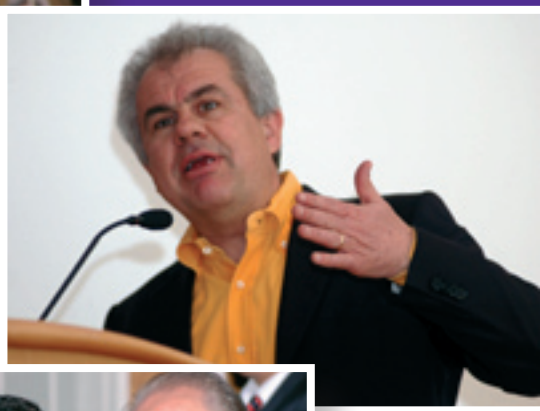
FOCUS CHILDREN

BREAKING THE POVERTY CYCLE

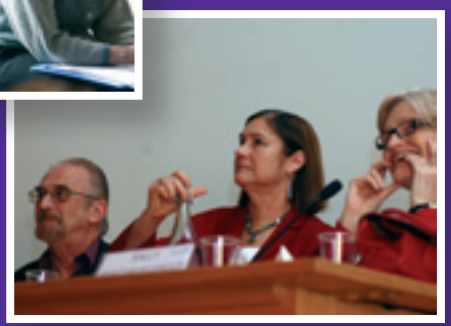
25–27 March 2009 **Conference Report**



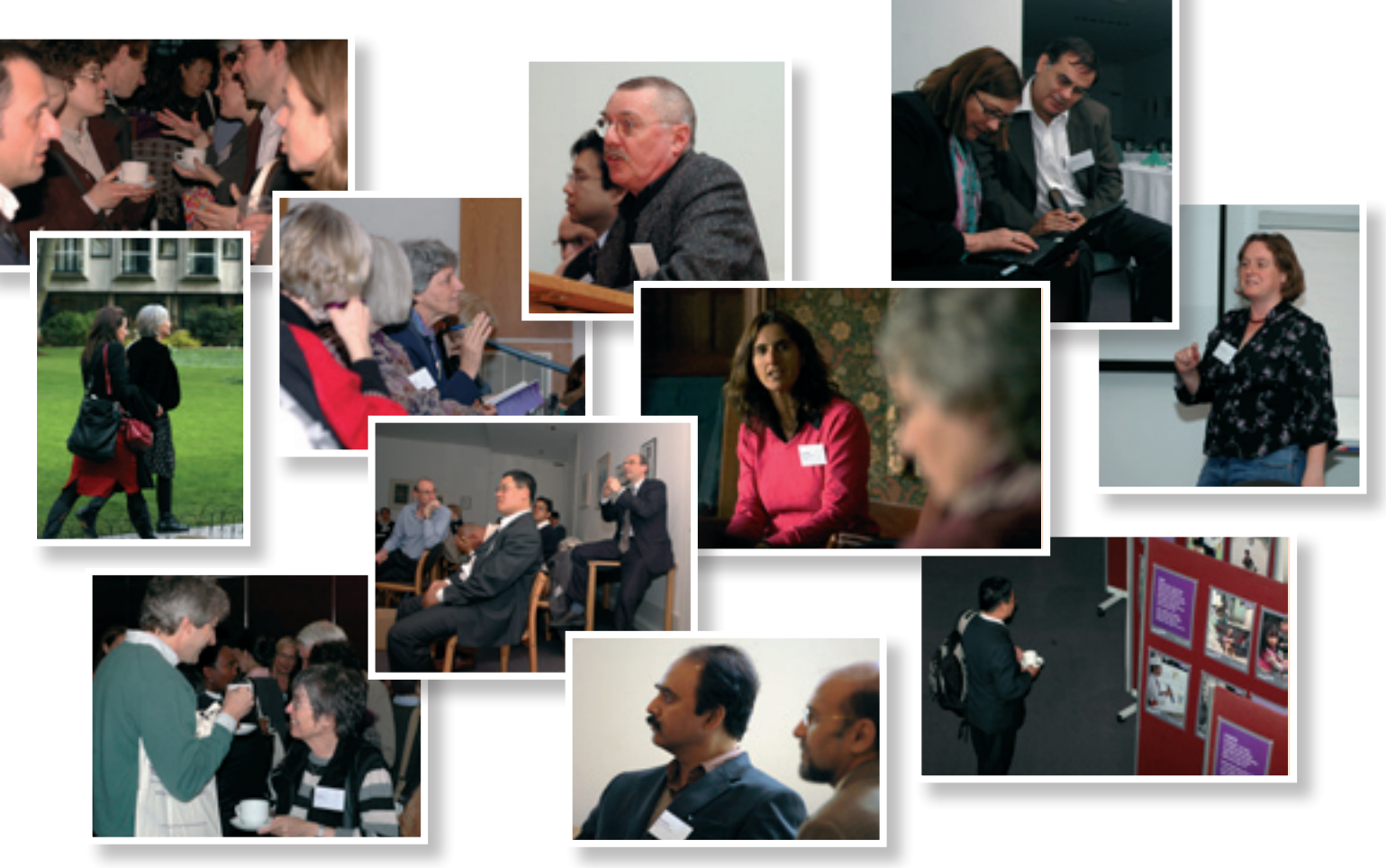






Young Lives
An International Study of Childhood Poverty



About Young Lives

Young Lives is a unique long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of child poverty. By following the same children over a period of 15 years, our aim is to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty, and provide evidence to support the development of effective policies. Since 2002 we have been working with 12,000 children in four countries – Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. One group of children was born in 2001/2 and another group in 1994/5, so we are following the younger children from infancy to their mid-teens and the older children into young adulthood, when some will become parents themselves.

We now know quite a lot about the children, their family situations, their problems, their hopes and fears and the contexts in which they live. By 2015, the target year for the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, we will know even more. We are gathering material that can tell us, for example, why some children leave school and others stay, why families migrate, and why some families manage to pull themselves out of poverty and others do not. We are also able to look at how children in different circumstances experience poverty, what factors increase or reduce poverty, and what effects it produces. Although most of the children come from poor families, our research shows how adaptable and resilient they are, but also how a failed crop or the illness and death of a family member can change a child's future at a stroke.

Introduction

The Young Lives conference 'Focus on Children: Breaking the Poverty Cycle' held in Oxford in March 2009 brought together 130 participants from all over the world. Anthropologists from India mixed with economists from Brazil, child development specialists from the USA with educationalists from Ethiopia. The corridors, meeting rooms and dining halls of St Anne's College were filled with a buzz of excited discussion throughout the three days.

The five plenaries and sixteen parallel sessions, with more than 48 papers, allowed for plenty of conversation as well as presentations on a wide variety of topics. Young Lives teams from the four different study countries presented the results of the second round of qualitative and quantitative research. Many papers drew on the Young Lives data, but there were also contributions from other researchers specialising in either child development or development and children, and from non-governmental organisations and policymakers. At the halfway point of the study, the conference gave the opportunity to present the findings to date and reflect on how Young Lives might develop communications and policy strategies going forward.

The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, sent a message of support in which he said: "Understanding how poverty affects children and young people is important for helping them, their families and their communities to escape poverty and this programme is doing just that. It is especially useful that this programme is collecting high quality longitudinal research which is particularly valuable for further research and policy development."

The final session of the conference looked forward to the next rounds of Young Lives research and examined how research evidence can translate into policies that bring real changes to children's lives around the world.

Children in development and the development of children

The conference was opened by **Frances Stewart** (University of Oxford), whose own work on childhood poverty began more than 20 years ago with the publication of *Adjustment with a Human Face* for UNICEF. **Jo Boyden** and **Martin Woodhead** from Young Lives then gave an overview presentation about the development of children. Woodhead began by looking back 100 years to a book by Ellen Key published in 1909, *The Century of the Child*. In it, she laid out a vision for how childhood might change during the course of the twentieth century. This was hotly debated in the following years and continues to be of relevance today as we look at what is happening to childhood in the twenty-first century in the context of Young Lives. **Jo Boyden** spoke of how her own interest was fired when, in 1980, she was writing the first Oxfam *Field Director's Handbook* and realised how little information was available about children and development.

Her presentation gave a historical perspective, starting with the work of Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children, and her attempt to establish a global set of values for children. In 1979, violence against children was raised as an issue for the first time and it became evident that there needed to be an international agreement relating specifically to children which was stronger than the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Jebb developed a Children's Charter that became the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and this formed the basis of the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which came into force in 1990. At the time, the notion of linking children and rights was controversial, but the CRC is now the most ratified instrument in the world – only Somalia and the USA have not signed up.

The next stage in the evolution of international policy came with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have placed a greater focus on children in development cooperation, along with massive investment in services for children. However, this emphasis on policy has not been accompanied by the same attention to the political and power dimensions of childhood poverty. Although the MDGs have improved the volume and quality of aid available for children, there is still the challenge of moving beyond the critical threshold: reaching the last 20% of children costs as much as providing for the majority 80% and is far more complex.

The MDG momentum was preceded in the 1990s by the institutionalisation of a child rights framework in many agencies, with a focus on child survival, development, protection and participation. But, Boyden argued, there is still confusion about what is really in children's best interests, despite claims to be child-centred, and the rights framework sits uncomfortably alongside human capital frameworks. There is also a conflict between normative and evidence-based approaches (whose norms count the most?), and the child participation agenda has proven to require great skill and investment to avoid merely being tokenistic and naïve.


Jo Boyden

"Reaching the last 20% of children costs as much as providing for the majority 80% and is far more complex."
Jo Boyden

Current trends

So how has research contributed to these trends? Although we have elaborate systems for monitoring macro-level inputs and outputs, we continue to be over-reliant on crude indicators and league tables of child well-being. This has resulted in patchy knowledge about the impacts of poverty on children's lives – and unresolved debates about how to conceptualise and measure them. There has been a dominance of cross-sectional studies highlighting the plight of 'vulnerable' groups: for example, ten years ago the focus was on street children, now it is on trafficking. We also have to ask whether research is genuinely child-centred. It is important not to box children's experiences into sectors such as education or health but to look across the spectrum of their life experiences.


Martin Woodhead

Education

Education is a major theme within the Young Lives study. Four of the 16 parallel sessions focused on some aspect of education. Early years education was given particular emphasis, as were the major transitions in a child's life – from pre-school into primary, to secondary and beyond. The presentations looked at schooling in specific countries and contexts and the particular influences of ethnicity and language. Quality as well as quantity was stressed, and initiatives examined that encourage poor children to go to school – for example the free school meals scheme in India – and budget monitoring for transparency and accountability.

Evidence was also presented on the importance of parental education. **Martin Woodhead** argued for the importance of early childhood education, from an economic investment perspective, as well as from the point of view of human rights, and examined the results of Young Lives research from Ethiopia, India and Peru. **Patricia Ames** outlined her findings on school transitions in Peru from a qualitative study. She noted that the main burden of adaptation is placed on children, who show a positive attitude the ability to cope, but also experience difficulties and stress. **Hang Mai Thuy** noted that although the total enrolment rate for primary education in Vietnam is now 97%, Young Lives research has shown that there are many issues for poor and especially ethnic minority children which prevent them accessing quality education. **Santiago Cueto** looked at strategies for overcoming the marginalisation of ethnic and language minorities in Peru. **Dave Bainton** and **Michèle Smith** presented the work of the EdQual research programme on the use of ICTs in basic education; on language and literacy development; on school effectiveness and education quality; and on leadership and management of change. **Kenneth King** talked about 'educating out of poverty', but pointed out the dangers of 'educentricity'. He noted that context matters – and there is a need for accompanying investments, particularly in jobs or livelihoods. Education alone is not enough.

"We are increasingly finding that education-related themes are central to children's lives. No matter where we go and who we talk to, children and their parents want to talk about school – even if they are not attending school."
Martin Woodhead

Martin Woodhead continued the presentation by examining the impact of the MDGs on educational access and achievement. He noted that education is playing an increasingly important role in children's lives, changing attitudes and expectations and producing a potential mismatch between the outcomes children achieve and their increasingly high expectations. He concluded by reflecting on the importance of two pioneer longitudinal studies in the USA: the Oakland Growth Study of children born in 1920 and the Berkeley Guidance Study of children born in 1928. Those children became the children of the Great Depression and young adults during World War 2. Now we have to reflect and ask ourselves what opportunities and challenges await the Young Lives children, and how can our work not only improve knowledge about children but also shape policy for the future.

What are the challenges?

Responding to Boyden and Woodhead, **David Mepham** (Save the Children UK) asked why we as a global community have not made more progress. We should not diminish the progress there has been, but there is a huge gap between where we are and where we ought to be. He identified four main reasons for this. First, there is an overemphasis on economic growth as the prime driver of poverty reduction. The reality is very different – research for Save the Children shows that if you have a 1% increase in economic growth it leads to a 0.3% improvement in child survival. In sub-Saharan Africa this figure drops to 0.1%. The story is clearly more complex than this: there is a big debate to be had about distribution and the effects of economic output, for example in India where 45% of Indian children are undernourished despite economic growth. Second, equity is not highlighted sufficiently.

Poverty and inequality

Poverty and inequality were inevitably a theme that ran throughout the conference. Two of the parallel sessions in particular picked up on this. Reviewing research on the impact of the 1990s financial crisis on children, **Valpy Fitzgerald** noted that the current crisis will clearly be both deep and long-lasting, with particular impact on developing countries (exports, investment, growth, etc). It is likely to have an asymmetric effect on the poor, and children of the poor; for children it also has long-term implications for nurture (nutrition, stability, schooling). Ring-fencing of budgets and safety nets based on targeted welfare provision are not enough: macroeconomic policy itself is at fault. He noted that in order to have a true picture of the effects, annual data from household surveys and labour market surveys need to be tracked across major macroeconomic shocks in selected countries. There is a need to revisit data and cases from 1990s crises and trace longer-term effects, and for the development of a more robust macroeconomic framework using existing models but modified for children. **Jason Hart** examined some of the basic premises of a political economy approach to childhood poverty. He looked at some of the questions arising at global, national and community levels and posed challenges for research in this area. These included: Is it reasonable to suggest that research pursued without attention to power relations potentially perpetuates a detrimental status quo? And finally, he quoted from a paper by Rachel Marcus: "… eradicating childhood poverty requires substantial changes in the power relations of international development – with greater national control, greater inputs from disadvantaged people themselves, and an end to global economic policies and structures which systematically advantage rich countries and people." **Philippa Bevan** outlined her political-cultural-economy analysis of youth transitions in Ethiopia, from the Well-being in Development project. This was part of a larger study of power and life quality in Ethiopia between 1989 and 2005. It comprised 17 months of intensive fieldwork in six communities. The survey showed that there are different answers to the question 'transition to what?' which are related to a complex mix of variations in structures of inequality, gender and gender norms, livelihood systems, and marriage and kin systems. She outlined some of the implications of the research for Young Lives, which is ideally placed to understand how local niches co-evolving with wider trans-local, national, and global political-cultural-economy systems have affected the lives of children.

The focus is on supply-driven aggregates and averages but there is not enough concern for people themselves. Third, there is not enough emphasis on the politics of development. These are deeply complex social and political processes, but in new approaches such as the drivers for change methodology, there is rarely much of a child focus. Fourth, there is a tendency to avoid cultural issues and sensitive social norms such as early marriage. So what does this mean for the child development community? How does one turn data and analysis into material that policymakers can do something with? We need to present such a powerful and compelling case that governments feel obligated to adopt and implement, he argued. Tackling child poverty is the key to tackling poverty more generally. As Jim Grant from UNICEF once said: "Child poverty is the Trojan horse with which we tackle the citadel of poverty."

David noted that the current global financial crisis can also create opportunities. If now is not the time for big thinking, then when is? He pointed out that there is a rich seam of evidence in Young Lives complemented by policy ideas. We need to find ways of putting things positively. As Anthony Giddens said recently: "How would it have been if Martin Luther King had said: 'I have a nightmare?' instead of 'I have a dream'?"

"If we are serious about child rights and development we need much more emphasis on inequality in relation to ethnicity, caste, religion and gender."
David Mepham


David Mepham


Albert Park

Psychosocial well-being

Young Lives is unusual in being a longitudinal study which also examines psychosocial well-being. The presentations in the parallel session gave an insight into the findings emerging from Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam. **Stefan Dercon** and **Pramila Krishnan** presented a paper on the relationship between material poverty and the psychosocial competencies of children. For the cohort of 12-year-olds, measures of self-efficacy, sense of inclusion and especially self-esteem and educational aspirations all correlated with measures of the material well-being of the family in which they are growing up. In short, material circumstances contribute to shaping these wider dimensions of child well-being. As other evidence has shown, these psychosocial competencies affect the children as adults and shape their future socio-economic status. This suggests a mechanism by which poverty may be transmitted across generations. A caregiver's education and school participation also affects children's psychosocial competencies, possibly suggetsing a mechanism for overcoming such transmission of poverty over time. They noted that future rounds of Young Lives data should make an even greater contribution to this debate. **Catherine Porter** and **Karin Heissler** presented their work on child labour in Ethiopia. Using Young Lives quantitative and qualitative data, they found that childhood is a dynamic social and economic construct that is also relational. The household division of labour is complex: roles and responsibilities of members are dynamic, changing to account for the domestic lifecycle of the household. Work is central to childhood and children's work is important for the household, but childhoods are changing in response to schooling and this affects aspirations for work that necessitates having an education. This may create tensions within the household as girls and boys seek to meet their work obligations and perform well in school. Roles are defined within the household depending on children's birth order, gender, and presence of other siblings and parents, but children adapt quickly to circumstances, for example, parental death or changes in household composition.

"It feels like Young Lives and the Gansu study in China were like twins separated at birth and now they have come together in Oxford."
Albert Park

Why longitudinal research matters

In his plenary presentation, **Albert Park** (Gansu Survey of Children and Families) asked: What is the value of longitudinal research for studying child development and well-being? The Gansu study is similar to Young Lives in a number of ways. It is a multi-stage cluster sample of 2,000 rural children in China who were aged 9 to 12 in the year 2000, with 1,400 children aged 9 to 15 added in 2007. It also interviews parents, teachers, village leaders and staff in health clinics.

Lack of longitudinal data

He noted that here is a lack of longitudinal data on children from developing countries. Gansu and Young Lives are the only two projects that incorporate interdisciplinary multidimensional welfare measures. He argued that they are now converging in some ways – for example, Gansu started with education and is now broadening out to encompass other issues, whilst Young Lives has a broader remit but education is emerging as an increasingly important theme. The research challenges for both projects are that they are tracing long-term causal relationships and conceptualising and measuring the key dimensions of childhood welfare. This does not eliminate bias caused by unobserved factors that change over time. Another challenge is that funding longitudinal research is expensive and the benefits only build and become evident with time.

He went on to talk about the findings so far from Gansu, which include the fact that girls perform better than boys in primary school but boys stay in school longer; and that parents make compensating investments in children with relatively poorer health or ability, and also invest more in boys than girls. They have also found that a father's migration has a more positive effect on girls' school enrolment and test scores than for boys, but has a more negative impact on girls' psychosocial development. Educational fee reduction reforms have increased middle school enrolment modestly and have led to increases in families' investment in the children

targeted by the subsidies. It has led to some policy reforms and spin-off projects, such as the distribution of glasses to children with poor eyesight. Ongoing challenges for Gansu include tracking children who migrate in order to minimise sample attrition and integrating quantitative and qualitative field research.

Opportunities and constraints

Further developing the ideas from Albert's presentation, **Stefan Dercon** (Young Lives/ University of Oxford) asked: What are longitudinal data for? What can they do that other data may not be able to do? What can they not do?

He identified three purposes: a basic narrative of poverty changes; the persistence of temporary deprivation; and the impact of policies on poverty. He noted that understanding how and why various dimensions of poverty change over time requires getting the facts right. A number of questions can be addressed using repeated cross-sectional data. The one that cannot is the persistence of poverty over time. Using a large sample from rural Ethiopia as an example he also showed how people's perception of how well-off they were in the past is not an accurate measure and can even contradict what respondents said at the time. He went on to show what longitudinal data can reveal about an issue such as migration and in understanding the long-term impacts of periods of deprivation and 'shocks'. He then looked at the potential role of longitudinal data for understanding the impact of poverty on policy, and noted that it could go a long way towards addressing causal links. For example, it can be used to compare changes across affected and non-affected groups over time, or by assessing how programmes are implemented – such as Young Lives work on the impact of the Ethiopia workfare programme on child labour and on the impact of the midday meal scheme in India. Longitudinal data can also help to assess the consequences of key questions in areas such as orphanhood, or the impact of building roads, or of globalisation, or of a recession.

Making a difference

The special guest speaker, **Michael Foster MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development began by saying: "When children grow up in poverty and suffering, they are condemned before they reach adulthood. The tragedy of the child also undermines a country's future. If we don't look after children and young people there is no hope


Stefan Dercon

of achieving the MDGs. Demographic changes make this all the more important – by 2015 nearly one third of the world's population will be under 14. That is two billion people. Unless we protect children from harm and recognise their needs we know they will become excluded from society."

He highlighted some of the things the UK Government is doing to address this, for example, helping Save the Children train personnel to protect children, working in Ghana on national social protection measures, and working with the ILO on national child labour monitoring systems. Young Lives research is helping DFID to understand how poverty affects children, building foundations for children to build better lives. The project aims to fill important knowledge gaps. For example, it is providing critical evidence on how short-term shocks affect children, and governments in the four study countries are already beginning to use the findings.


Michael Foster MP

"When children grow up in poverty and suffering, they are condemned before they reach adulthood."
Michael Foster MP


Patrice Engle

"The effects of poverty are dynamic and depend on a child's age and the level of deprivation suffered."
Patrice Engle

Innovations in methodology

Young Lives is developing a number of methodological innovations and some of these were explored in the parallel sessions, as well as in the coffee breaks, when there was a demonstration of the new handheld computers that are being piloted for data collection. In the parallel sessions, **Javier Escobal** and **Alan Sanchez** asked: Can the Young Lives samples be used to extrapolate at the national level? In order to answer this question, they had prepared sampling reports on all four countries to assess potential biases. Using data from Ethiopia and Peru, they argued that the biases spotted in each of the samples do not preclude engaging in national-level policy debates, as Young Lives covers a wide range of household wealth levels and both poor and non-poor households are tracked. By adding the longitudinal dimension, the Young Lives sample is well equipped to deal with the presence of household characteristics that are fixed over time. **Gina Crivello** presented an overview of Young Lives qualitative research, which started in 2006 and focuses on 200 case-study children across the four study countries. The research has been guided by three broad themes: 1) the key transitions in children's lives; 2) children's understandings and experiences of well-being; and 3) how policies, programmes and services shape children's transitions and well-being. Young Lives is innovative in its inclusion of relatively young children in participatory research (aged 6 to 8); and its development of methodologies that can be applied in diverse cultural contexts, marked by variations in children's daily lives, their relationships with adults, and preferred ways of communicating their ideas and feelings. The challenges of this work were explored. The presentation also highlighted the potential to build integrated case studies, based both on survey data and qualitative data, to feed into policy research.

Poverty and Child Development

Patrice Engle (California Polytechnic State University) was introduced by Sally Grantham-McGregor from the Institute of Child Health in London. She began by looking at four assumptions that are often made about how people might escape poverty. These include: improved health, nutrition, and child development through individual investment; better employment and income through societal changes in income distribution, social protection programmes and economic development; reduced social marginalisation and exclusion; and finally, luck or fortuitous circumstances. She gave some evidence for the importance of each of the four factors, noting that there is no one definitive theory of child development and that most hail from a Western viewpoint. She looked at different 'windows' of sensitivity and receptiveness that children have to develop different skills, emphasising the importance of the early years and of cognitive stimulation and learning opportunities that many children lack.

The effects of poverty

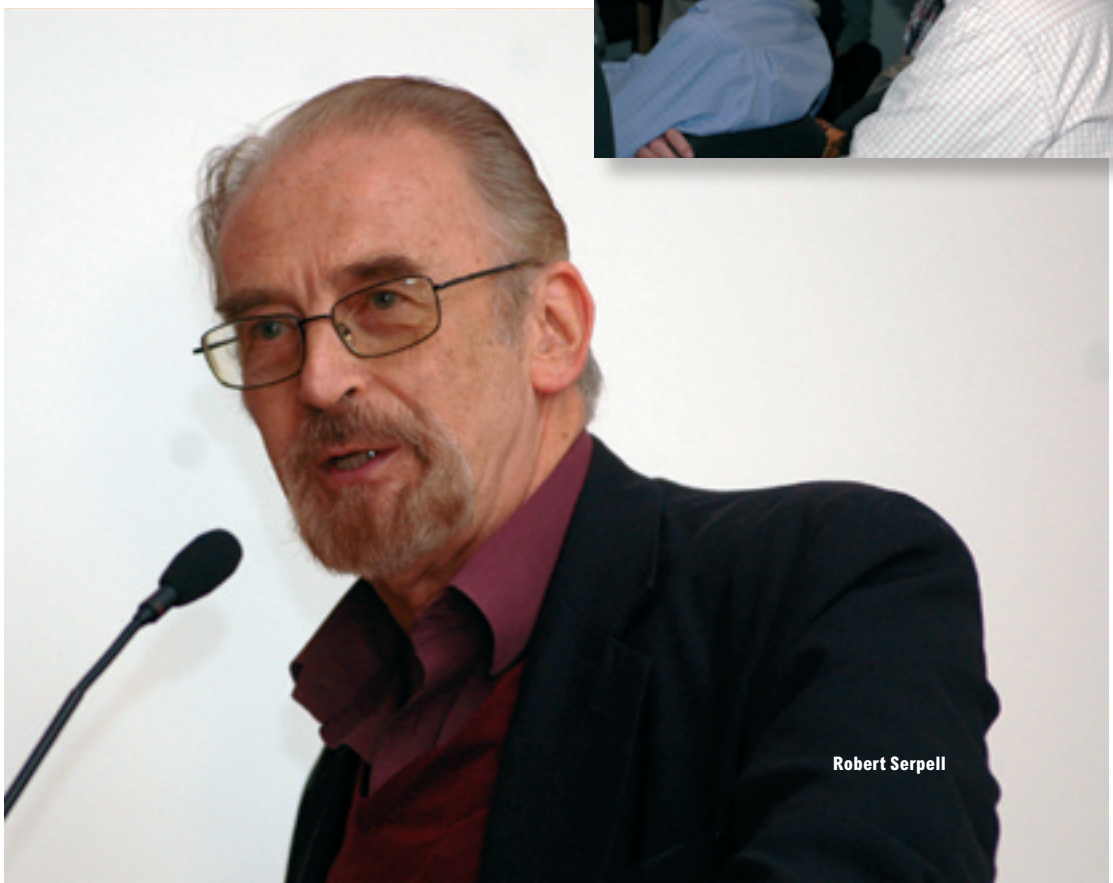
The effects of poverty are dynamic and depend on a child's age and the level of deprivation suffered. Engle argued that there is a set of overlapping circles of characteristics that influence how children experience poverty – individual (such as gender or birth order), family (such as socioeconomic status), meso (quality of and access to services, etc.), and macro (degree of exclusion, economic conditions, etc.). She went on to pose the questions that longitudinal data can be most useful to address, such as: When is an intervention most effective in combating poverty? When in a child's development are shocks most devastating? How do protective factors vary by age? Is it more difficult for a child to cope with falling into poverty or static poverty? What are the effects of escaping poverty? Finally, she noted the unique advantages of Young Lives data. First, it can combine analysis of individual capacities, economic development, and social exclusion (and luck?); second, it can identify when in a child's life each of these factors are most important; third, it can examine the dynamics of poverty; fourth, it can begin to create reliable indicators for psychosocial variables for child and family; and lastly, the research is useful for individual study countries.

Robert Serpell (University of Zambia) reflected on Engle's presentation, highlighting the importance of cultural context for the definition of developmental outcomes, indicators and learning opportunities. He reinforced her

argument that developmental science can enhance the design of pro-poor social policies and practice by specifying the points in time when children are most vulnerable or most responsive to positive change; the individual and social factors that are protective against poverty; exceptions to the 'developmental trajectory'; and the importance of resilience and personal agency. But he also highlighted the need for culturally sensitive assessment rather than externally packaged standardised tests, giving examples of why such tests did not work in a Zambian context. In contrast, he outlined the locally designed *Panga Munthu* ('make a person') test, which reduced gender as well as cultural bias. He then looked at how developmental outcomes can be linked to local socialisation goals and eco-cultural contexts rather than Western cultural end-points of development, for example, the indigenous Chewa perspective on children's intellectual and moral development which values intelligence and wisdom, cognitive agility and social responsibility. He spoke of the importance of optimising learning opportunities with multiple forms of support rather than focusing exclusively on school enrolment, and examined the Child-to-Child (CtC) approach to health education in northern Zambia. He argued that the main contributions education research could make to reducing the negative impact of poverty would be to study local socialisation practices, goals and learning opportunities; to develop and standardise assessment methods appropriate to children growing up in poverty; and to develop case-studies of innovative educational practices that could be transferred to other settings.

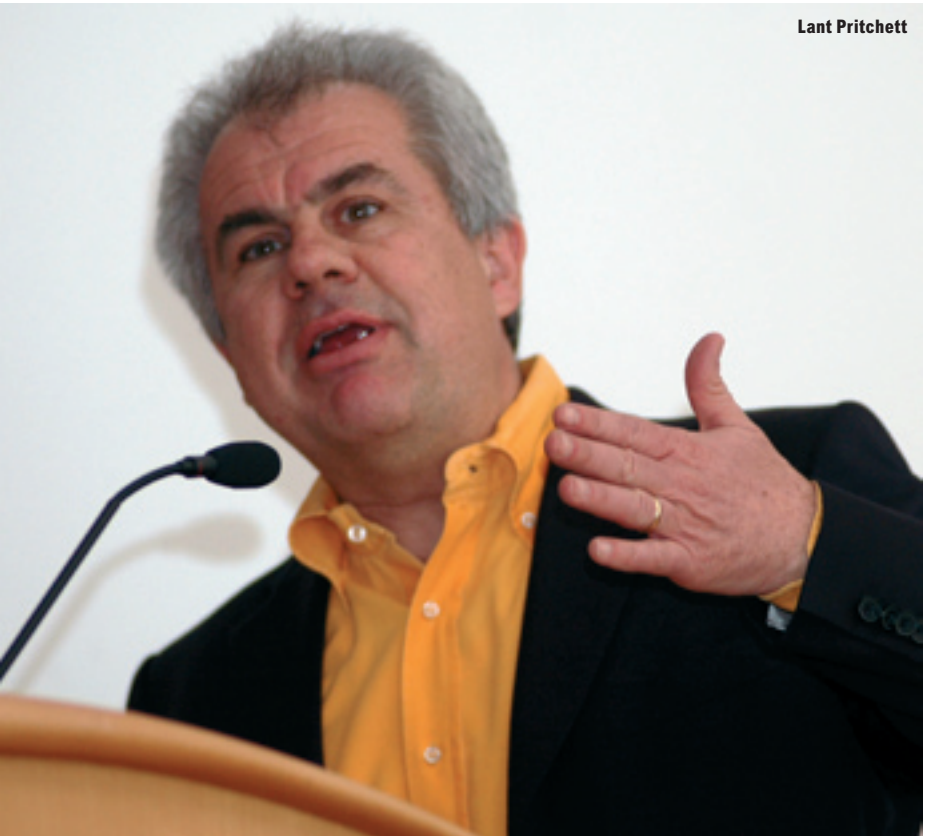
Health and nutrition

Health and nutrition is a strong theme for Young Lives and was covered specifically by seven parallel papers which looked at research on malnutrition and obesity, food consumption, the links between early nutrition and cognitive achievement, the effects of paternal absence, and the relationship between health and improved sanitation. For example, **Rozana Himaz** looked at persistent stunting in middle childhood in Andhra Pradesh, and which observable characteristics influence stunting in children between the ages of 7 and 12. She found that maternal education was very important, and that girls and younger siblings were much more likely to be stunted. Children who recovered from being stunted consumed a diet higher in protein and micronutrients than others. The policy implications of these findings suggest that nutritional interventions and adult female education may have a positive impact on growth and perhaps mitigate adverse consequences of early-age stunting. **Kirk Dearden** examined the long-term consequences of a father's absence on children's well-being in Peru, using Young Lives data. At age 1, nearly one in five children did not see their biological fathers on a daily basis. One-year-olds whose fathers were always or never present were more malnourished by the time they reached age 5 than children whose fathers were sometimes present. Encouraging fathers to stay at home may reduce stunting; however, it is unlikely that many absent fathers will heed the call. Father-absent homes where children were well-nourished purchased more food, gave more meals to children and had higher educational aspirations than father-absent homes where children were stunted.



Robert Serpell

"What poor people say they want is power, voice, connections and coping strategies."
Robert Serpell


Lant Pritchett

Risk and resilience and work and learning

Another strand running through the conference was risk, resilience and well-being, alongside work and learning. On risk and resilience, the majority of papers focused on Ethiopia, looking at risk and early childhood development, the impact of parental death, resilience in older children, and the effect of economic shocks. A further paper covered the links between maternal migration and child well-being in Peru. Papers on work and learning looked at how children cope with combining work and education in Andhra Pradesh and in Ethiopia, schooling and work in times of drought, and the importance for children in Peru of work and migration in 'becoming somebody'. **Pieter Serneels** and **Stefan Dercon** presented a paper on aspirations, poverty and education. Young Lives data for India showed substantial variation in parents' or caregivers' aspirations for their children, which have a strong effect on the grade achieved at age 12 for girls, but not for boys. **Susan Levine** presented the findings from a South African study of children's work in agriculture. This illustrated how children face conflicting demands between their need, obligation and desire to support their families, and the legal obligation to participate in schooling. The paper explored the reasons why children work in agriculture and their views on the effects of work on schooling and their own well-being. Family obligation is key and while the physical and psychosocial costs of children's agricultural work are evident, it is highly valued by both children and adults. The children who find it hardest to cope are those who have to combine unpaid work in subsistence agriculture with paid work in the commercial sector, while also attending school. One child said: "We are pushed by the situation, not by our parents."

"Sooner or later policymakers have to track it back to: 'here are the things that I control'"
Lant Pritchett

How do we make effective policy?

Lant Pritchett (Harvard University) chose to speak about five things education policy needs from comparable long-term panel studies. He noted that there are hundreds of studies of the association between school outcomes (enrolment, attendance, learning achievement) and child/household and school characteristics based on multi-module household or school-based surveys, and these are being augmented by dozens of studies of the impact of particular interventions. However, neither can do a good job of capturing the essence of education, which is a dynamic sequence of learning experiences and the choices made by a child and his/her parents. He spoke about research in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, and how schooling policy has been dominated by discussions of the physical expansion of schooling systems, which has generated a positive coalition sufficient to increase enrolment – the 'access axis'. However, he argued, this stage of policy discussions is nearing the end of its useful life and the run-up to the 2015 MDG target date will be an opportune time to launch an entirely new approach.

Millennium Learning Goals

Pritchett argued that a new approach to education will be needed that is not just more of the same, but a new 'Millennium Learning Goal' (MLG) – a performance goal of skills, knowledge and attitude. He went on to talk about the 'three disconnects' of the MDG approach, which included: 1) Does curriculum design lead to learning goals at the MDG? 2) In practice, do children's learning profiles reflect achievement of the curriculum design goals? 3) How variable is the distribution of student achievement?

The advantage of a MLG approach is that it emphasises the dynamics of a student's own progress – an achievable learning profile based on the student's sequence of education

and schooling experiences over time. It acknowledges the importance of 'readiness to learn' and pre-school experience in achieving the target. And it emphasises distribution issues and that the physical expansion of systems will not necessarily generate social mobility and/or greater equality of opportunity or chances to escape poverty if learning *opportunities* remain stratified by household poverty level and/or ethnicity.

The dynamics of schooling choices

Pritchett then went on to ask five questions about schooling choices. The first focused around enrolment: What are the reasons why children are not in school when the opportunity cost of their time is so very low? For many children school is still a foreign and brutal environment: "School is the fiercest thing you can come up against. Factories ain't no cinch, but schools is worst," said a girl interviewed in a Chicago sweatshop in the 1900s, explaining why she preferred work to being in school. And 'lack of interest' (or relevance) is still a major factor in non-attendance across all world regions. Second, do the benefits from positive school experiences depreciate or decline over time? Third, what is the impact of a child's experience on subsequent choices and attitudes towards school? Fourth, to what extent can differences in cross-national measures of learning achievement be attributed to learning profile differences versus 'readiness to learn'? And fifth, do parents' different investments in schooling between siblings compensate or reinforce differences?

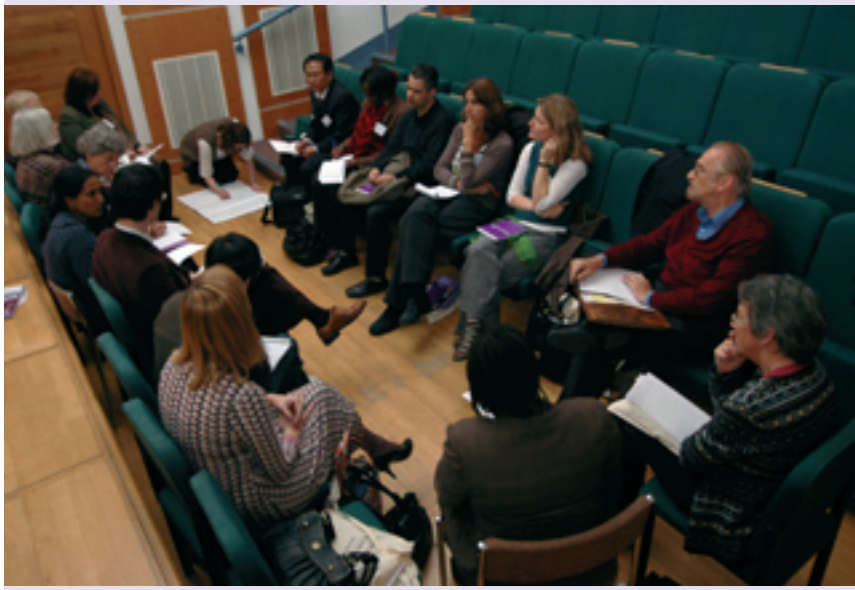
How could the Millennium Learning Goals be achieved?

He then asked how the Millennium Learning Goals could to be achieved, especially given the huge differentials between countries – for example, the achievement of an average child in Chile would still place him/her in the bottom 10% in the USA. He also looked at parental choice its effect on education. Finally, he examined the advantages that longitudinal multidisciplinary research like Young Lives can bring for policymaking. This includes highlighting the dynamics and sequential decision-making of children and caregivers under the severe constraints of poverty; emphasising the potentially complicated dynamics of poverty traps in which early decisions (even well before children start school) determine later options; and promoting a 'whole child, whole life-cycle and family' approach to life chances and outcomes, rather than 'school-centric' approaches.

From research to policy: discussion groups

An additional layer of richness was added to the debate by smaller discussion groups. Among a wide range of thoughts and questions, some of the major themes emerging included:

- How is child poverty different to household poverty? Should we focus on children for their own sake or as an entry point into alleviating poverty?
- As researchers, how can we convince policymakers? They have many priorities – drought, growth, etc. "Tell me one thing I can do to make a difference…" was one plea that was heard.
- Good intentions do not necessarily result in what children want or need, for example, proper sanitation facilities for girls is what children said when asked what they wanted at school. There is often a dislocation between policy and how it is taken up and there are also unintended consequences.
- It is important not to see policy as a linear process – it is messy; a broad effort spanning an unpredictable timeline.
- There needs to be much more dialogue between researchers and policymakers from the beginning onwards. Policy teams should already be involved in research design and formulation of research questions. Partners should be engaged from the beginning and consulted on what would be useful rather than holding dissemination events at the end of the cycle. Researchers need to be communicators.
- Research and activism needs to be better integrated. For example, links with NGOs in the case of South African HIV/AIDS policy would not have happened if research had not been linked to social and political movements. 'Activism' does not need to be oppositional – it is about translating research into action.




Frank Hagemann

"Sound data helps to assess the nature and extent of child labour, to set targets and priorities, to increase public awareness, and to develop appropriate policies, programmes and legislation."

Frank Hagemann

Social protection

The parallel sessions on social protection covered a wide range of issues and countries. They included a paper on the effect of economic shocks on child schooling and health, an evaluation of India's school meals scheme, and an exploration of children's and families' views of *Juntos*, a conditional cash transfer programme in Peru. **Bekele Tefere** looked at household perceptions of user fees in Ethiopia, based on a qualitative study of Young Lives data. He found that user fees were a significant proportion of household income and that families often found it difficult to raise money to pay fees when there were unexpected health shocks. In some cases they would only receive services if they paid up front; in others, health workers found alternative solutions, including paying for treatment themselves. Mechanisms that households used included using savings and selling assets such as seeds or cattle, with long-term consequences for household livelihoods. **Jenn Yablonski** presented a paper she had written with Michael Sampson on the work of Save the Children UK in developing an integrated child-focused social protection model in Rwanda. The presentation focused on three main areas. First, an integrated package of measures to address multiple dimensions of children's vulnerability. Second, the institutional and financial arrangements for the proposed package. It was important to integrate the model into existing policy and structures. Finally, some reflections on policy – namely, the importance of prioritising and documenting children's vulnerabilities in specific contexts; knowing what policymakers' questions are likely to be; the challenge of working across ministries and of dialogue with those in government; and finally, a question about the appropriate role of external actors in social protection debates.

The elimination of child labour and the quest for effective policy

Frank Hagemann from the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour showed the global and regional trends on child labour, which fell between 2000 and 2004, as has child labour in hazardous work. The majority of child labourers work in agriculture. The ILO now has child labour surveys in all world regions and many countries are assessing child labour trends themselves. In 2008, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) passed a Resolution on Child Labour Statistics. Hageman noted that sound data helps to assess the nature and extent of child labour, to set targets and priorities, to increase public awareness, and to develop appropriate policies, programmes and legislation. He went on to examine the economic benefits of eliminating child labour and how, as unemployment rises during the global economic crisis, there is a danger that this will reduce the gains that have been made. Countries with decelerating growth and high poverty are most at risk. In terms of the possible effect on schooling and child labour, there are likely to be income versus substitution effects and both Education For All and the ILO's 2016 goal of eliminating the worst forms of child labour are at stake in some 40 countries. However, we can learn from previous crises. In terms of policy, it is important to prevent an erosion of progress in eliminating child labour, to re-prioritise expenditures to benefit the poor and vulnerable (through 'social stimulus'), and to mitigate the effects of recession on labour markets and education systems.

Looking to the future: Communicate, communicate, communicate!

In the final plenary session **Jan Vandermoortele** (former Chief of Policy Analysis at UNICEF) told the conference that "there are only three important things – communicate, communicate, communicate! And you must do so at a level understood by policymakers. Intellectual independence does not mean keeping policymakers at arms length."

He felt that there were "too many statistics and too little history, and there is a danger of misplaced concreteness. We indulge in over-abstraction, over-generalisation and over-simplification. Reality is complex; we use aggregates and averages to comprehend reality. But these only exist in the human mind,

not in reality. Young Lives offers an antidote; it is a fantastic tool to limit some of this."

Misplaced concreteness

He went on to talk about what he called 'misplaced concreteness'. He gave an example from his time as a United Nations adviser in the Ministry of Finance in Nairobi in the early 1980s. The government wanted to introduce user fees for water but the UN wanted to protect the poor. In the end a simple payment system was put in place based on district-level income data. If household income was below a certain threshold, no fee was payable. In two weeks the utilisation of water points dropped to almost zero. The mostly male economists had been victims of 'misplaced concreteness'. They had not worked out that average household income had little connection with the money actually available to women, who were the ones who had to pay the fee.

Evidence-based policy

Vandermoortele then turned to another term – 'evidence-based policy' – and asked: "Were policies in the past made in a dark room by people who were blindfolded? Are we now suddenly rational, logical, etc? The human eye gets quickly trained to see the things the mind wants to see. Why do we take the term 'evidence-based' seriously? There is a sense that the debate has been settled and we have come to the end of history. It is just a matter of looking at the facts and drawing conclusions. We have to be aware of the dangers of herd mentality. Not that ideology is bad – there is a danger in believing that there is no ideology and pretending there are no more differences when they are still there."

A tragic gap

Finally he asked what this means for Young Lives in its attempt to influence policy. "Young Lives lives and works in the tragic gap between politicians and researchers. It is not tragic because policymakers are not interested in research, but the reality is that they don't use it. So researchers need to reach out and establish a relationship that combines the logic of science, which is abstract, rigid and deals in aggregates; and the logic of politics, which is flexible, adaptable and story-based. There are no objective standards to do that correctly. Ultimately it is about judgement: as a researcher, you have to step out of the comfort zone and go out and connect with policymakers. The tendency is to do that only when the last bit of information is in. But you need to reach out from the beginning even with imperfect data. Do not wait until your analysis is complete and perfect. Engage in different formats."

Children's contribution and sense of belonging

Children themselves may not have been present at the conference, but their voices and views were very much in the foreground in many of the presentations and side events. In the parallel session on children's contribution and sense of belonging, **Jo Boyden** presented a paper on researching children's responses to adversity. She argued that two dominant traditions have emerged, the first of which emphasises the existence of a strong association between risk exposure early on in life and detrimental outcomes for children; and the second of which calls attention to the mediated nature of children's development and their resilience in the face of misfortune. The presentation explored the relevance and appropriateness of these two models for understanding children's responses to misfortune in Ethiopia. It examined children's roles and responsibilities, their perceptions, learning and other outcomes in the context of diverse personal and household adversities, and concluded by posing some questions about the nature of evidence on risk and resilience in boys and girls in the context of changing values in relation to children and childhood. **Gillian Mann** presented a paper: 'On being despised: Growing up a Congolese refugee in Dar es Salaam.' She explained that despite the overwhelming nature of their material problems, children from as young as 9 argue that the worst part of their lives is the social exclusion, discrimination and harassment that they experience on a daily basis. The presentation examined how boys and girls try to cope with this tension in their everyday lives. It showed how they try in concrete and imaginary ways to act and think like the individuals they believe themselves to be and wish to become.

Politicians and policymakers are also there to influence research. "You must build up a relationship of trust even if you disagree." He went on to say that the challenge for Young Lives is two-fold: one, intelligent and appropriate aggregation; and two, a focus on national priorities and keeping tight national ownership of the research agenda.


Jan Vandermoortele

"As a researcher… you need to reach out from the beginning even with imperfect data. Do not wait until your analysis is complete and perfect."
Jan Vandermoortele

"Nothing is impossible for me": Stories from Young Lives children

In the run-up to the conference, Young Lives commissioned photographs from the four research countries and put these together with the stories from 19 of the Young Lives children in a book called *Nothing is impossible for me*. Below is a flavour of three of the stories.

Ravi, 13, from India, lives in a village with his parents, brothers and nephew. He dropped out of school and works on a farm picking peanuts. He had to leave school in order to repay a family debt and allow his older brother to go to school. His father beats his mother sometimes, which makes him unhappy. He says if he gets married he will never beat his wife.

Lien, 13, from Vietnam, has to work hard to help her mother at home. She describes her typical day: "I wake up in the morning, wash my face, brush my teeth, go to school, I come home at noon, have lunch, wash the dishes, go to school, pick vegetables, cook rice, go to bed." In the summer Lien works in a factory from 8am to 5pm sewing to earn money for her family. She earns £1 per day.

Louam, 6, lives in Ethiopia and is the youngest of seven children. She can't wait until next year when she can go to school. Louam's mother, who thinks she is about 32, says Louam needs to go to hospital but will have to wait until the potatoes are harvested so they can afford to pay the fees.

"There are no poor children. Children are born into poor families."

Ethiopian conference participant

Feedback we received

Participants came from all over the world and from a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Their response was very favourable, commenting on the diversity, the range of papers, the multidisciplinarity and the lively discussions. There was a plea for more time, both in the plenaries and the parallel sessions, and some people talked about the difficulty of integrating the viewpoints of child development specialists with those of macro-economists. General comments included:

"The whole event was dynamic, very, very interesting and very productive. An excellent showcase for Young Lives."

"The conference had a clear focus and took ideas from diverse schools of thought and practice backgrounds."

"One of the best conferences I've ever attended!"

Photo exhibition: credits

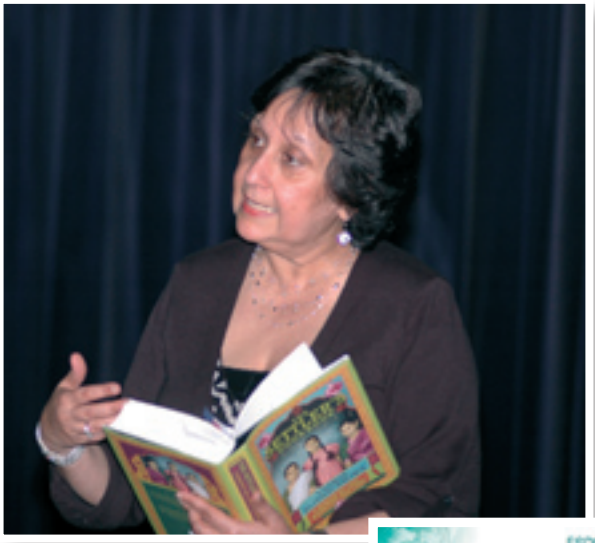
Ethiopia: © Young Lives / Aida Ashenafi

India: © Young Lives / Farhatullah Beig

Peru: © Young Lives / Lucero Del Castillo Ames; Sebastian Castañeda Vita; Raúl Egúsquiza Turriate

Vietnam: © Young Lives / Pham Viet Anh

Other conference activities

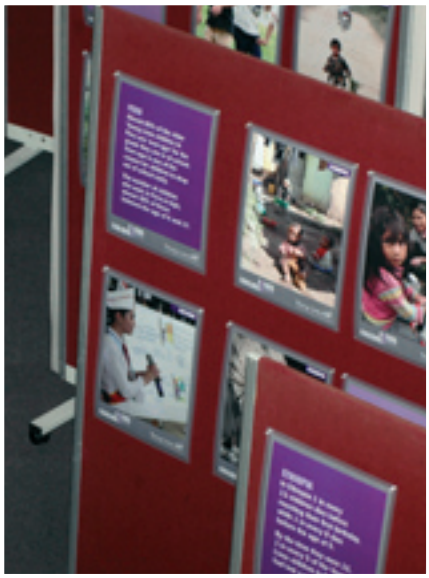


Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, journalist from *The Independent* and well-known advocate of equity and rights, was the after dinner speaker. She spoke of her childhood growing up in Africa and her experiences as a migrant.

Young Lives virtual village: we are always seeking ways to make our data more accessible and user-friendly. Reactions to our demonstration of our new 'data visualisation' project were very positive.

Young Lives data archive: the first and second rounds of Young Lives household and child survey data are publicly archived with the Economic and Social Data Service. The transcripts from the 2007 qualitative research will be available in late 2009. www.esds.ac.uk/international/

Using hand-held computers for data collection: in Round 3 of our child and household survey we will start to replace the old paper questionnaires with electronic data collection and instant cleaning. Participants were able to 'play' with the pilot software and computers to have some insight into the huge difference (and challenges) this will mean for our data collection.



Focus on Children: An exhibition of newly commissioned photographs demonstrated how children's daily lives and activities can be depicted with dignity and energy, countering stereotypes of poor children.

Other resources

Download the conference report, video and background papers from the conference from the Young Lives website: www.younglives.org.uk

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Young Lives
An International Study of Childhood Poverty