup>4</sup> or sweet foodstuffs.

**Table 1.** *Food consumption in the previous 24 hours reported by children (%)*

In the last 24 hours did you consume	Yes	No
Any food before a morning meal?	2.9	97.1
Any food between morning and midday meals?	6.8	93.2
Any food between midday and evening meals?	59.3	40.7
Any food after the evening meal?	4.3	95.7
Any <i>injera</i> , spaghetti or other foods made from <i>teff</i> , millet, sorghum, maize, rice or wheat?	97.1	2.9
Any meat?	11.7	88.3
Any eggs?	8.3	91.7
Any fruit/vegetables?	14.2	85.8
Any sugar, honey, sweet foods or sugary drinks?	51.1	48.9
Cheese, yoghurt, milk or other milk products?	21.2	78.8
Fresh or dried fish or shellfish?	5.7	94.3

Source: Young Lives Round 3 survey, 2009. Older Cohort (age 14–15), Ethiopia (n.=973).

3 Following her marriage she moved to a nearby town with her husband. She was not willing to return to her family's village [or town?] and participate in group discussions with her unmarried friends.

4 The consumption of vegetables can vary according to the seasons. For example, during their fasting months (December and March/April), Orthodox Christians consume a lot of vegetables because they do not eat animal products at these times.

Very few of them ate between breakfast and lunch or after the evening meal. Only three in five children were able to have food between the midday and evening meals. The data suggest that children had access to a narrow range of foodstuffs, of lower quality and in small quantities, manifesting the poverty of their families.

#### 4.1.2 Housing

As indicated in Table 2, a third of the households have single-room houses, and just over a third, two rooms. The houses were of very poor quality, with their walls mainly made of mud and wood, the roofs of rural houses, of thatch/straw, and their floors, mainly of earth or sand.

**Table 2.** *Housing conditions, access to utilities and family size (%)*

	Rural	Urban	Total
Houses with one room	40.4	25.0	34.1
Houses with two rooms	37.7	40.0	38.6
Houses with more than two rooms	21.9	35.0	27.3
Houses with walls made mainly of mud and wood	63.7	81.6	71.1
Houses with roofs made of galvanised/corrugated iron	52.0	95.0	69.8
Houses with roofs made of straw/thatch	30.5	1.2	18.4
Houses with floors made of earth/sand	97.0	64.9	83.8
Access to electricity	27.1	93.3	53.7
Access to safe drinking water	41.0	74.6	54.5
Access to sanitation facilities	69.0	47.4	60.3
Family size (n.)	6.8	6.1	6.5

Source: Young Lives Round 3 survey, 2009. Older Cohort (age 14–15), Ethiopia (n.=973).

Researchers' qualitative field reports from 2011 also show that children were living in poor-quality houses. Urban children lived with their family members in rented houses and half of them resided in single-room homes. The houses were old and made of wood with mud walls and floors. Most families lived in compounds shared with other families, where houses were joined on to each other. The single room was used for cooking, living, sleeping, and in some cases for generating income (e.g. baking *injera*, embroidery, washing clothes for cash). Those residents who had mattresses usually kept them outside during the day and made a bed on the floor during the night. They shared toilets with other families or sometimes used plastic bags when there were no toilets around. Those who had more than one room used the rooms for cooking and sleeping separately. As there was not enough space for study or leisure activities, children usually preferred to stay outside during the day, except some girls who feared sexual abuse, bullying and robbery which are common practices in the neighbourhood. Each household had an average of about seven members, with very little difference between urban and rural areas (see Table 2).

**Table 3.** *Household size and number of rooms (%)*

Household size (members)	Number of rooms					
	0	1	2	3	4	>=5
2	0	50.00	27.78	16.67	5.56	0
3	0	56.36	36.36	5.45	1.82	0
4	1.14 <sup>a</sup>	44.32	29.55	18.18	3.41	3.41
5	1.42	26.24	39.72	19.15	9.93	3.55
6	0	35.63	42.53	14.94	2.3	4.60
7	0.53	30.69	39.15	19.58	7.41	2.65
8	1.33	30.67	42.00	15.33	5.33	5.33
9	0	29.27	36.59	30.49	3.66	0
10	0	23.4	44.68	17.02	8.51	6.38
11	0	33.33	27.78	27.78	5.56	5.56
12	0	16.67	16.67	33.33	16.67	16.67
13	0	0	0	50.00	50.00	0
Total	0.62	33.40	38.66	18.14	5.67	3.51

<sup>a</sup> Some households did not live in their own house.

Source: Young Lives Round 3 survey, 2009. Older Cohort (age 14–15), Ethiopia (n.=973).

Table 3 shows the size of the households in relation to the number of rooms in the house. About half of the households with a relatively small number (2–4) of family members lived in houses with a single room. The fact that about a third of the big households (with 6–9 members) shared a house with one room and some families did not have their own houses indicates the extent of the housing challenge facing these families.

In the rural communities, households had limited access to utilities. Less than a third of the households had access to electricity (see Table 2) while the majority used kerosene lamps for lighting. All used firewood for cooking. A few of the houses had latrines inside their compounds. In the houses visited, children did not have materials that helped them pursue their education, such as reference books, tables, or chairs. School textbooks and exercise books were, however, sometimes seen in the rooms where children lived. As there were no tables or benches, children put their exercise books on their knees or on the floor while reading and writing. Family members, including children, used mats and ledges made of mud for sitting and sleeping. Only a few had wooden beds with mattresses.

#### 4.1.3 *Schooling and work*

The Government's strong determination to increase the number of school pupils (for example, through the expansion of schools), parents' willingness to send their children to school, and other related reasons have resulted in an increase in school enrolment. For example, Ethiopia's gross primary school enrolment rate was 94.2 per cent in 2010, up from 78.8 per cent in 2005 (Woldehanna et al. 2011). Similarly, in Young Lives study sites, school enrolment is high, with small variations with respect to location, gender and poverty of households (see Table 4). However, disparities in achievement are apparent in relation to children's backgrounds. More children from poor families drop out of primary school and their completion rate is very low (15 per cent) as compared with the children from non-poor households (24 per cent). Rural children also have a higher drop-out rate and a lower primary school completion rate than their urban counterparts.

**Table 4.** *Children's schooling status (%)*

	All	Poor	Non-poor	Urban	Rural	Boys	Girls
School enrolment rate	90.0	89.0	92.0	96.0	85.0	88.0	92.0
Drop-out rate from primary school (between age 12 and 15)	8.0	9.0	6.0	4.0	12.0	9.0	7.0
Primary school completion rate	18.0	15.0	24.0	29.0	10.0	19.0	17.0

Source: Young Lives Round 3 survey, 2009. Older Cohort (age 14–15), Ethiopia (n.=973).

The qualitative data collected in 2011 also indicate variations in the educational levels of children. Among the 30 children participating in the qualitative research, six have dropped out of school and one has never been to school. Two rural girls were married at the age of 16, while two boys dropped out because their parents could not afford to keep them in school. Nine children were engaged in paid work in private stone-crusher plants, irrigated farms, washing cars or picking haricot beans, but two of them stopped working after marriage. On the other hand, seven out of the nine children involved in paid work were able to work and attend school in shifts; the other two withdrew from school and fully got engaged in paid work. The majority of those in school have not achieved expected grade levels (assuming every child starts schooling at the age of 7) as a result of repetitions and interruptions mainly due to poverty. At the age of 16 or 17 only four have reached Grade 9 or 10. One girl finished Grade 10 but could not pass the entrance exam to university. She has now trained in using a sewing machine and is also considering learning embroidery. The rest are between Grades 2 and 8. Each child has experienced one or more school interruptions.

In general, the data indicate that the children live in economic deprivation and their schooling has been affected by their poverty. The next sub-section presents results on how children living in such situations perceive poverty, collectively and individually.

## 4.2 Children's perceptions of poverty

Below we present children's perceptions of poverty, comprising indicators, causes and consequences as established through participatory group activities and the discussions that followed them.

### 4.2.1 Indicators

Poverty manifests itself in households or individuals who are unable to get their basic needs properly met. The children considered people from their localities who did not have basic necessities such as food, clothing and housing to be poor. In their view, a poor child was one who got food once or twice a day and spent the rest of the day hungry. They might have to skip meals or consume small portions. Seifu, a boy from Leku, said, 'A poor child eats once with difficulty, while a child from a rich family eats quality food three times a day.' Most poor children in the sub-sample ate a piece of *kita* (homemade flatbread) or *injera* without sauce at mealtimes. Poor children went to school after getting a small breakfast but no lunch. They are observed feeling hungry and tired, and this limits their interactions with friends and their participation in class activities.

**Table 5.** *Summary of children's perceptions of poverty*

	Poverty indicators	Causes of poverty	Consequences of poverty
<b>Urban</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No enough food and wearing tattered clothes</li> <li>Living in very crowded housing</li> <li>No materials for learning, and not going to school at all</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weaker work ethic</li> <li>Poor financial management</li> <li>Having a large family</li> <li>Lack of work opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclusion and feeling of inferiority</li> <li>Poor educational outcomes</li> <li>Behavioural problems</li> <li>Worse future life</li> </ul>
<b>Rural</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not having enough food and clothing</li> <li>Living in poor housing</li> <li>Lacking school materials</li> <li>Not having enough land and livestock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weaker work ethic</li> <li>Extravagance</li> <li>Having many children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclusion and feeling of inferiority</li> <li>Poor or no schooling</li> <li>Early marriage for girls (girls' group)</li> <li>Doing paid work instead of studying (girls' group)</li> <li>Worse future life</li> </ul>

Source: Young Lives qualitative research 2011. Older Cohort (age 16–17), Ethiopia (n.=30; 15 girls and 15 boys participating in gender-segregated group discussions).

The children stated that poor children were easily identified by their tattered clothing and old shoes or bare feet. They might wear the same poor-quality clothing for weeks or months, sometimes during both the days and the nights. The clothes are usually very dirty because they are not changed and families do not have any money to buy soap to wash them.

However, some girls questioned the consideration of clothing as an indicator of poverty in late childhood and adolescence. Though wearing ragged clothes suggests a girl is from a poor family, some girls argue that at the age of 16 or 17 this is not a good marker of poverty. During a group discussion among girls in Leki, Biritu, 16, said: 'A girl has ample means by which she can get dressed in good clothes, either through income from paid work or from a love partner.' Older girls often spend most of what they get on clothing and nowadays it is not always easy to distinguish the poor from the rich.

Children stated that living in confined housing was an indication of poverty. The qualitative field reports referred to in Section 4.1 and survey results (see Tables 2 and 3) suggest that most of the children live in poor housing. The number of rooms and the quality of the building materials make life difficult for poor children. Thatched roofs and mud walls expose them to illness due to cold and poor hygiene. For example, some rural children sleep on the mud floor with dried cattle-skin bedding and wearing a piece of shawl that they wear during the day. They do not have mattresses, beds or sheets.

Poor children are also easily identified in school. They do not have the necessary school materials. They may use one exercise book for many subjects. If their pens or pencils are finished, then they beg from others in the class who have extra or wait until others finish their own writing and can lend them a pen or pencil. Bereket, who is in Grade 8, from Bertukan, says that he can easily identify a poor child in his class because 'a child from a poor family usually carries his exercises books in his hands [instead of a bag]. He asks for a pen in the classroom and wears a worn-out school uniform'. Poor children attend government schools where the fees are lower but the quality of education is less good. A child may not attend school at all due to lack of basic necessities such as food and clothing and educational materials (see Table 4 on the association between poverty and schooling status).

In rural communities, lack of productive assets suggests that a household is living in poverty. Households without enough land and livestock are regarded as poor. Farmers who do not

have oxen are dependent on others to plough their land. Besides, households without livestock can further be exposed to hunger as they cannot cope with drought by selling livestock and buying food grain. Their children are affected because they lack enough food and animal products such as milk and meat, unlike their richer peers.

#### 4.2.2 Causes

The main causes of poverty agreed on by the children in the participatory group exercises were weaker work ethic, extravagance and large families. These are discussed in this subsection.

We Ethiopians decline to do some types of work. We favour one job over the other. However, what we don't do here, we do in America. ...Being unwilling to do available work is the main cause of our poverty.

(Destachew, 16, boy, Leku)

As shown in Table 5, weaker work ethic tops the list of causes of poverty as perceived by children. The poor refuse to do certain types of work or do too little. Across the study sites, children considered unwillingness to take up available work and laziness as the main reasons behind poverty. The poor waste their time looking for 'better' jobs. They give very low value to '*yegulbet sira*' (physical work) and continue to be poor. 'The poor dream of being rich without doing anything!' (Fatuma, 17, girl, Bertukan).

Many look for types of work that are highly valued in economic and social terms. They want to work in government offices though they may not have the necessary qualifications. Children stated that people become poor when they start despising available work and expect jobs that don't exist in the community (boys' focus group discussion (FGD, Zeytuni).

In urban communities, there are casual job opportunities like daily labour, working as guards, washing clothes and cooking that can generate income for poor people. Very few want to take up such jobs. In rural areas, some poor farmers do not prepare their farmland well or work for cash in irrigated farms owned by others during dry seasons. Instead of trying to generate income through paid work to support their families, they spend their time wandering around. As a result, their needs cannot be fulfilled and so dependency on aid becomes imminent. All the three rural communities in the qualitative sub-sample benefit from the government-run PSNP. Children believed that the poor were often 'taking aid' instead of working hard and moving out of poverty.

The paradox is that the poor want jobs that are not available in their communities while their poverty remains so severe that they cannot afford to refuse any job that would earn them something. Children associated this weak work ethic with their parents and blamed them for their own suffering.

The second cause of poverty the children identified collectively was extravagance. According to the children, it is not only the insufficiency of resources, but also poor financial management that causes poverty. Expenditure on unnecessary things or more than one can afford leads to poverty. Children stated that money spent on drink, chewing *chat*, gambling and smoking by adults is usually at the expense of other family members' basic consumption needs and particularly children's schooling. Some of the children stated that their fathers did not bring their earnings home. Pay day in urban areas and grain sales in rural areas are usually marked by fathers coming home very drunk. One of the girls shared her experience by saying:



When my father makes some money, he does not bring it to us. He spends all on drinks with friends. He has never given me a penny to buy a pencil or pen. ... I do not ask him anymore about money because after he had sold some maize I once asked him to give me 50 birr to buy school materials. He said, 'I do not have any money.'... [My father] does not even know which grade I am in. He usually sells grain but does not bring the money home. Now elders have decided to share our land between him and my mother. ... Nowadays, his behaviour is getting worse and I have a big fear that I may not be able to continue my education because of that. I am also worried that he might harm my mother.

(Biritu, 17, Leki)

Biritu, who was weeping while telling this story, believes that despite having farmland and irrigated land, the family remains poor mainly because of the extravagance of her father. He sometimes exposes the family to food shortages by selling their grain to make money, instead of keeping it in storage for the family's use. Now he has become not only a source of economic problems but also insecurity to the family.

Children also blamed themselves because some follow what their parents do. For example, some boys spend their money on drink, chewing *chat*, gambling and unnecessary activities, while girls spend more on clothes and jewellery. Some children pressurise their parents to help them do what the children of the rich do.

Some households spend what they have on feast days, religious festivals and commemorations. Some social events require certain levels of expenditure. Sometimes the poor want to be seen as 'equal to the rich' by spending the same amount. 'The poor want to spend like the rich, while failing to feed their children and buy them school materials' (Bereket, boy, Bertukan). During the fieldwork, we (the researchers) found many households planning and hosting celebrations for feast days like those of St Gabriel, St Michael, and St Mary. Among the Orthodox Christians of Tigray and Amhara, farmers are organised in groups of 12 households and each household hosts a celebration once a year, sometimes with monthly commemorations. Food and drink are served and poor families need to exercise reciprocity. They want to be 'equal' to other members and they also believe that it is their religious obligation to observe the day. It could also be a means for respect and social inclusion.

Some farmers spend what they get from good harvests on different feasts and celebrations. In the rural communities, expenditure on weddings, baptising children and commemoration of deceased family members follows good harvests. The farmers spend a lot on food and gifts during weddings and bride-wealth handovers. By selling their grain, even poor people buy jewellery for young people who get married, just to be 'like the rich'. Children from Zeytuni stated that there was a growing practice of giving a large amount of grain at baptism ceremonies. The host provides food and drink copiously in exchange for this grain. This new trend is depleting the savings of people in the community and children were very much against it. Children reiterated that if there was crop failure next season, they would be back in a difficult financial situation. They then have to seek food aid and the lives of their family get worse. A weak culture of saving perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

The third cause of poverty agreed on by the children was large families. As indicated in Table 2, households in the sample had an average of about seven family members. Parents who have limited material resources find it hard to raise many children. They cannot afford to feed them, give them proper housing and send them all to school. As indicated in Section 4.1, the housing situations of the households in both rural and urban areas are very poor. Bereket, a boy from Bertukan, described family sizes in his community by saying: 'In our community there are households with seven or eight children. They do not have enough income for the

couple, let alone for their children. They give birth to more children without considering the economic impact. When the children grow up, it gets worse because they need many more things.'

The logic for having many children is deeply rooted in cultural and religious values. Children are usually considered as 'wealth' and a gift of God. So having as many children as possible is considered as being 'blessed'. During a group discussion, Mihretu, a boy from Zeytuni, quoted a saying: '*Hade zwelede, darga zeywelede, kilte zwelede darga hade zwelede*' (having one child is like having none, having two is like having one). This suggests parents want to have more children and sends a strong message of disapproval to those who want to have fewer children. The children taking part in the group discussions in the community had a heated debate on this issue. While some said children were a burden to poor households and so aggravated poverty, others argued that this was only the case while the children were very young. Grown-up children could help their parents and become a means of moving out of poverty rather than a cause of poverty. However, most agreed that having many children was making families poorer, putting the children in a difficult situation and potentially causing them to grow into poor adults.

Children identified the above as causes of poverty. Their perceived consequences of poverty are presented below.

#### 4.2.3 Consequences

'For children, poverty creates stress, starves them, causes a lot of problems; it kills them.'

(Mesih, 17, boy, Zeytuni)

This quotation indicates the scope and severity of the effects of poverty on children. Children gave a range of views of how poverty affected their lives (see Table 5). Here emphasis is given to its impacts on self-perception and exclusion, social interaction, schooling and girls' early marriage.

Poverty forces children and young people to examine their self-perceptions and relationships with others. Poverty, manifested in poor housing, clothing and schooling, sidelines poor children. For example, poor children find it hard to talk or play with children who wear good clothes and shoes. Those who do not attend school find it difficult to interact with those who go to school. They consider themselves as inferior and do not believe that it is right to behave as if they were equal to those who have many resources.

According to survey responses (Table 6), about a third of the cohort did not feel happy with their shoes and clothing. Only about half of them felt that the clothing they had was appropriate for all occasions.

**Table 6.** *Children's feelings about their clothing, shoes and school materials (%)*

	Agree	More or less agree	Disagree
I am proud of my shoes or of having shoes.	54.7	13.7	31.4
I am proud of my clothes.	53.6	12.8	33.4
I feel my clothing is right for all occasions.	50.4	15.9	33.5
I am not embarrassed because I do not have the right books, pencils or equipment for school.	70.6	11.0	16.6
Pupils in my class never tease me at school.	63.2	11.1	25.6

Source: Young Lives Round 3 survey, 2009. Older Cohort (age 14–15), Ethiopia (n.=973).

Those who did not have the right clothing either excluded themselves from certain occasions or participated while feeling inferior. Not having appropriate school materials also contributed to children's humiliation, sometimes making school attendance very difficult. Both affect their self-perception badly. 'Poor children feel shy in front of their friends because they don't wear clothes and shoes the same as them. They dislike interacting with rich children. They hate their school and their living areas. They lack interest in life!' (Girls' FGD, Bertukan).

Social interactions require doing what others do, for example, wearing proper clothing and having some money to spend. Poor children and young people exclude themselves from the company of their peers because they cannot afford these things. This happens in their communities, schools and recreation areas. As indicated in Table 6, a quarter of them were teased by their peers at school, while one in ten experienced a bit of teasing. In the qualitative study, all children confirmed such experiences. Fatuma, 17, an urban girl, summarised what others agreed on as follows: 'Poverty kills your conscience... It makes you think of it everywhere. ...You feel it when rich friends wear good clothes and shoes, when you get hungry in a classroom and at home.' Children who lost self-confidence soon stopped participating in discussions. In one of the group discussions a child said, '*Ketegebe gar atikeraker*' (Do not argue with someone with a full stomach!). It means poor children should not squabble with well-fed children.

Another hurdle to social interaction comes from others. The better-off children contribute to the humiliation of the poor. They disrespect the poor children because of their deprivation or because they do not attend school. Tagesu from Leku said, 'The poor girl is despised because she doesn't wear good clothes and shoes.' Another boy states that when a poor child tries to talk, the rich child 'laughs at and gets astonished to see the poor talking equally' (Tsegaw, 16, Tach-Meret).

Across sites, children confirm that better-off children dub poor children as: '*yediha lij*' (the child of the poor). Such slurs make any potential friendship between the perpetrators and the victims difficult to maintain. As they get older, young people look for peers with similar economic status. Children who were friends with poorer children at an earlier age may turn away from them when they get older and markers of poverty and wealth are apparent in their lives. Differences in dress, food and schooling push children to look for their equals.

Sometimes clothing also restricts children's and young people's access to work. Children from urban areas stated that poor children looked like 'thieves' because of their ragged clothes and employers did not accept them for work because they suspected them (Boys' FGD, Bertukan). Children agreed that even within their own communities, adults did not treat children equally. Tsega from Tach-Meret said: 'People do not view poor children as equal to those from rich families. Rich children are favoured; nobody cares about the poor child. They do not consider them as equal human beings.' This suggests that exclusion of poor people is rooted deeply in local values and these are being transferred to children.

The impact of poverty on children is also apparent in their schooling, as manifested in low levels of attendance and grade completion, or high drop-out rates (see Section 4.1 and Table 4). Children are forced to abandon schooling at some points, or perform so badly that they fail to progress further. The education of those who do not have basic necessities such as enough food, clothing and school materials is in jeopardy.

Children sometimes had to choose between trying to attend school on an empty stomach and just dropping out and getting food through paid work or other means. The luckier ones had the opportunity to combine work with education. Our study children picked haricot beans, for example, out of school time, and in some areas worked on irrigated land for half a day.

Those who involved themselves in such activities earned some money that they could use for their basic needs and schooling. Sometimes they helped support their families.

However, most employers required children and young people to do eight hours of work a day which usually clashed with time for schooling. Poverty pushed them to just forget about schooling, and instead take care of their survival. Extracts from the narratives of one child show the multidimensional effects of poverty:

Last September [2010] when I asked my parents to send me to school, they said that they could 'not afford it'. ... They were not able to provide me with exercise books, other learning materials and enough food. ... I had to discontinue my education after realising that my family was very poor. As I often get hungry, I ran away from home and started carrying things for cash in the nearby town... I usually sleep on the veranda with other poor boys. ...I caught a cold. I became ill and lost weight because of the hunger and cold.

(Defar, 17, boy, Tach-Meret)

Defar, who was only in Grade 4 at the age of 17, had had to interrupt his schooling repeatedly because of poverty. All his family members lived in a single hut and he reported that he slept with his brother in a barn with livestock. He used to collect stone for sale in town with his father but found it difficult to combine this work with schooling. Carrying stones was also hard and the pay was too low to cover his basic needs and schooling. His poor family gets inadequate produce from farming because they do not have draught oxen and enough farmland. The family relies mainly on the PSNP but the amount was also too small to cover their needs. Consequently, Defar had no option but to look for his own survival in town at the expense of both his schooling and his health.

Another boy who faced continued school interruptions because of poverty, aggravated by his father's extravagance, shared his experiences.

I started education at the age of 8. ...I was very happy because I was able to go to school with friends and my parents bought me new clothes. But now I am very sad because I am behind my friends. ... I am only in Grade 2.... Every year I start school but it is interrupted repeatedly because my family is very poor. We do not have oxen or other property. We gave our land to sharecroppers. ...I fish in the nearby lake and... do paid work to help my family and myself. My father is also wasteful... [because]... he drinks and sometimes smokes. He does not buy me any school materials. I want to continue my school from Grade 2 next year. But I have to pay 50birr (US\$2.80) as a fine for interrupting this year. My worry is that I may not be able to pay that and get registered in the school again.

(Tufa, 17, Leki)

Tufa, who tried every year to continue his with education, has been short of the necessary things to attend school properly. He had to help his family through fishing and paid work and farming at the expense of his education.

Even children who managed to attend school found it difficult to perform well. They went to school without sufficient food and school materials. In a classroom they 'think of food to be eaten when they return home and other family problems' (boys' FGD, Leki).Tsega, 16, a paternal orphan girl from Leku, said, 'I do not attend school well. I think about food. I usually go to school without breakfast. Sometimes I may not have food for lunch or dinner. I am only Grade 4 because I joined school late due to shortage of food and clothing.'Tsega is from a very poor family with housing and food problems. The household has one room with one bed. The mother and two of the children sleep on the bed, while Tsega and her sister sleep on the floor.

In 2008, the field researcher had to break the conversation because Tsega was too hungry to continue the interview. She had to buy her some snacks before resuming the conversation.

The differential in access to quality education between children from poor and rich families is another issue for poor children. Poor children have little access to pre-schools and private schools as both require high fees. They join school directly from home, where they receive little or no education. Government schools register so many students that the classrooms are full, and they employ teachers with relatively low qualifications and have limited teaching aids or libraries. This may contribute to failure at national exams. For example, Fatuma, the only child in the sample who took the Grade 10 national exam in 2010, failed in her attempt to join the university preparatory course.<sup>5</sup> A paternal orphan, Fatuma struggled to finish her education by helping her mother, who has been washing clothes for cash for years, living in a single-roomed old house in the capital city. She says,

The poor children cannot attend private school nor have personal tutors because they cannot afford these... I attended public school and did not have any tutor. More students from private schools go to university. For example, from the nearby private school, ten students scored 'A' in all subjects but in our school most of us could not get even the pass mark... Since childhood, I have wanted to be a doctor....Now I have trained in using a sewing machine and plan to work during the day and start education in another school in the evening to take the final exam again. If this all fails, I may go to an Arab country, though I do not want to.

(Fatuma, 17, girl, Bertukan)

As the income from washing clothes was not sufficient, Fatuma has been securing school uniforms and some money for school materials from a local NGO since her pre-school years.

The results presented above indicate the impact of poverty on children. During the group discussions and individual interviews, however, differential impacts on rural girls came out strongly. Early marriage as a risk and real experience dominated conversations with these girls. I will start by presenting two cases of girls' early marriages. These stories are about Haymanot from Zeytuni and Ayu from Leki. Both are from poor families and married at the age of 16. Haymanot had reached Grade 5, but dropped out to undertake paid work in a private stone-crushing plant in order to help her ailing mother and her two siblings. In early 2011, she married a boy from her neighbourhood. The feast was hosted by her in-laws because her mother could not afford to pay for it. Her sister, who had similarly dropped out of school to work in a private enterprise, offered 1,300 birr (US\$72) as *gezmi* (dowry) to the groom. Haymanot said she accepted the marriage because it relieved her of heavy work and associated injuries she had sustained for some time. She was also happy with it because her husband started to farm her mother's land and began to give her some support. Her disappointment was that she had left school and she feared she might soon give birth and face delivery complications. She said, 'A girl from a poor family is forced to marry early because her parents cannot send her to school. She might be neglected by her husband and eventually get divorced.'

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5 Since 2004, national exams have been taken in Grade 10 and those who pass are eligible to stay on at school for two further years (Grades 11 and 12) in preparation for university. Those who fail this exam can do technical and vocational training but the number is determined by the space available in the training institutions, leaving many with no option. This adds to the growing youth unemployment because young people leave school after Grade 10, two years earlier than before, when they used to finish after Grade 12.

Ayu got married according to the cultural practice of her community – through ‘abduction’, a practice often undertaken with the connivance of the bride to avoid delay and marriage formalities. She had been working for cash in the irrigation fields in her community since the age of 13. Paid work combined with continuing illness forced her to halt her schooling. She had only managed to reach Grade 2 because she repeatedly interrupted her schooling. At the age of 16, she was ‘abducted’ and taken by her husband to a nearby town. According to the local norms, her husband paid some money (1,200 birr, equal to US\$67) to his in-laws, as well as giving them food, clothing and blankets, as compensation and for reconciliation. He is expected to provide more as bride wealth so that the marriage can be formalised. During our fieldwork this was not finalised as he had not yet saved enough. Ayu believes she is living better and she is relieved of the hardship of paid work she used to do. But her worry, like Haymanot, is that her family may want her to have a child soon even though she wants to wait until she is more mature.

The stories of the two married girls show that they attempted to attend school, and to help themselves through paid work, but they ended up being married. Their educational aspirations have gone. When they were 13 years old, both aspired to complete university education.

Early marriage is not peculiar to poor girls. In the rural areas, girls’ early marriage is widely practised and there are economic and cultural reasons behind it (see Boyden et al. 2012). Poverty is one reason. The early marriages of rich and poor young people have different logic. Rich parents want to marry their daughters to secure their future at a good age. Would-be husbands are also attracted by the wealth and push for early marriage. The paradox is that while it is rich girls who are very much in demand, it is poor girls who actually end up interrupting school to marry early.

Girls from poor families are under pressure to marry at an early age for at least two reasons. Primarily, a poor girl living in difficult circumstances may want to be relieved by marrying a husband who can provide what she lacks. Parents can also get some benefit from the marriage. The examples of Haymanot and Ayu illustrate this. The second major reason for early marriage is an attempt to guarantee marriage at a good age. As they get older, poor girls’ chances of getting married are limited compared to rich girls. Marrying at an early age would mean marrying as a virgin with the potential for more children. As indicated in the stories of the two girls, parents can negotiate for lower dowries/bride wealth or resource transfers such as livestock or money to ensure the marriage of their daughters.

However, early marriage does not provide a lasting guarantee of economic security for poor girls. Because of her own and her family’s economic dependency, the husband and his family may begin to bully a poor girl. Children stated the risk of divorce for a poor girl as follows:

A daughter of the poor finds it hard to get married. Even if a boy loves her, his parents bar him from marrying her. They want their son to marry a girl from the rich family. If by chance she gets a rich husband, he soon disrespects her and may abandon her. Poverty prevents a poor girl from marrying the man of her choice [both for wealth and love].

(Girls’ FGD, Tach-Meret).

Girls from poor families who marry early are susceptible to early divorce. They are usually married at the initiative of the boy as the girls have less economic power to negotiate. If a poor married girl is not tolerant enough, the marriage can end very soon. She needs to show resilience in both poverty and marriage.

Despite all its consequences, in terms of schooling and future life, early marriage for girls remains both a reality for some and a risk that many are facing.

### 4.3 Children's definitions of poverty

In individual interviews, children were asked: *What does poverty mean to you?* The responses by each child, were put into three categories –lack of basic necessities, resource ownership and overall scarcity – and are presented in Table 7. Their answers reflect their lived experiences (presented in Section 4.1) and their perceptions expressed in group exercises (discussed in Section 4.2).

Children's definitions of poverty relate to the lack of basic necessities such as food, clothing and proper housing. Children also explained poverty in terms of lack of basic resources such as privately owned houses, regular income (for urban children), and productive assets (for rural children) like livestock, irrigable land and enough farmland. Some children explained poverty in terms of having nothing or lacking everything necessary for life. These are manifested in being destitute, not attending school or being dependent on others. Largely, children's responses are similar suggesting that they, in some respects, experience poverty collectively when living in the same environment.

**Table 7.** Summary of children's definitions of poverty

Urban children	Rural children
<p><b>Lack of basic necessities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poverty is to live in confined housing</li> <li>• Inability to provide basic necessities for the family and children</li> <li>• Unable to attend school regularly</li> <li>• Poverty is not being able to provide all the necessary things for life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Lack of basic necessities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The poor have nothing, even nothing to eat</li> <li>• Poverty is the inability to provide basic needs for the family and children</li> <li>• Unable to attend school regularly</li> <li>• Poverty is a shortage of food and shelter. The poor child lives in a thatched and smaller house</li> <li>• Poverty means being starved, facing health problems</li> <li>• Poor means the one that has nothing, not even food</li> <li>• I am poor because I do paid work half the day to get money for basic needs and school materials</li> <li>• Poverty means when basic human needs are not fulfilled</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resource ownership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A poor family is one that does not have income at all or housing</li> <li>• Poverty is lack of money</li> <li>• Lack of money, lack of privately owned house</li> <li>• Poverty means not having anything [of your own]. If many houses share the same latrine, and one electric line, that is poverty</li> </ul>	<p><b>Resource ownership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor is the one that has no cattle and no sheep</li> <li>• Poor means someone who has no livestock</li> <li>• Not having things that are necessary for life like livestock and chickens</li> <li>• Poor is the one who has no cattle or sheep</li> <li>• The poor are like us. We don't plough our land and we sharecropped it out for a quarter of the product. Everything is in shortage!</li> <li>• The poor have no farmland, no cattle, and no food to eat</li> <li>• A poor person has no land and does not own his/her house</li> <li>• We are poor because we don't have oxen, enough farmland, television and other materials</li> </ul>
<p><b>Overall scarcity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If we talk about poverty, the fact is that living in Ethiopia by itself is poverty. We all are poor!</li> <li>• Poverty is not having enough of anything!</li> <li>• Poverty means not having anything</li> <li>• If you are poor you lead a miserable life. It means being unable to do what you want</li> <li>• Poor means one who leads a destitute life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Overall scarcity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You miss many things. If you are poor, you cannot go to school</li> <li>• A poor person is one who depends on others</li> <li>• A poor person is one who cannot afford to buy what he wishes to have</li> </ul>

However, as their lived experiences are the foundations for children's definitions of poverty, diverse experiences of poverty are also manifested in children's definitions. For example, for Fatuma, who lives in a single-room house with five family members, poverty is 'living in confined housing'. Defar, who withdrew from school due to lack of food and educational materials, defines poverty as 'the inability to provide basic necessities for the family and children; ...[and being] unable to attend school regularly'. Others describe poverty by unfolding their own life. Beletech, 16, from Leki, who does paid work in private irrigation fields says, 'I am poor because ...I do paid work half the day to get money for basic needs and school materials.'

In general, children's individual descriptions of poverty are pertinent to their lived experiences. While rural children stated a lack of agricultural resources (farmland and livestock) as indicative of poverty; their urban counterparts related it to not having money or private housing.

#### **4.4 Moving out of poverty: children's ideas**

The young people demonstrated their ability to share their views about poverty. They also had ideas on how to reduce poverty, based on their lived experiences. They focused mainly on three actors that could play bigger roles: government, parents/caregivers and children themselves.

##### *4.4.1 Government*

The children felt that, as the most powerful agent, and with the necessary resources, the Government could play a major role in reducing poverty. It could do so mainly by improving the quality of education, enhancing agricultural productivity, creating job opportunities and providing some support for very poor children and their families. Children stressed that education policy should focus on the quality of education so that students got good knowledge that could prepare them for jobs. The quality of education in government schools, which poor children attend, is too low to give enough knowledge or skill. They suggested that the Government needed to hire teachers with good qualifications for government schools, mainly graduates from universities or colleges. Rural children further expected the Government to expand schooling in the rural areas so that more children get educated.

Another policy gap that children highlighted as a source of youth unemployment and hence contributing to poverty was related to the secondary school exam system. Students currently take the final exam in Grade 10 and those who fail are sent to technical schools. The young people suggested that those poor children who finished Grade 10 did not want to attend technical schools mainly because there was no job after graduation. So they suggested that the final exam, as has been the practice before, should be in Grade 12, when students who were weaker at an earlier age could still go to university. They argued that having the exam in Grade 10 was leading many young people to stay at home and further aggravating the fast-growing youth unemployment.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, the only child in the sample who had completed Grade 10 (Fatuma) was staying at home without any access to further education or work as the result of this policy. Young people see this as a risk that many of them could face when they reach that level of schooling.

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<sup>6</sup> The new policy has resulted in an increased number of young people finishing Grade 10 and becoming idle when they fail to pass the Grade 10 national exam or are unable to join technical and vocational training. They may not join the training due to limited space or for other reasons.



On the other hand, the children felt the Government should create job opportunities and provide credit for start-up businesses. Young people find it hard to get credit from individuals, banks or credit institutions due to a lack of guarantors or collateral. They do not own houses or other property to use as collateral. There are good initiatives by the Government, in which unemployed young people are organised into cooperatives and receive credit, for example, in stone carving, handicrafts, trade, etc. Children want these to be expanded in an attempt to cover the huge number of unemployed young people in both urban and rural areas.

Rural children suggested that the Government needed to give ongoing training to farmers on modern farming techniques such as the use of improved seeds, fertilisers, financial management, irrigation and soil conservation, and to supply farmers with selected seeds.

Finally, children also said that poor children needed government support so that they could pursue their education properly. They needed educational materials, food and clothing. For those who could not get these in anyway, the Government must step in. Children thought that the dispersed support given by NGOs, communities, and schools in urban areas needed to be properly coordinated. Rural children argued strongly for higher cash benefits and larger grain transfers from the PSNP.

#### 4.4.2 *Parents/caregivers*

Children want their parents first to stop being causes of poverty and to endeavour to reduce the effects of poverty on their lives. They want their parents to work hard and generate enough income for their families by not avoiding physical work and not staying idle. They also expect to inherit a good work ethic from their parents.

Parents need to adopt family planning. Children argue that it is no longer acceptable to have more children than the family can afford. It is not just food or clothing that children need; they also have to be educated, and this requires considerable expense. The saying 'Children are wealth' does not convince the children any more. A child from a group interview in Zeytuni said that 'children are no longer wealth'. She thought the saying should be replaced by '*Bizuh kol'a, buzuh gudguad*' (More kids, more holes), suggesting that the more children you have, the greater your resource problems will be.

#### 4.4.3 *Children*

The children and young people also weighed up their own contributions to poverty reduction. They felt that despite the burden of poverty, they needed to work hard in school so that progress in education would lead them to a life better than that of their parents. They needed to be strong to face the consequences of poverty and develop self-confidence and believe in themselves.

All agreed that they needed to support their families by working and some even believed that they needed to be engaged in paid work. At the age of 15, children were asked during the survey if they did 'anything to help their family or to get things for themselves' and 98.8 per cent said yes. Those who have already participated in paid work in their communities argued that working for cash was a necessity for poor children. Some said that children should make paid work a priority, arguing that survival comes first and schooling was not possible without having anything to eat. One boy from Tach-Meret said, 'Before going to school, you have to live and to live you have to work.' Another girl from Zeytuni stated, 'Girls have to make baskets at home for sale and help their families.' Bereket, who washes cars for cash and contributes to his family income, said, 'Children should not make the excuse of being students for not working. Parallel to their schooling, they have to work to help their family move out of poverty.'

A few others have different views. They think students should attend school and progress in education so that they can move out of poverty when they become adults. For example, a boy from Tach-Meret argued,

It is an international law that children under the age of 18 should not do heavy work. If they are engaged in work, their health can be affected and could be unsuccessful in their education. It is the responsibility of parents to bring up their children properly.

The boy attends secondary school and has a very good performance. He works at home helping his ailing mother but he says he does not do any work that affects his time for school and study. However, his view was opposed by all group discussion participants, most of whom were involved in paid work to help their families, and consequently lag behind him in their education. They said,

Children need to work and support their parents so that they can get food to live. Not working means learning dependency in life. Some want to apply American law in Ethiopia saying children below 18 should not work. But our children [unlike the Americans] do not leave home at the age of 18 on their own because of poverty. So they need to work from earlier age because it is for themselves as well. Children of the poor must work; otherwise they will continue to live in poverty.

(Boys group discussion, Tach-Meret).

Some resilient young people succeeded in working and going to school and advocated the possibility of being a 'working student'. For example, a paternal orphan girl, who works for cash but also performs well in school, tells her story as follows:

I combine both work for family and for cash with my education. Out of school time, I do paid work for five hours a day with my mother and sister. I pick haricot beans – a quintal in three days and get 25 birr (US\$1.40)....The work is difficult as I sit for long hours bending my back and it affects my health. I do not have any free time. ... Now we have electricity so I study during the night and do the picking during the day....Our life is improving because of hard work in the haricot beans. I cover costs of my school materials and other basic needs. We start to have better food, including fruit. We bought new equipment recently. ... By continuing the paid work and studying hard, I will join university and become a doctor, then marry and have two children. I am sure I will have a better life than my mother.

(Mulu, 17, girl, Tach-Meret)

Children stated that 'work' was also 'learning' out-of-school livelihood options. When education failed, the possibility of continuing with an on-going activity would be much easier. One child who combines schooling and work indicated the benefit of work as follows:

Three years ago, I was only covering half of my expenses by myself. Now I am 17 but I am not dependent on my family so it is a big change... [Out of school time], I wash cars and get good money. Poverty pushed me to start this work at the age of 9. But I didn't like to look inferior to those who wear better clothing in school. So it was a must for me to work hard and change myself. If my family were able to give me what I wanted, I would not consider working.

[At an early age] I used to only focus on my education. But now I have changed because sitting for hours in class is boring for me. ...My grandmother pushes me to progress only in schooling but I no longer accept her views. I want to become a car broker because I

now know many people in the business. I think [business pays off] better than education this time. I may finish Grade 10 then fully go back to business.

(Bereket, 17, boy, Bertukan).

Children concluded that a poor child needed to be able to combine work and schooling, though it is challenging. The child should be hard working both at work and in school in order to move out of poverty.

## 5. Discussions

Based on the results presented above, this section discusses the main findings. It focuses on the nature of child poverty, children's agency and the implications of children's perceptions of poverty.

### 5.1 The nature of child poverty

Children and young people who experienced poverty themselves were well positioned to provide us with their perspectives on child poverty. Based on these accounts and views, the nature of child poverty can be seen as multidimensional, contextualised, and intergenerational.

#### 5.1.1 *Multidimensional*

The dimensions of child poverty can be classified as material deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability (Wordsworth et al.2005), with economic, social, developmental and emotional impacts. Lack of material resources can have multiple effects, including social exclusion and powerlessness (Boyden et al. 2003). Children's characterisation of their poverty indicates its different dimensions, which can be manifested in the same child; one of these dimensions can lead to the others and vice versa. For example, 'wearing tattered clothes' (one of the poverty indicators given by children; see Table 5) has a multidimensional effect on children's lives. It could be an indication of material deprivation (an economic impact), but also a cause for exclusion (a social impact), feeling inferior (an emotional impact), and being unable to attend school properly (a developmental impact). It may bar a poor child from casual work because employers 'suspect' the child as a 'thief'. For the child experiencing poverty, 'tattered clothes' could be simultaneously an indicator, a consequence and a cause of poverty.

The children's views question at least two existing perspectives on child poverty. One is the over-emphasis on economic poverty (Attree 2006; Busby and Busby 1996), which overlooks its 'social costs'. One implication of this approach is the assumption that adults and children both experience poverty in the same way. The evidence from the children suggests that, for them, the social and developmental consequences of poverty were no less significant than the economic ones.

The evidence from children also questions the long tradition of viewing child poverty in terms of outcomes such as school achievements (for example, Bradbury 2003). While it is legitimate to monitor child outcomes in order to see the effects of poverty on children, this does not show how these outcomes are reached. Focusing on outcomes obscures the causes of poverty. Through lived accounts, young people established well the links between the causes and consequences of poverty. Their suggestions for alleviating poverty include both reducing its consequences and, more importantly, tackling its causes.

### 5.1.2 *Contextual*

Lived experiences of poverty also suggest it is contextualised. While poor children could potentially have similar lives, their location (rural or urban), gender and age will alter their experiences of poverty. Children reflected common feelings on poverty, but found it difficult to have the 'same' perspectives as each other. In group discussions, children agreed that a 'weak work ethic', the 'extravagance' of their parents and 'having many children' were major causes of poverty. But their varied experiences brought some differences in their views on the impacts of poverty. For instance, paid work was a significant outcome of poverty for rural children, while rural girls argued strongly that early marriage was a major result of their poverty. Two of them have had already experienced it and others saw it coming soon. Further differences were evident when children were asked to define poverty: they tried to relate the definition to their own lives.

The impact of poverty is also contextualised in time. At some points one aspect of poverty could be more harmful than another. For example, the children considered hunger and lack of clothing to be more of a concern for younger children. Girls say that, as they grow older, their parents' inability to provide clothing does not affect them so much as they have ways of acquiring it. For most children, being unable to achieve well in school, and for girls, early marriage, are major concerns as they grow older. Over time, poverty has forced them to undergo some life transitions early, either by dropping out of school to do paid work or get married.

Evidence on the contextualised nature of poverty suggests that viewing child poverty as a universal phenomenon hampers attempts to understand and act on it. There is neither a universal experience of nor one solution to child poverty. It needs to be understood in context as experienced by children and acted on accordingly.

### 5.1.3 *Intergenerational*

The accumulated outcomes, both in scope and time, of different consequences of poverty are likely to lead to an insecure adult life. Children who were not invested in may grow up into poor adults like their parents. Children whose basic needs are not met and who are unable to attend school properly are likely to have negative experiences. And 'living in poverty is not only damaging to children's present expectations of life; it can also include their hopes and aspirations for the future' (Attree 2006: 62).

As they grow up in contexts of economic deprivation, social exclusion and limited access to schooling, children are likely to become adults with multiple disadvantages. The sampled children argued that those who grow up with such difficulties could be a 'burden' on a nation and add to the poverty already existing in the country. Poor adults deprived of economic resources, knowledge and self-confidence fail to manage themselves and their families properly. Unless appropriate action is taken, poverty may be perpetuated across the generations.

## 5.2 **Children are more than just 'victims' of poverty**

As outlined above, poverty affects children's present and future lives. The data from these children also indicate that children are not just victims of poverty. They have also demonstrated their agency and resilience, mainly by providing data about their lives and by making practical efforts to manage life in poverty. Children talked about how poverty could be addressed, for example, by questioning some of their parents' beliefs and actions. For them, what seem good values for parents turn out to be 'harmful' and causes of poverty for

children. They felt that some of their parents' values were 'not acceptable' for families living in poverty.

As agents of modernisation, perhaps influenced by their schooling, young people want to adopt values different from those of their parents. They feel that hard work, having fewer children, succeeding in school and, most importantly, saving would help them move out of the poverty experienced by their parents. They say that refusing to do certain jobs in a context of high unemployment, having a lot of children, and hosting religious or other feasts extravagantly are no longer acceptable. For example, they argued that children were no longer 'wealth' and it was no longer right to have children that the family could not raise 'properly'. In individual interviews, the maximum number of children a child aspired to have when grown up was three; most opted to have only two. They aspired to achieve better lives by avoiding 'harmful' practices and adopting 'modern' values. In all group discussions and individual interviews children indicated that they continued to share the knowledge they had gained from schools. Some reported that they had succeeded in persuading their parents to change their ways, at least with regard to family planning and to some extent also with regard to reducing spending on feasts. However, many say their parents still continue with these practices.

Some of the children's and young people's perceptions could be contested. While their views on the weak work ethic of their parents, having many children and early marriage for girls could be accepted by many, the custom of spending on feasts may have other dimensions. Parents would see such expenditure as a means of social inclusion, maintaining or expanding networks, or meeting religious obligations. These ideas might be beyond the grasp of the young people or less meaningful for them at their stage of life.

Young people also showed their agency by contributing to family income and the fulfilment of their own needs. The evidence shows that all children have been doing something, ranging from giving advice and helping with household work to engaging in paid work, and trying to succeed at school. Amid hunger, poor housing and clothing, and social exclusion, children have continued to contribute both to their own survival and to positive changes in the economic status of their families. They felt that the future of their lives and in some respect that of their families lay on their shoulders. Though poverty has enormous negative effects, these children and young people have demonstrated their resilience.

### **5.3. Knowledge and policy implications**

So, what is the purpose of studying children's views on poverty? First, it is to contribute to the growing interest in the sociology of childhood, where children's participation in research is emerging as a given; and second, to encourage action to alleviate child poverty more sustainably.

One challenge in childhood studies is the question of children's and young people's 'competence' in providing data on their own lives and whether such data is sufficient to help address child poverty. It is becoming widely accepted that children's contributions to our knowledge can help to address the ontological, epistemological and methodological challenges childhood studies are facing. If what we want to know is their 'social world' and what we know is their 'perceptions', what we need is an appropriate methodology, as explained below, to this effect.

As 'life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects' own experiences' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 27), studying children needs to focus on asking them about their lived experiences. Seeking such accounts of children's life

experiences requires withdrawing from the long history of getting data mainly from adults. The process of building knowledge about children's lives needs to adopt 'research *with* children as opposed to research *about* or *on* children' (Fraser et al. 2004: 23). This could be enhanced by using multiple methods: participatory, reflexive, adaptable, focused on children's lived experiences and embedded into practice (Clark 2005: 31). Participatory qualitative methods (for example, poverty tree exercises), group discussions, individual interviews and observations, as well as surveys, have been useful in generating the data on which this paper is based. Through participatory exercises and individual interviews over time, these young people have demonstrated their competence in providing strong data about their lives. For example, they provided their views on the causes, characteristics and, most importantly, impacts of poverty on their lives. However, it is unlikely that parents or caregivers would tell us the same story of their children's poverty experiences. For instance, it is implausible that parents would consider themselves as being partial causes of their children's poverty or that they would suggest that their values should be changed in order to reduce the impacts of poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Another challenge is whether data collected from children are sufficient for conceptualisation and theorising. James (2007) argues that asking children questions does not guarantee that their ideas will not be dismissed later by adults as 'giving voice to children is not or only about letting children speak; it is about the social world that children's perspectives can provide' (James 2007: 262). Whether what the respondents narrate about their experiences can be regarded as knowledge has remained a long-standing debate in epistemology (Kvale and Brinkman 2009: 47). Social scientists widely question actors' perspectives arguing that 'abstract categories are superior to the actors' own knowledge' (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000: 36).

But ethno-methodologists argue for the need to study everyday lives to understand how knowledge is generated and shaped, and acknowledge the role of reflexivity in the process. Indeed, children sometimes express themselves through actions or simple language and this makes it difficult for researchers to translate into research discourse with other adults. Sceptics question whether the final outputs of the research reflect what children expressed during the data collection. Many of the meanings children attach to words and actions might have been lost in the process of analysis, which children are not involved in. Thus, researchers always face a trade-off between making analysis grounded in the data as revealed by children and making abstract conceptualisations that are 'communicable' within the research community.

However, it seems inappropriate to blame children for not being able to conform to abstract conceptualisation, as this might not be relevant in their daily lives. While theory is built through reflexivity, the very possibility of identifying standard indicators appears doubtful (Nilsen 2005: 185). In this study, children expressed their views about poverty in simple language (e.g. clothing, food, inferiority, not attending school, etc.), but it is our responsibility as researchers to make sense of what they said and turn it into concepts and theories. For example, children have told us how wearing 'tattered clothing' affected their schooling, relationships, confidence, and so on. It is researchers' task to conceptualise this, for instance, as the 'multidimensional' effects of poverty.

The second purpose of considering children's views on poverty is to enable action to be taken. Nowadays, childhood poverty has taken centre stage in developmental discourse.

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<sup>7</sup> Strong argument on this issue may require further study on parents' perceptions of child poverty.

Childhood poverty is not only relevant to children; it follows people even when they become adults. Despite huge engagement by policymakers, changes in child poverty are very limited. One possible reason, among many others, is very limited consideration of children's views in policy formulation and interventions. The long tradition of childhood studies considers children as 'incompetent' and believes they need to be adults before their ideas can be considered seriously. Considering young people as competent to provide knowledge, as discussed above, can help broaden our knowledge so that action can be taken more effectively.

The growing interest in understanding child poverty through children themselves requires a new way of acting. For example, considering parents as contributing to children's poverty suggests that there is a necessity for intervention to deal with certain societal values rooted in the local culture. Though further study could be required, it seems that parents would be unlikely to present themselves as causes of poverty and advocate the eradication of some of their values. Monetary or other traditional poverty reduction interventions may not change such culturally rooted values. Policy actions need to reflect the nature of child poverty as viewed by children. Their responses have shown that it is multidimensional, contextual and intergenerational. This means that multiple interventions are needed, for example, to address the economic, social, personal and developmental needs of poor children; that their location (urban or rural), gender and age must be taken into account; and that the appropriate time and resources must be found to stop the transmission of poverty across the generations.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has presented children's and young people's perceptions of poverty based on their own experiences. Their lived accounts suggest the multidimensional, contextualised and intergenerational nature of child poverty.

The paper also argues that children and young people are competent enough to provide rich data from their lived experiences of poverty. These data are rich enough to add to the sociology of childhood where 'child voice' is an important component. Knowledge based on 'lived experiences' means that children are better positioned than others (e.g. their caregivers) to give data on their poverty. What researchers need is to adopt better participatory methods that can help to get more data from the actors – the children.

Poor children and young people also have shown their resilience and agency. They have faced poverty and have tried to suggest how it could be tackled. As poverty remains a concern of nations and all generations, action needs to follow knowledge. Based on their experiences, children suggested ways out of poverty, involving the Government, their parents and themselves. Policy needs to address education, employment, social protection for the most needy and agricultural development in order to end persistent poverty. Any policy interventions on child poverty should not underestimate the challenges posed by societal values that are contributing to poverty.

The conclusion is that researchers and policymakers need to listen to children and use their data to act on poverty. This paper has shown the ability and agency of children and young people in providing sufficient information on their lived experiences of poverty. Children are more than just victims of poverty; they are agents of its alleviation.

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# Children's Experiences and Perceptions of Poverty in Ethiopia

This paper presents children's experiences and perceptions of poverty. It draws on survey and qualitative data from the Young Lives study of poor children in Ethiopia. Through group exercises, discussions and interviews, children and young people aged 13-17 collectively and individually provided their perceptions of the causes, indicators and consequences of poverty in their communities. They felt that they were more victims of the consequences of poverty while they rarely contributed to its causes. Their poverty experiences suggest the multidimensional, contextualised and intergenerational nature of child poverty.

The children and young people have also demonstrated their agency and resilience by providing their lived accounts and suggestions for tackling poverty and by practically contributing to family incomes. They identified what they believed to be the root causes of poverty and suggested what the Government, parents and children should do to reduce it. For example, they thought that child poverty could be addressed by changing some of the societal values that contribute to its perpetuation.

The paper argues that children's lived experiences of poverty place them in an optimum position to provide us with strong evidence to advance our knowledge of childhood poverty and develop apt policies to reduce it. Through this argument, this paper aims to provide both theoretical and practical contributions.

## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

## Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (Group for the Analysis of Development), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional (Institute for Nutrition Research), Peru*
- *Center for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
- *Child and Youth Studies Group (CREET), The Open University, UK*
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