



# “I started working because I was hungry”: The consequences of food insecurity for children's well-being in rural Ethiopia



Virginia Morrow<sup>a,\*</sup>, Yisak Tafere<sup>b</sup>, Nardos Chuta<sup>b</sup>, Ina Zharkevich<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Oxford, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Young Lives Ethiopia, Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

Food insecurity, the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of safe, nutritious food, is a persistent problem in rural Ethiopia. However, little qualitative research has explored how food insecurity affects children over time, from their point of view. What are the effects of economic ‘shocks’ such as illness, death, loss of livestock, drought and inflation on availability of food, and children's well-being? To what extent do social protection schemes (in this case, the Productive Safety Net Programme) mitigate the long-term effects of food insecurity for children? The paper uses a life-course approach, drawing on analysis of four rounds of qualitative longitudinal research conducted in 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2014, with eight case study children, as part of Young Lives, an ongoing cohort study. Children's descriptions of the importance of food and a varied diet (dietary diversity) in everyday life were expressed in a range of qualitative methods, including interviews, group discussions and creative methods. The paper suggests that while the overall picture of food security in Ethiopia has improved in the past decade, for the poorest rural families, food insecurity remains a major factor influencing decisions about a range of matters – children's time allocation, whether to continue in school, whether to migrate for work, and whether they marry. The paper argues that experiences of food insecurity need to be understood holistically, in relation to other aspects of children's lives, at differing stages of the life-course during childhood. The paper concludes that nutritional support beyond early childhood needs to be a focus of policy and programming.

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## 1. Introduction and background

The Sustainable Development Goals, launched in 2015, aim to ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition’. An additional objective is to monitor the progress of the Goals, with a call for a data revolution to track progress by gender, age and place of residence. During the lifetime of the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), Ethiopia made progress in reducing malnutrition and food insecurity (Rahmato et al., 2013), and according to FAO, the prevalence of undernourishment (the percent of population estimated to consume fewer than a certain amount of calories that are considered essential to live) effectively halved in Ethiopia between 2000 and 2015 (World Bank, 2016). In order to foster food security and poverty reduction, the Government of Ethiopia introduced the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in 2005,

designed for rural areas, with two components - a public work component that pays daily wages for unskilled labour (either in cash or grain) to people who are chronically food insecure, and a direct support (DS) component that provides food to those unable to work, including people with disabilities, elderly people, pregnant and lactating women (Porter and Goyal, 2016; Tafere and Woldehanna, 2012). A National Nutrition Strategy (NNS) and a National Nutrition Program (NNP) were introduced in 2008, revised in 2013 to emphasise the importance of a holistic, multi-sectoral approach across the Ministries of Health, Education and Agriculture, focussing on the first 1000 days (Government of Ethiopia (2013)). The most recent Mini Demography and Rural Household Survey showed that levels of malnutrition were high, but trends were improving; however, the rate in rural areas was nearly double that of urban areas (CSA, 2014). Between 2015 and early 2016, Ethiopia experienced its worst drought in 50 years, making children highly vulnerable (UNICEF, 2016) and in 2016, the Government launched a national School Health and Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan ‘to improve access and educational achievement of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [virginia.morrow@qeh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:virginia.morrow@qeh.ox.ac.uk) (V. Morrow).

school-age children', with a small-scale school meal programme.

Globally, research has focussed on malnutrition among infants and under five-year olds and this has been vital for policy and programming (Fram et al., 2015). However, the emphasis on the anthropometric consequences of food insecurity 'probably underestimates the extent to which children are negatively impacted by food-related hardships' (Fram et al., 2015 p6). The study of malnutrition has been dominated by cross-sectional and quantitative research (Fram et al., 2015), but this is limited in the insights it can provide into how children in low and middle income countries experience food insecurity on a daily basis, and their responses to the lack of good food and impact on their wellbeing (Aurino and Morrow, 2015). Further, there is growing awareness of the importance of nutrition throughout childhood and into adolescence, especially for girls (Lancet, 2016; Cordeiro et al., 2012; Aurino et al., 2017; Georgiadis et al., 2016).

Hadley, Belachew and colleagues have recently undertaken the *Jimma Longitudinal Family Survey of Youth* with adolescents in Jimma region of South West Ethiopia (Hadley et al., 2008). They analysed two rounds of the survey to explore food insecurity in a period of food price rises, and found that rural young people were most affected; that over time, boys were more likely to become food insecure; and that young people who were food insecure also reported poorer health (Hadley et al., 2009). Belachew et al. (2011) found that 13–17 year olds who were food insecure were significantly more likely to be absent from school. In a later paper, Belachew et al. (2013) explored food-based coping strategies and dietary practices, and found high numbers of young people who reduced the number of meals per day, worried about running out of food, didn't eat all day, asked for food or money to buy food, or begged. Hadley et al. (2012) analysed qualitative data from adults, and note that research has focussed more on *who* is affected by food price rises, not *how* they are affected. As Fram et al. (2015) note, existing systems for monitoring household food insecurity

do not tap children's perspectives on their own lives, nor do they flow from a conceptualization of food insecurity that is grounded in children's experiences, their roles within households, or ways in which they make sense of their environments. (Fram et al., 2015, p.7)

Some qualitative research with children in high income countries explores their experiences of food insecurity (Connell et al., 2005; O'Connell and Brannen, 2016; Ridge, 2007). Connell et al. (2005) undertook research with 11–16 year olds in Mississippi, and identified a range of feelings and experiences that children articulated about strategies when facing food shortages, including: implications for well-being, having no choice about what to eat, feelings of shame, and fear of being labelled poor. There is very little qualitative research exploring children's and young people's experiences of food insecurity in low and middle income countries (Hadley et al., 2009). An important exception is Bernal et al.'s (2012) research with 10–17 year olds in Venezuela, which found that children's experiences of food insecurity differ from those of adults for a number of reasons, including their dependency on adults, and lack of control over financial resources (see also Aurino and Morrow, 2015 for India). Bernal et al. (2016) also analysed survey data from Venezuela to show that children have strategies for managing lack of food, and that food insecurity is a source of shame. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies of children's experiences of food insecurity based on qualitative longitudinal data.

Panther-Brick (1998, p.78) has suggested that 'in-depth and multi-disciplinary information on social and ecological settings over time' is needed to illuminate the processes of children's

development. This calls for a life-course approach to childhood, enabling a focus on the importance of past experiences for outcomes (Dornan and Woodhead, 2015). Briefly, four themes constitute a life-course approach: **historical time/era**, which connects people's experiences to events at global, national and local levels; the **timing of events** in a person's life – often referred to as 'critical moments' (institutional and social transitions between school, home and work); the **centrality of relationships** – interdependent webs of social ties between family members and others, which influence children's responses to adversity; and children's **agency**, often highly constrained in poverty situations, but crucial in how children respond to difficulties. A life-course analysis emphasises differing demands on households and the impacts of food insecurity in the medium term on children's trajectories. Qualitative longitudinal research adds value because it has the potential to 'address the complexities of poverty dynamics, to identify links between earlier circumstances and later outcomes, to examine the relationships between geographic and social mobility, and to explore when, why, and how inequality emerges in childhood and youth' (Crivello, 2015, p.23). By exploring children's accounts of their experiences, we highlight the effects of food insecurity on children's well-being in Ethiopia, how food insecurity affects crucial decisions over the life course and how these differ by gender; and the importance of sources of support over time.

## 2. Young Lives – methods, sample, ethics

Young Lives is a study of childhood poverty in four countries, Ethiopia, India (the former state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam, over 15 years, 2002–2017. 12,000 children were selected randomly within 20 sentinel sites, in poor communities (see Barnett et al., 2012; Woldehanna and Pankhurst, 2014a; for Ethiopia). Child and household survey data are complemented by four rounds of qualitative data, as well as thematic sub-studies. The qualitative research was nested within the main survey, see Fig. 1.

### 2.1. Qualitative longitudinal research – sampling and case study selection

Qualitative data were gathered in five sites with a sub-sample of 60 vulnerable children (purposively sampled to include equal numbers of boys and girls from both cohorts, together with indicators of vulnerability including orphanhood, access to schooling, involvement in paid work and children who considered their household poorer than others). Fieldwork was conducted in 2007, 2008, 2011, and 2014. Here, we focus on older cohort children from two rural sites, in Tigray and Amhara (all names of places and people are pseudonyms). We selected rural cases because there are higher levels of malnutrition in rural areas than urban areas, and PSNP is targeted at rural areas (Woldehanna and Pankhurst, 2014b). The two sites were:

Tach-Meret, a *kebele* (local administrative area) in Amhara region, situated on the outskirts of a town, affected by food shortages. Infrastructure developments include electricity, a road, and a health centre. The main livelihood is agriculture. The government has provided seeds, apple trees and a reforestation programme to address food insecurity. Haricot beans are grown as a cash crop and for domestic consumption. The inhabitants are mainly Christian. Children could access all levels of schooling because of proximity to the town.

Zeytuni, a remote community in Tigray region, affected by protracted drought and food shortages. Children described improvements in the community such as irrigation and government planting schemes. Agriculture is the main livelihood but

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