

Young Lives Methods Guide

Planning and Managing Fieldwork



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The process of collecting and recording data is the foundation of the Young Lives study. Managing fieldwork in any multi-country study in the developing world is intensive and demanding, and involves a set of basic considerations which include:

- financial management. Planning budgets, making resource decisions such as how many people to employ and whether and how much respondents should be paid, and establishing and following protocols for monitoring spending are all key tasks in the fieldwork process.
- ensuring fieldworkers are trained. Young Lives has several different study components, each using different methods, and fieldworker training is needed for each.
- advance logistical planning of transport and accommodation. In all four countries this takes on particular importance in rural areas which are often remote and lack infrastructure.
- obtaining ethics credentials and official permission to operate in the field. This varies from country to country but is a vital part of preparation which often has to be started many months in advance of fieldwork.
- procuring and maintaining equipment. A range of equipment is required to implement the Young Lives survey, including weighing machines, height measuring rods, cameras, stop-watches, GPS instruments, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and laptops.
- seasonality. In India, for example, most of the Young Lives survey is done in the agricultural season between June and December because the majority of Young Lives families are casual agricultural labourers and this is the time of year when they are at home rather than on migration. In all four countries, seasonal weather conditions also influence access to field sites.

Beyond these basic considerations, Young Lives has a set of unique characteristics which have a strong influence on the way fieldwork is planned and carried out. These include:

- working with children, which demands particular skills and characteristics from fieldworkers
- working with both boys and girls, which makes gender considerations an important aspect of fieldwork planning, especially as the children approach adolescence
- longitudinal work with two age cohorts, which lends particular importance to strict timing, as fieldwork must take place when the children are the right age
- working in a range of geographic and linguistic settings, which presents logistical and staffing challenges for planning and managing fieldwork

- tracking children even if they move, which increases the geographical spread of fieldwork and investment of researcher time
- working with a range of research tools in the survey and qualitative components, which demands fieldworkers with a range of different skills, or with the capacity to develop new skill sets.

Fieldwork planning

Fieldwork planning is carried out within the basic structure of the overall Collaborative Framework Agreements and annual Call Down Agreements made between Young Lives in Oxford and the study partners in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. While these plans outline deliverables on a year by year basis, detailed implementation plans and schedules are made at the country level. Box 1 shows how this process is carried out in Ethiopia.

Box 1. Planning Survey Fieldwork in Ethiopia

The Principal Investigator (PI) and the Administration and Survey Officer (ASO) have central roles in planning fieldwork. The PI is involved in all stages, and is responsible for ensuring that all staff members play their assigned roles. The PI and the ASO prepare a preliminary plan of the activities, schedule and budget for fieldwork, based on agreed deliverables and budgets. This preliminary plan is presented to researchers, field staff and the data manager for discussion and comment, and members of the team in Oxford also provide comments and any technical support required. The process of preparing this plan includes several stages:

- A list of activities and inputs for fieldwork is made based on experience of the previous round of fieldwork.
- Additional activities and inputs are then added according to any new requirements for the current survey round.
- Time planning and scheduling is carried out for each stage of fieldwork, including time for travel, survey administration and data entry, verification and cleaning.
- Responsibilities are assigned for each activity, which helps determine what kind of personnel are needed for fieldwork, and is a key input for financial planning.
- The budget is planned, and sent to Oxford for approval.

By the end of this process, the team has an activity plan, a schedule and a budget which form the foundation of fieldwork activities.

As noted in Box 1, detailed planning of the activities and inputs necessary for carrying out the survey differs from round to round. This is due to both the longitudinal phasing of the study and the introduction of different components. Members of the Peru team, for example, observed that in Round 1, particular attention was given to developing and planning a methodology which ensured that children were enrolled in the study in a systematic way in each district, but that by Round 3, there was a strong focus on planning the introduction of PDAs for data collection.

Recruiting fieldwork teams

In all four countries, fieldwork teams are needed for each survey round and study component which combine men and women, supervisors and fieldworkers, and people with different language skills. Efforts have been made to build field teams that can stay together through successive survey rounds, as this contributes positively to cohort maintenance. Establishing and maintaining teams with the necessary mix of skills and qualities can be challenging when Young Lives is competing with other studies for a relatively small number of qualified staff. In all four countries, the first place to begin recruiting is among fieldworkers who have already worked with Young Lives partner institutions.

The task of structuring and recruiting field teams is approached slightly differently in each country. In India, for example, seven teams were recruited for the Round 3 survey, each comprising one supervisor and six field investigators, three men and three women, one of whom had to be an anthropologist. In Ethiopia, by contrast, a set of minimum educational criteria were established for recruiting field supervisors and survey enumerators, in addition to which all fieldworkers had to be able to speak and write fluently in the local languages of their assigned field sites and to have had survey experience.

For the Round 2 survey, the Peru study team took an innovative approach to recruiting and selecting field teams. The Round 1 survey was carried out by three teams, each formed of a supervisor, a data entry clerk and six interviewers. At the end of this first round, the study team concluded that they had underestimated the difficulties faced by supervisors, whose multiple and varied roles included maintaining the integrity of the fieldwork team. They decided that for Round 2 they would design a process that would not only select supervisors with the necessary qualities, but also lay the foundations for their training. Box 2 describes what they did.

Preparation and fieldwork

Once selected, fieldwork teams participate in training, which often takes place during the piloting process for whichever study component is being carried out. Training processes vary between countries, between different study components and between survey rounds. Some aspects of training, such as preparing fieldworkers to complete the complex income and consumption component of the household survey, are formal, structured and intensive. Other aspects can be much more informal. In Peru, for example, once a good draft of the survey has been prepared, fieldworkers are encouraged to apply the questionnaire as often as possible to familiarise themselves with its flow and format, practising with each other and then at home and with their neighbours.

Preparing teams for the qualitative research component has an important additional step that is not needed for the survey fieldwork. Unlike a questionnaire with its pre-ordained questions and anticipated responses, qualitative research is flexible and iterative. Because of this it is essential that fieldwork teams collectively examine all the existing evidence available about each community and case-study child from previous data. This involves teams in reviewing community

Box 2. Designing Supervisor Recruitment and Training in Peru

The recruitment and training programme designed for Round 2 of the Young Lives survey aimed to recruit supervisors who not only had the skills needed to implement fieldwork and maintain data quality, but also the organisational capacities to lead a team through the challenges of fieldwork. The programme took into account qualities that included intellect and people skills.

Instead of advertising in newspapers, which experience showed led to an overwhelming response from people not necessarily qualified, publicity was directed at university social science departments. As well as being asked to provide a CV and detail their Quechua language skills, applicants were also invited to answer three key questions about what supervision means, their views on roles with power, and the importance of characteristics such as honesty and self-confidence. Successful applicants were invited for interview, and those who passed this stage were asked to participate in a three-day selection and training course facilitated by the study coordinator, principal investigator and a psychologist with experience in personnel selection.

This course aimed to identify of specific qualities in the candidates, partly through self-assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses with regard to teamwork and leadership qualities and partly through role play and practice interviews. Candidates had to sit a written exam covering questions ranging from anthropometry and age calculations to responding to theoretical fieldwork scenarios, and psychological tests to evaluate their cognitive skills and personality traits. During the course, candidates were also trained in the processes of securing consent from respondents, applying structured interviews and completing questionnaire forms. Many of the sessions used participatory methods which are designed to support participants in taking a proactive role in learning.

This process, while relatively costly in terms of time and resources, was successful in the sense that it identified some excellent supervisors who formed strong teams that were able to successfully undertake all the challenges of fieldwork. Some of the candidates who were not selected as supervisors became fieldworkers. As well as identifying these individuals, the training and selection process also strengthened and consolidated their skills. The rigorous and diverse nature of the process established very high standards and expectations for the project, as well as creating a team spirit among the group.

Source: Oré, Penny and Madrid (forthcoming)

information from previous survey rounds and sub-studies, and examining the mosaic of data available on each child. Through this process, fieldworkers re-familiarise themselves the main features of each child's story – their circumstances, concerns and expectations for the future – and note anything that may need to be followed up. This activity, although time-consuming, is a vital part of preparation for qualitative fieldwork and should involve the whole team.

Pre-fieldwork logistical preparation involves team members in tasks that range from translating and editing questionnaires to preparing data bases to ensuring that all equipment and permissions are in place. Once fieldwork teams have departed, they often do not return for several months. During fieldwork they face long hours, lengthy journeys and very basic accommodation, witness harrowing situations and encounter frequent fatigue. Throughout this process they have to maintain a high standard of scientific rigour in whatever circumstances they encounter.

In each study country, processes have been established to maintain contact with fieldworkers and preserve the security and integrity of the data they are collecting. In India, survey workers report to supervisors at the end of every day, and the supervisor checks each questionnaire for data consistency, submitting questionnaires to headquarters before moving on to the next research site. In Ethiopia, field coordinators are responsible for reporting and gathering completed questionnaires, which are periodically collected or backed up and taken from the field to the office. Fieldworkers are phoned every other day so that they can report on any challenges they are encountering. Research staff from the office also periodically travel to the field to check the validity of data and work to resolve any unanticipated problems.

All teams have also established financial management processes for fieldwork through which fieldworkers are paid and fieldwork expenses are reported, checked and submitted.

Challenges

The process of planning and managing the complex fieldwork necessary to implement the Young Lives study inevitably raises challenges. These include:

- Several country study teams have noted that the need for local language skills greatly reduces the pool of potential fieldworkers from which they can recruit, and that there is sometimes a trade-off between linguistic skills and fieldwork experience.
- Translation and back-translation of questionnaires into local languages has presented a major logistical challenge in implementing the survey, especially when content is still being altered on the eve of fieldwork. This has led to intensive periods of very high stress just before departure as staff struggle to send fieldworkers out on time with translated questionnaires.
- A particular challenge has arisen in Ethiopia concerning the very lengthy procurement and regulation procedures of government offices, which has sometimes led to long delays in procuring necessary survey items.
- More than one team has pointed to the relatively low wages that Young Lives is able to offer fieldworkers, which has put experienced fieldworkers off applying to work on the study.
- Implementing the survey can be very stressful, and has in some cases led to inter-personal and communication problems within teams.

Overcoming these challenges and learning from successive rounds of the study has resulted in building robust fieldwork teams with a core of members who have stayed with Young Lives through more than one fieldwork round. Their local knowledge and the long-term relationships they build with the children and their families and communities is invaluable in producing high-quality fieldwork, and an important factor in maintaining low attrition rates.

References

Oré, B., M. Penny and S. Madrid (2012, forthcoming) 'Selection and Training of Supervisors for Fieldwork: Experiences from the Young Lives Study in Peru', Technical Note, Oxford: Young Lives.

