



Delivering Research to Policy Impact: Reflections from Former Young Lives Director Jo Boyden on the Challenges of Leadership and Governance

Kath Ford and Jo Boyden



Young Lives is the largest and most comprehensive mixed-methods longitudinal study in the developing world, following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. The study is a collaborative research programme led by the University of Oxford and conducted in partnership with eight prominent study-country institutions.

In this Insights Report, Professor Jo Boyden, former Young Lives Director, discusses the challenges of successful leadership and management of this complex longitudinal study. Jo reflects on lessons learnt over the last two decades, particularly in relation to delivering research to policy impact in diverse country contexts and during periods of unprecedented change, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. Jo is in conversation with Kath Ford, an international development policy consultant and former Young Lives Programme Manager.

Reflections on

- the potential of longitudinal research for influencing policy.
- getting the right balance between quantitative and qualitative research.
- aligning academic excellence and policy impact incentives.
- the importance of understanding country context and local leadership.
- building long-term relationships of trust and collaboration.
- dealing with uncertainty and risk.
- navigating changing politics and seizing new opportunities for policy impact.

Kath Ford: What makes you so passionate about longitudinal research and its potential for influencing policy and improving lives?

Jo Boyden: I have always been motivated to identify practical ways of using evidence to improve the lives of children exposed to very difficult circumstances. Understanding the different ways in which children, their families and communities *actually experience and respond to poverty and inequality* is critical to developing effective policies and programmes.

Longitudinal research enables us to identify the many environmental, socio-cultural and economic factors that make children and their families vulnerable to poverty, or help to build their resilience and overcome adversities, as well as revealing how these influences change over time. It facilitates a deep understanding of how early childhood experiences impact later life outcomes, helping to make sense of long-term trends in human development and well-being, such as how early learning influences labour market outcomes.

A key lesson from Young Lives is that human development is not always linear; windows of opportunity for improving lives can occur throughout the life course. For example, Young Lives evidence has shown that there is potential to reverse early growth stunting *even into adolescence* and that physical recovery is associated with better education outcomes.¹ This finding has had significant policy impact in shifting the global debate on tackling undernutrition.

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Longitudinal research also enables analysis of how different aspects of human development and well-being interact over time, such as the impact of early nutrition and health on later education and skills development. This provides a more holistic and nuanced understanding of human development and is better able to capture the key transitions in people's lives than cross-sectional research, which typically focuses on specific circumstances at a particular point in time.

Research evidence can become much more powerful if we are able to triangulate longitudinal research with existing data through targeted data matching analysis.² This allows researchers to access expanded variables, and linking to administrative data can serve as an alternative to impact evaluations in contexts where randomised controlled trials are too challenging or expensive to implement. Recent Young Lives research on the positive impact of a specific education policy in Peru is a good example of where we have been able to make this happen.³

It's amazing to see how Young Lives has adapted its longitudinal research in response to the pandemic through the ongoing COVID-19 phone survey, despite the sobering findings so far.⁴ With our participants now young adults, there is huge potential for further expanding our understanding into how early experiences and current

health and economic challenges have an impact on patterns of work and family formation.

Kath: Young Lives' mixed-methods approach provides a rich dataset enabling analysis at the macro level and in terms of 'getting under the skin' of trends and statistics, but is inherently complex to deliver. What do you think are the main leadership and management challenges in delivering mixed-methods research?

Jo: Yes, mixed-methods research is highly complex in both design and delivery. It requires a multi-disciplinary approach, bringing together a range of experts who employ very different research frameworks and methodologies. To help address these challenges, we established a Research Management Committee representing all the main disciplines in the study. This was an important governance structure to support the production of broad publications and encourage cross-disciplinary learning.

It took a long time for the Young Lives team to fully develop its multi-disciplinary approach and there is still potential to build further on our successes, even after all these years.

One of the key management challenges in all longitudinal mixed-methods projects is getting the right balance between the quantitative and qualitative research. There is a potential risk that qualitative evidence may be reduced to easily communicable quotes to help illustrate quantitative survey findings, underutilising its role in in-depth complementary analysis. In Young Lives, an additional challenge was that we only began our qualitative interviews in 2006, five years after the first household survey. This meant aligning the qualitative enquiry with existing longitudinal quantitative questions from the outset.

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Despite this constraint, Young Lives' qualitative research has cast light on several important topics that were not anticipated in the original survey design, such as the high level of violence experienced by children in their homes, communities and schools.⁵ In addition, the use of qualitative sub-studies has been a very effective way to enable researchers to drill down on specific issues and themes, within the more constrained design of a longitudinal programme. Sub-studies allow sample composition to be tailored to a particular issue and country context, often focusing on specific policy-relevant questions.

For example, our qualitative sub-study on young marriage and parenthood (in collaboration with Child Frontiers) enabled in-depth innovative research into the perspectives and experiences of young people in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia.⁶ This showed that many young people continue to marry and cohabit in adolescence, despite laws prohibiting marriage under 18 years old, primarily due to poverty, lack of opportunity and entrenched gender norms, with limited support services greatly exacerbating the challenges they face.

Kath: The incentives and objectives that enable academic excellence in research are not always the same as for delivering policy impact. How has Young Lives aligned these complementary but sometimes diverging incentives?

Jo: Strong operational leadership is just as important as research leadership in a complex multi-partner longitudinal study such as Young Lives. It's true that academic incentives typically focus on delivering peer-reviewed publications in high-impact journals rather than policy change, though this can vary across different disciplines. An additional challenge for Young Lives researchers has been the necessity to commit substantial amounts of time to research design, and data gathering and management, often limiting the scope for focused research analysis, let alone policy engagement.

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Young Lives has therefore supported its researchers through initiatives to protect time for dedicated research analysis, including through specific ‘write-shops’ at which researchers produce written pieces under the guidance of peers and tutors, enabling mini-sabbaticals, and providing direct mentoring in support of masters or doctoral studies. Involving researchers in communications and policy engagement has also been imperative, in terms of both helping to deliver the right messages and providing robust expertise for policymakers to interrogate the evidence. Balancing the need for a clear and simple policy message, while maintaining academic rigour, is an intellectual challenge that requires a team effort across research, policy and communications, particularly in the age of social media and the internet.

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Developing a strong overarching vision that everyone signs up to is critical, and the delivery of our objectives has been supported through the implementation of flexible management tools, including our Theory of Change and related log frame.⁷ The Young Lives Advisory Board also plays an important role in helping to deliver our complex research to policy agenda. Ensuring the board includes a diverse range of both academic and policy experts is necessary to provide independent strategic advice in support of a broad research agenda and to deliver maximum policy impact. Board members also act as ambassadors for the study, collaborating on research analysis, contributing to the dissemination of findings and helping to identify new fundraising and policy-influencing opportunities.

Kath: The decision to appoint country directors in each study country is often cited as a turning point for successful research to policy impact in Young Lives; why do you think this was so transformative?

Jo: Young Lives was originally set up in 2001 to inform global policy debates around meeting the Millennium Development Goals, through longitudinal evidence on childhood poverty collected in four study countries. One early lesson was that delivering credible policy recommendations requires evidence to be firmly situated in a nuanced and detailed understanding of local country contexts. I believe this is true for all levels of policy – whether local, national, regional or global.

The recruitment of our four country directors, now over ten years ago, had a profound effect on Young Lives' governance and policy impact both within the study countries and internationally. We specifically sought individuals who demonstrated both intellectual leadership and personal credibility, and who understood the importance of translating research into policy.

The country directors have been particularly successful in building long-term relationships of trust and collaboration with key national stakeholders, especially government officials, politicians and other significant policy decision makers. These relationships have been one of the most important factors enabling Young Lives findings to be both relevant and used by policymakers and practitioners in the field.

Alongside the country directors, Young Lives has been fortunate to work with dedicated country teams, including principal investigators, qualitative researchers and fieldworkers, policy and communication officers, and administrative support staff, some of whom have been with the study from the outset. These teams ensure the highest standard in research ethics and provide vital continuity in intellectual leadership and operational management. This includes building the capacity of local field workers to undertake the surveys and maintain long-term relationships with local communities, which have been crucial to sustaining data quality and the very low attrition rate achieved throughout the study.

Kath: Young Lives' long-term relationships with partners in the study countries continue to be one of its key strengths. Can you outline how these relationships have been forged, given the very different systems and cultures that Young Lives partners work within?

Jo: It might sound an over-simplification, but I believe the most important thing for strong relationships is valuing the contribution of all those involved and taking the time to really get to know each other. Building personal relationships across numerous different organisations, in four very different countries, each with their own cultures and hierarchies, took time and required a lot of mutual respect and understanding. But it is the personal relationships that are so important for building trust and forging a resilient and committed multi-country team.

Working across four country contexts also requires flexibility both in terms of operational issues and in relation to specific research and policy focus areas. Getting the balance right between respecting and integrating different country perspectives and maintaining a consistent approach across the study was not always easy.

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One of the most significant changes for delivering the Young Lives programme has been the emergence of digital technologies and rise of the internet. Key adaptations for research have included the use of computer-assisted personal interviewing and mobile phones for survey administration, while social media has been transformative in enhancing the dissemination of findings and policy impact.⁸ This involved building new skills in the team and increased investment in equipment, but the advantages have been many, including faster data retrieval and research dissemination, easier data linking, greater data accuracy and a raised global profile for the study and its key messages.

Kath: Young Lives has had to manage a great deal of uncertainty and risk over the last two decades, including the unprecedented impact of COVID-19. What are the important factors of leadership and governance in weathering these storms?

Jo: I would come back to the importance of personal relationships and promoting a culture of mutual trust and respect across our partnerships. Planning for uncertainty and being prepared to change course when necessary is not easy, but always easier if issues are addressed as joint challenges requiring common approaches and solutions. As Young Lives Director, I relied heavily on the experience, wisdom and insight of the country directors, principle investigators, lead qualitative researchers, programme managers (formerly chief operating officers) and others in senior management, as well as broader expertise from across Oxford University, to advise on difficult decisions in times of stress.

Important management tools such as a comprehensive risk register and new safeguarding procedures can only really add value if they enable an ongoing process of risk management, rather than a one-off box-ticking exercise. Regular monitoring of risks, with all partners keeping abreast of fast-changing situations, is vital – as is the development and continuous review of risk-mitigation strategies.

The devaluation of sterling following the Brexit referendum had a significant impact on the available budget for our school surveys and the fifth round of our household survey in 2016 and is a good example of how Young Lives partners worked together to deliver common objectives under much reduced financial resources. Redesigning the workplans and related budgets in a very short space of time was a huge task that required mutual engagement and compromise. And the current COVID-19 pandemic presents

an unprecedented crisis that has required the team to pivot the whole research programme to deliver an innovative rapid response COVID-19 phone survey.

In both examples, Young Lives has benefitted enormously from the continuing support of our primary donor partner, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – formerly the Department for International Development (DFID). It has been hugely valuable to be funded through a relatively flexible accountable grant that has enabled mutually agreed changes to project plans in response to changing circumstances, and to work with a donor who is very engaged in all aspects of programme delivery.

Kath: Young Lives' long-standing partnership with FCDO has undoubtedly been critical to its success. What do you think are the key aspects of building successful donor partnerships, especially given current challenging times for longitudinal research, both in terms of reduced donor funding and constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Jo: Carrying out mixed-methods longitudinal research in low- and middle-income countries is expensive at the best of times, with related policy outcomes often taking years to come to fruition; the pressure for research to deliver targeted short-term policy recommendations has understandably become even more acute in response to the pandemic.

In my experience, the key to building successful long-term donor partnerships is to really nurture and value joint strategic engagement. Understanding donor priorities and recognising shared aims and objectives is very important and can bring huge benefits in relation to leveraging expertise and policy and communications networks. Of course, different donors have different expectations in terms of how involved they want to be with the actual delivery of research to policy programmes, but I believe that building a genuine intellectual and strategic partnership with FCDO has been pivotal in navigating the many hurdles Young Lives has faced, and continues to face.

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Young Lives has also been fortunate to partner many other donors over the years, including several foundations, bilateral agencies and multilateral organisations. Working with a wide range of partners has enabled us to conduct tailored research on specific policy themes, for example through school effectiveness surveys and targeted qualitative sub-studies. From an operational point of view, we encouraged smaller donors to use common donor reporting mechanisms wherever possible (i.e. sharing the same Young Lives annual report). Avoiding the burden of multiple donor reporting requirements while being able to demonstrate the appropriate use of specific donor funds is often a difficult balance, again requiring strong relationships of mutual understanding and shared objectives.

Kath: Young Lives has been part of numerous partnerships over the years, both in terms of conducting research analysis and working to influence policy and programming. What has worked well and why?

Jo: Partnering with others has been vital to shaping knowledge and understanding of the determinants and outcomes of childhood poverty, as well as influencing policy, particularly given that the Young Lives team itself is relatively small.

In terms of research, Young Lives has worked closely with a wide range of academic partners, many of whom have also engaged through our Advisory Board. Delivering joint research outputs with well-known, highly committed academics continues to be one of Young Lives' most successful mechanisms to help shape new thinking – including through working papers, journal articles, joint presentations and high-profile blogs. Our ongoing collaborative work with networks of researchers, policymakers and practitioners, including donors, international organisations and local NGOs, also amplifies our findings and helps to ensure that policy messages remain relevant and impactful.

At the international level, Young Lives' central role in the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty's Communications Taskforce, and collaboration with the Know Violence in Childhood initiative are good examples of where this has had a direct impact. At the country level, convening forums such as the Child Research and Practice Forum (CRPF) in Ethiopia has also helped to deliver lasting policy change.

As with all partnerships, I think Young Lives collaborations have worked best where we have focused on specific issues of common interest. As a longitudinal observational research to policy study, we have found that building long-term working relationships with key policymakers in the four study countries, particularly government officials, achieves better results than lobbying.

That said, we have also not been afraid to challenge existing policy narratives when our findings go against the grain of current development discourse. Young Lives evidence on the potential benefits of some forms of children's work is a good example of this. Working out which research findings are most likely to catalyse change, while also remaining true to the actual findings, frequently requires very nuanced and carefully framed policy and communication messages.

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For example, Young Lives findings in Peru revealed that one of the government's flagship early education programmes did not improve childhood development, particularly in relation to early learning.⁹ The country team worked closely with government officials to ensure these findings were appropriately communicated alongside positive recommendations for change, rather than shaming the government into action. The subsequent overhaul of

this programme has led to demonstrable improvement in the provision of early education in Peru, particularly for disadvantaged children between 6 months and 4 years old.¹⁰

Kath: Politics always matters when trying to influence policy and programming. How has Young Lives adapted over the years to working in changing global and country policy contexts?

Jo: Yes, politics can be messy and unpredictable; key policy decision makers change, particularly following election cycles, and policy preferences can come in and go out of fashion. Understanding the sometimes changing incentives of those with political influence is very important, which is where the country directors and country teams have been so crucial.

Being able to be flexible and opportunistic, when new opportunities for influencing policy arise, is also important. Young Lives' success in influencing policy to reduce child marriage in India is a good example of responding to an initial government request for research analysis on a policy area that was not an original focus for Young Lives.¹¹ Similarly, the team in Vietnam continues to work in close partnership with government agencies in support of their '21st Century Skills' agenda, including providing influential evidence on school effectiveness in new areas such as problem solving and critical thinking.

A key challenge for longitudinal research is the need to keep core research questions constant over time, while building in enough flexibility to be able to respond to new areas of investigation. Likewise, there is the need to balance a long-term research framework with the ever-increasing pressure for short-term policy recommendations.

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Developing a targeted and practical influencing and communications strategy is essential. At its basic level, this is about getting the key messages right, and targeting the right people, at the right time and through the right channels. This can include a wide range of approaches, from advising government directly, doing commissioned research for others to take forward in their own policy work, or disseminating findings more widely to key stakeholders and influencers. There is no magic bullet to achieving this, but enabling a strategic approach alongside our country partners has meant that Young Lives has often been well placed to respond to new policy opportunities.

Kath: Many thanks Jo for such a wide-ranging and stimulating conversation. What would be your final takeaways for other longitudinal researchers striving to deliver research to policy impact?

Jo: First, I think that bringing in key policy decision makers and stakeholders right at the beginning of designing a research to policy programme is crucial.¹² Research design matters for policy impact and although you can't always

predict which issues will be most pertinent over time, early engagement with the people you are trying to influence can make all the difference to both the relevance and uptake of findings.

Second, I would advise that initial qualitative research – with relatively open-ended questions – is undertaken very early on in the design of a mixed-methods research programme. This will enable a more context-specific understanding of participants' day-to-day issues *before* core longitudinal research questions and related modules of research are developed. Striving to ensure a research programme is both participant-led as well as researcher/policymaker-led is important if we are to really make a difference in people's lives.

Third, effective research leadership means making sure that research staff are not disadvantaged, and indeed are rewarded, for engaging actively with policy. Even though the culture of research at universities is rapidly changing, peer-reviewed journal articles continue to be attributed far greater value than outputs that impact policy.

And finally, ensuring that both operational management and research and policy themes are as flexible as possible – within the constraints of longitudinal research consistency – is critical for ensuring findings remain relevant and impactful in these ever changing and challenging times.

Notes

- 1 See Benny, L., J. Boyden, and M. Penny (2018) 'Early is Best but It's Not Always Too Late: Evidence from the Young Lives Study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam', Oxford: Young Lives, https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/Nutrition%20and%20Growth%20Summative%20Report%20June%202018_0.pdf
- 2 See Boyden, J., and D. Walnicki (2021) 'Leveraging the Power of Longitudinal Data: Insights on Data Harmonisation and Linkage from Young Lives', Oxford: Young Lives, https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-BoydenWalnicki-InsightReport-May21_0.pdf
- 3 See Ford, K. (2021) *Educational Inequality in Peru: What Works for Improving Secondary School Quality?*, Policy Brief 45, Oxford: Young Lives, <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-PolicyBrief-45-May%202021%20Proof.pdf>
- 4 For more details on the phone survey, see <https://www.younglives.org.uk/content/young-lives-work-ylaw?tab=3>
- 5 For more details, see <https://www.younglives.org.uk/content/childrens-experiences-violence>
- 6 See Crivello, G., and G. Mann (2020) 'Young Marriage, Parenthood and Divorce: A Comparative Study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia', Oxford: Young Lives, <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-ComparativeReport-Feb20-LowRes.pdf>
- 7 For more details, see <https://www.younglives.org.uk/content/how-management-tools-can-help-enhance-research-impact-policy-and-practice>
- 8 See Boyden, J., and D. Walnicki (2020) 'Opportunities, Challenges and Strategies in Generating and Governing Longitudinal Data Learning from Two Decades of Research at Young Lives', Oxford: Young Lives, https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-ResearchReport-2Decades-Oct20_1.pdf
- 9 See Cueto, S., G. Guerrero, J. Leon, A. Zevallos, and C. Sugimaru (2009) *Promoting Early Childhood Development through a Public Programme: Wawa Wasi in Peru*, Working Paper 51, Oxford: Young Lives, <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-WP51-Cueto-WawaWasi.pdf>
- 10 See Young Lives (2018) 'Early Childhood Development: Informing Policy and Making it a Priority', Oxford: Young Lives, <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL%20Impact%20Case%20Study%20ECD.pdf>
- 11 See Ford, K., and R. Singh (2020) 'Influencing Policy to Reduce Child Marriage in India: Reflections from Young Lives', Oxford: Young Lives, https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-FordSingh-InsightReport-Dec20_0.pdf
- 12 For more reflections from Jo on this point, see <https://www.younglives.org.uk/content/if-i-were-do-all-again-reflections-former-young-lives-director-jo-boyden>

The project

Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. This Insights Report is part of the 'Methodological Learning and Lessons from Young Lives' project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This project aims to strengthen capacity and effectiveness in the conduct of longitudinal research in low- and middle-income countries, while also contributing to a growing community of practice. This report is part of a series reflecting on specific experiences and practices over 20 years of Young Lives research to create a dialogue with others involved in large-scale longitudinal studies in international development and related fields.

The authors

Professor Emeritus Jo Boyden was based at Oxford University's Department of International Development and was Director of Young Lives from 2005 to 2019. Her research has mainly focused on child labour, children and political violence, and childhood poverty – particularly in bringing together academics, practitioners and policymakers to develop effective models and methods for supporting children, their families and their communities in situations of adversity.

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Acknowledgments

This report was written by Kath Ford, in conversation with Jo Boyden. The authors would like to thank Gina Crivello for her valuable comments and suggestions. Thanks also to Adam Houlbrook for copy-editing, Garth Stewart for the design of this report, and Julia Tilford for her oversight of the publication. Special thanks to the ESRC for funding the 'Methodological Learning and Lessons from Young Lives' project and enabling this Insights series. The views expressed are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the University of Oxford, Young Lives, the UK government, ESRC or other funders.



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