



Responding to children's work: Evidence from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam

Around the world, many children work in difficult conditions with the risk of injury and exhaustion. Such work is often categorised as 'child labour'. Other work, however, can be benign and beneficial, for example if children are working outside school hours on light domestic chores, or accompanying mothers, fathers or older siblings on family farms or businesses.

There are ongoing debates about how policymakers respond to children's work, and the aims of this report is to include children's experiences in this discussion. Young Lives research has shown that many children are working as part of their daily lives to help ensure household survival. Where this work is safe and can be combined with school, children can gain other benefits in terms of personal achievement and skills development. However, governments should remove children from the worst forms of 'child labour', while supporting other working children – providing strengthened social protection and ensuring that children's work can be combined with better and more flexible schooling.

While highlighting potential risks of work, this report also indicates the benefits, considering children within their working households and communities, and focusing on the fundamental relationship between work and school education. Instead of 'child labour', Young Lives uses the term 'children's work', seen as part of children's everyday lives within a continuum of regular activities. In doing so, Young Lives draws attention to the reasons why children work and identifies the key issues that can help policymakers approach children's work in a more child-sensitive way.

This is based on the Young Lives *Responding to children's work: Evidence from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam* report, highlighting the context in which this research was conducted, cross-country findings, and key implications for policy and practice. The full report is available on the Young Lives website, detailing acknowledgements, photo credits and references.

Principles for policy and programming

The following principles for child-sensitive programming will help minimise the risk of burdensome work for children, while maximising children's wellbeing - always acting in the best interests of children.

1) Focus on the most harmful work – National and global efforts should aim to eliminate the worst forms of work. Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals and the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour provide a framework for this, protecting children at the greatest risk of harm while recognising that not all work is harmful.

2) Child labour legislation needs to be implemented sensitively – Governments should develop policies with communities and families so that children who work and their families are neither stigmatised nor penalised. Rather than simply imposing solutions, it is important to talk with children and families about the pressures on their lives and evaluate the impacts of potential interventions.

3) Address family poverty – Child-sensitive social protection should be expanded to better support children and their families living in poverty and reduce their reliance on children's work.

4) Help children who work to access schooling that is fit for purpose – Authorities should support the education of those children who need to work. This means ensuring that education is more beneficial and attractive by improving the quality and flexibility of schooling, as well as making schools safer by addressing corporal punishment and bullying.

5) Address care work in the home – Prioritise interventions which aim to reduce pressures associated with care work within households, such as improved access to childcare or decreased domestic work, so relieving the burden most often experienced by girls.

of 8, although still spending more time in school, these same children tended to do more work. At all ages children spent most time on leisure and sleep. Over the 7-year period between children of the Older and Younger Cohorts, however, there was a notable reduction in children's work, with the most recent generation of children spending fewer hours engaged in work.

Children can find it more difficult to combine work with school if they are involved in paid work, which typically entails longer and more continuous hours of work with less flexible schedules. In this respect, there has been progress. By 2016, fewer children were engaged in paid work. In 2009, the proportions of 15-year-olds working for pay were: 10% in Ethiopia, 17% in India, 22% in Peru, and 16% in Vietnam. Although engagement in paid work is generally declining, it is still more common for children from poorer and socially marginalised households.

Across the four countries, children were commonly involved in unpaid work within their families. This reflects strong cultural values that emphasise intergenerational dependence. But even this kind of work can put children under pressure, since the more time they spent on unpaid activities the less time they devoted to schooling.

Children's work roles and responsibilities differed by gender. Girls were more likely to be engaged in looking after younger siblings, and grandparents, and other forms of unpaid domestic work, while boys were more likely to be engaged in unpaid agricultural activities and paid work – gender distinctions that became more marked in adolescence. Nevertheless, these roles were not necessarily fixed. The decision as to who worked and who stayed at school also depended on birth order, age, and family composition – and the availability of boys and girls for certain tasks.

Most families had increasingly high aspirations for their children's futures and placed a great value on education as a way not only of realising children's individual ambitions but also of lifting families out of poverty. In some cases, particularly in rural areas, expectations of schooling may be unrealistic, especially if the caregivers themselves have little experience of education, with children frequently seeing their educational aspirations unmet.

Young Lives

Young Lives has followed the progress of 12,000 children in 20 poor communities in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2002. The children were in two age groups: 4,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort); and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort). The study gathered data on how children spend their time, at school, work, rest and play. It also collected information on children's education, physical growth, and on psychosocial outcomes, interviewing children to understand their psychological and emotional wellbeing, and their hopes for the future.

The balance between work and school

By age five, Younger Cohort children in Ethiopia, India, and Peru were already combining school and work. After the age

Why do children work?

Children's work is the outcome of a complex mix of economic and sociocultural factors. Some children work out of economic necessity. The children most likely to work were from the poorest households where parents had to balance the anticipated future rewards of keeping children in school against the immediate need for survival. This dilemma was especially acute when households faced economic shocks, such as family illness. In Ethiopia, for example, between 2002 and 2006, 87% of households of the Older Cohort (who were between 12-15 years of age) experienced at least one shock – food price rises, crime, or illness or death in the family.

Sometimes children's work enables them, or their siblings, to go to school. Children in rural Ethiopia, for example, worked as casual wage labourers, using their incomes to buy exercise



books, stationery and adequate clothes and shoes. Similarly, in Peru, children were earning cash to cover school expenses, including bus fares, uniforms, school materials, and even the paper on which to print the exams.

In addition to providing household income, work can be beneficial for children's development and wellbeing. In all four countries, children and parents said that children gained considerable knowledge and learned new practical and social skills from work.

Children may also be proud of their contribution through work. Even children who felt compelled to work were not simply helpless victims of circumstance. In all four countries, children believed it was important to support their families – part of what is considered being a 'good child', especially for sons to support their mothers.

Paid work offers children a foothold in the labour market that they can use as a back-up if education fails to improve their prospects, or if no better jobs are available. However, such work can also erode educational ambitions. Children and their parents may start to question the value of staying at school. Boys can be under greater pressure to secure a good job as early as possible. Girls, on the other hand, may be required to learn domestic and agricultural tasks that are considered essential for their marriage prospects.

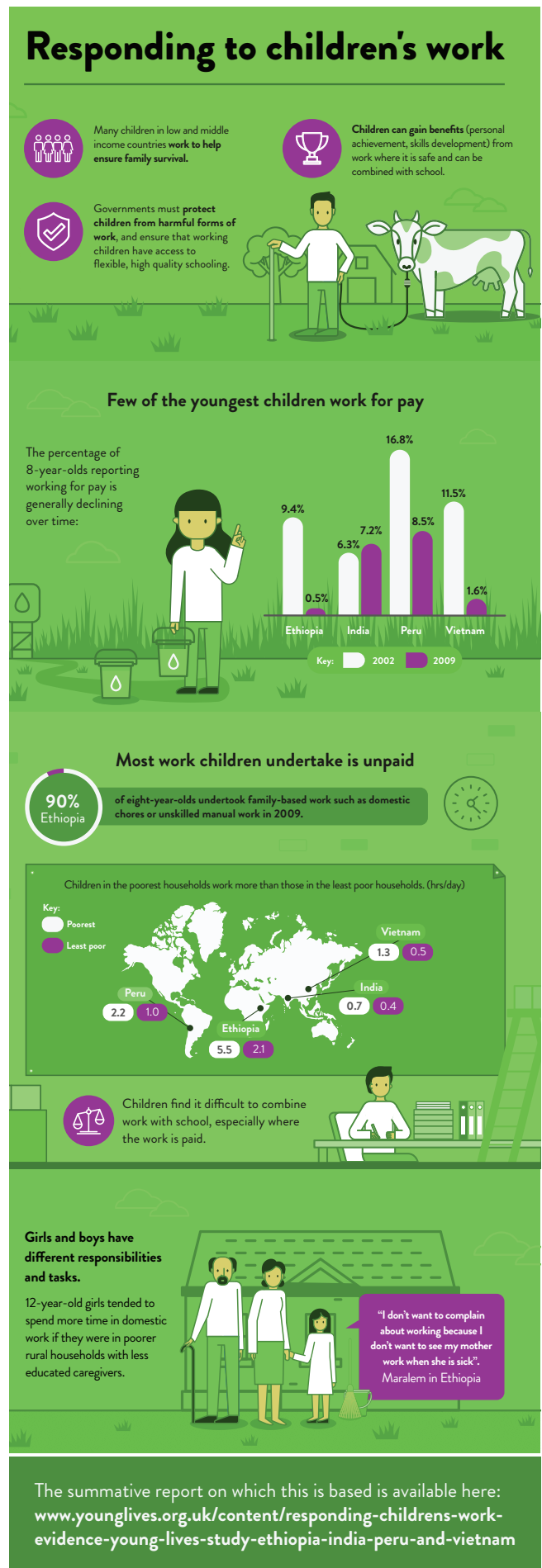
Difficulties in combining school and work

Some forms of work are incompatible with school – especially the more exploitative forms of child labour. For example, Ravi, a Scheduled Caste boy from rural Andhra Pradesh stopped going to school at age nine to work as a bonded labourer to pay off family debt. By age 13 he had left the village and found other work, having seen little chance of returning to school.

However, many more children can now attend school regularly while also working. In all four countries, children and their caregivers aimed to strike a balance. In Ethiopia, for example, Bereket, an orphan who lived with his grandmother in Addis Ababa, described missing school from five to seven days a month when he worked washing cars.

Even if children can allocate the time for schooling, they may not have the energy to both work and attend school. One girl in Vietnam explained that after going to school in the morning and working in the afternoon, she was so tired when returning home in the evening that she could only study for a short time. This made it difficult for her to pass exams, but she still wanted to try.

Children do not necessarily leave school at a single point in time; many drift away gradually. In 2009, few households in Ethiopia reported that children had permanently left school by age 12. Much more common were repeated periods of absence, lagging behind the appropriate school grade for age, the inability to concentrate at school because of worries about the home situation or hunger, or the need to take on additional responsibilities at home.





Education will also be less attractive to children if schools are unwelcoming places with poor infrastructure, for example lacking adequate and private toilets, which is a major problem for girls. Teaching may be unreliable or poor, and, in the case of ethnic minorities, in a language they do not speak at home.

Children are put off attending school if schools are violent. In all four countries, teachers regularly used corporal punishment. Children who miss school to work reported being physically punished for their absence when they return. Families may therefore question the value of the schooling on offer and lose confidence in education as a means of escaping poverty.

Supporting children who work

No child should undertake work that is likely to harm their health, safety, development or wellbeing, or that prevents them from attending school. However, attempts to ban child labour should be undertaken with care – to avoid unintended consequences, such as displacing children into less visible, and even more dangerous, employment.

Not all work is detrimental. Governments should therefore aim to support working children. There are four opportunity areas for action.

1. Engaging with communities

Governments should collaborate with communities and families to support children who have no option but to work, and ensure that they are not penalised, punished or

stigmatised. Poverty is one of the main underlying drivers of children's work. Further, the burden of domestic work falls on women and girls. This is linked to societal norms and perceptions about girls' fitness to become wives and mothers.

2. Improving the potential of child protection systems to respond to children who work

Child protection systems need to engage directly with children, families, and communities and accommodate children's work in relation to other aspects of their lives. Research with children about their experiences will ensure that any interventions align with evidence concerning the actual risks children face. This may mean collaborating with employers to improve workplace health and safety, while also ensuring that children can access school, and have information and support in relation to their working rights.

3. Improving school systems

Work and education should be considered not as separate activities, but in combination, with each having bearing on a child's future job prospects. Education should be of good quality and relevant to the adult world of work. Schools must be child-friendly and free from violence. In rural areas especially, they should offer more flexible timetables that enable children to work part of the day, along with facilities for re-enrolment, and extra tuition for children who left school early.

4. Child-sensitive social protection

Various forms of social protection, such as cash transfers for poor households, can help mitigate the impact of sudden shocks such as family illness, which might otherwise oblige children to work. There are now many more social protection schemes in low-and middle-income countries, but their coverage and spending levels need to be increased and carefully designed to benefit children. One way is to link conditional cash transfer schemes to education. Many schemes offer parents work in return for cash or food. Such schemes boost household income, but they also pose risks for children's work – either because they pass responsibility for more household work to children or actually employ children who at times substitute for their parents.

Overall, efforts to assist working children should start from the perspectives of poor children and their families. Governments should support children who engage in work that is light, safe and beneficial – and which they can combine with attending school.

Supporting materials based on Young Lives research into children's experiences of work can be found on Twitter @yloxford with #YLChildWork.

© Young Lives February 2018

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

Core-funded by

