

# Putting Children in the Economic Picture



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*By Stephen Dale*

***“Young Lives” Ethiopia is a 15-year research project concerned with how children have been affected by Ethiopia’s poverty reduction strategy.***

Poverty reduction programs in developing countries risk undermining their own advances if they don’t adequately consider the specific impacts of economic policies on children.

That’s one of the preliminary conclusions of [Young Lives](#), a massive research project — partly funded by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) — that’s five years into its decade-and-a-half mission of examining how Ethiopia’s Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP) affects the welfare of children and youth. Ethiopia is currently pursuing an agricultural-led industrialization strategy, where a variety of programs — such as loans for livestock, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs, and food-for-work schemes — have been put in place to raise household production and so, it is hoped, improve the country’s unenviable statistics on poverty and malnutrition.

But household earnings are only part of the story, says Nicola Jones, the Policy Research Manager for Young Lives. Jones is based at Save the Children UK, the international nongovernmental organization coordinating the policy analysis and policy engagement dimensions of the Young Lives project.

“We have to think in more complex ways about who is in the household and what their differential needs might be, rather than simply thinking in terms of overall household output,” remarks Jones.

It is possible in fact, that a country might reach its overall economic goals but that its children could bear a disproportionate cost for that achievement. If the expenditures of time and energy required to support income-generating activities result, for example, in inadequate care for young

children or threaten their access to education, then the ability of today's children to reap the benefits of a more robust economy and to prosper in the future are reduced.

### **Children should be central**

Jones says this potential for economic programs to undercut the next generation's prospects makes it imperative for economic planners to take the specific needs of children into account: "Too often, when we think about children, we only think about education policy or health policy. We're trying to say that children should be mainstreamed into all poverty-reduction debates. The focus of our work is really to emphasize to government ministries and to donors that any kind of economic strategy really needs to take a child-sensitive perspective if we are going to tackle poverty in the long run."

To determine just what impact Ethiopia's SDPRP has on children, Young Lives' researchers constructed a large-scale longitudinal study allowing them to juxtapose statistics on the country's overall economic health with practical indicators of how young people are faring in their daily lives. In 2002, researchers began collecting data from 20 sentinel sites across the country on matters such as children's nutritional status and their access to and experience of education and involvement in work activities. Subsequent data-collection rounds in 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2015 (with subsequent analysis of the data) will follow the children's progress over time. "At the end of the process they will be adults and we will be able to see how the economic strategy has affected them in terms of their educational achievements, their nutritional status, and several other measures," says Addis Ababa University economist and Young Lives' team leader, Tassew Woldehanna.

### **Engaging with the policy process**

The ultimate goal of Young Lives, however, is not to passively observe the influence of economic policy in the lives of these young people. Instead, the project is designed to feed back into the policy-making process by identifying shortcomings in the government's economic strategy and proposing remedies.

This approach — viewing poverty as a moving target, and potential solutions as works-in-progress that require revision and rethinking — adds layers of complexity to the work. As such, it calls on the contributions of a multicountry list of players.

For example, collecting the longitudinal data tracking the progress of young Ethiopians is being funded by the UK's Department for International Development. IDRC is supporting another aspect of the work that uses "qualitative" methods — such as convening focus groups and semi-structured interviews — to deepen researchers' understanding of children's perceptions of their own realities and to integrate those insights with the statistical profiles generated by the longitudinal work.

IDRC is also helping to build the team's capacity to disseminate its research results, to interact with policymakers, and to plug into networks dealing with similar issues in different locales. Meanwhile, the entire enterprise is being coordinated by Save the Children UK in Ethiopia, with much of the research being conducted by members of Ethiopia's university research community.

### **Stress from work and school**

Based on the work to date, one of the first messages that researchers have for policymakers is that labour-intensive economic activities — such as raising livestock — do appear to place additional

burdens on children and their caregivers, and this has a clear potential to offset the advantages that come with increased earnings.

“We have found that children who are in school also spend an average of six hours a day working,” says Woldehanna. “Traditionally, the herding of sheep, goats, and cattle is done by children. Working this much means that children have less time for studying, so one of the costs is that many of them have to drop out of school.”

This increased demand for child labour has a paradoxical impact. Although the government has not yet released its full-scale study on whether household income has risen or fallen, Woldehanna says isolated studies show an upward trend in earnings. This raises the possibility that more families can afford to send at least some of their children to school. However, these same children who attend school are, on average, also working substantial hours — so their chances for academic success are diminished.

Save the Children’s Nicola Jones adds that children who struggle to combine school with work experience significant stress. “A lot of children whom we’ve interviewed expressed real concern that they have no time to themselves, that they are stretched to their limits, especially girls,” she says, drawing upon the IDRC-supported, qualitative research.

### **Education must improve**

More generally, says Jones, education is a major area where refinement of public policy is necessary in order to take advantage of a more favourable social climate. There is a new resolve within Ethiopian society, for example, that girls should have greater access to education, and some reforms have been implemented to translate that sentiment into real opportunities. A case in point is the ban on child marriage and a variety of attempts — when girls have been married off at a young age — to bring them back to school.

Yet despite widespread recognition of the value of education, Ethiopia’s schools are underperforming. Jones says that one likely reason is that an emphasis on supporting primary education — to meet targets set in the Millennium Development Goals — has led to insufficient attention to higher levels of learning and thus, ironically, a shortage of adequately trained primary school teachers. When seen together with the lack of time that working children can devote to their studies, the result is a very low expectation of what children can achieve at school.

### **The costs of extra income**

Education is not the only area where the agricultural-led, labour-intensive development model appears to have compromised the well-being of children. The researchers have also found that mothers who must venture further to work with crops or livestock are less likely to continue breastfeeding their children — a trend that puts the health of young children at risk. Additionally, children who have to travel longer distances to work are seen as being more in danger of facing harm, including serious forms of violence and kidnapping by traffickers.

The good news, reports Woldehanna, is that in the second phase of the SDPRP the government has acknowledged that economic growth comes with particular costs for children and caregivers and has moved toward implementing “several social protection policies” to shelter those groups from the negative impacts of economic policy. Key among these new measures is community-based childcare — not just to provide children with the care they need, but to remove some of the burden that otherwise falls on women and girls. Similarly, community cattle-herding initiatives under consideration may make it easier for children to advance in their studies by shifting the

responsibilities for livestock herding, traditionally the province of the young, onto the shoulders of a pool of adult workers.

### **A mixed record on children's issues**

Although Jones is encouraged by the movement toward these sorts of innovations, she says that the broader goal of making child welfare considerations an integral part of economic planning has had, so far, mixed success.

“I think that having key people in the SDPRP technical committee consider these ideas is one of our main achievements,” she reflects. “It looks like in the next draft of the PRSP [Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper], there is a whole section on children and the impact poverty reduction approaches can have on them.”

On the other hand, Jones laments that “we have yet to see the indicators by which the Ethiopian government will be held responsible for its achievements in tackling childhood poverty”— which means, essentially, that no formal criteria exist for measuring whether the government's stated commitment to considering children in their economic planning has been matched by practical achievements. Part of the problem, says Jones, is that the multinational institutions and international donors that fund and help design poverty reduction programs “want the process to be quite simplified. They generally put pressure on governments to come up with a relatively small number of indicators [of whether the PRSPs have been successful in improving the lives of citizens].”

### **Children in the policy mainstream**

By contrast, Jones would like to see international institutions “broaden their understanding of childhood poverty by looking, for example, at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has a much more holistic approach to child well-being and tackling child poverty.” A broader-based examination of the impact of policy on children could lead to more comprehensive checklists against which to measure governments' performances. Then, there would be an expectation that governments and their multilateral sponsors would be formally accountable for the impact their programs have on children.

This is similar to the way that gender issues are dealt with: there are typically mechanisms to assess, at various stages, the impact of development projects on women. So far, says Jones, there has been less enthusiasm for the idea of “mainstreaming” children's issues into economic debates in the way that gender issues have been, although Young Lives has made presentations to international agencies on the value of that approach. For now, the researchers will just have to be content with modest progress —with the knowledge that in Ethiopia, at least, children's issues have found their way onto the poverty reduction and development agenda.

*Stephen Dale is a writer with IDRC's Communications Division.*

## **Contact Information:**

Basil Jones, IDRC program officer, IDRC Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa, PO Box 62084, 00200 Nairobi, Kenya. Street address: Liaison House, 2nd floor, State House Avenue, Nairobi, Kenya. Phone: (+254-20) 2713-160/1, 2713-273/4 Fax: (+254-20) 2711-063. Email: [bjones@idrc.or.ke](mailto:bjones@idrc.or.ke)

Dr. Nicola Jones, Policy Research Manager for Young Lives,  
Save the Children UK.

[njones@savethechildren.uk.org](mailto:njones@savethechildren.uk.org).

**Contact information for Young Lives:**

Postal Address: Young Lives, Department of International  
Development, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, Mansfield Road,  
Oxford, UK, OX1 3TB. Phone (+44) (0) 1865 280748 (Queen Elizabeth  
House) or (+44) (0) 207 0126796 (Save the Children UK). Fax: (+44) (0)  
1865 281801 (Queen Elizabeth House).  
Email: [younglives@younglives.org.uk](mailto:younglives@younglives.org.uk).

Dr Tassew Woldehanna Email: [tassew.woldhehanna@wur.nl](mailto:tassew.woldhehanna@wur.nl)