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Measuring children's time use: Five insights from research in northern Uganda

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Studying children's time use can shed light on different aspects of children's lives and is important for highlighting the important contributions children make to their families, communities and societies. But measuring children's time use is not easy, especially in low-income settings. My [recent paper](#) highlights five insights into measuring children's time use from research in rural northern Uganda.

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Children riding a bike. Creative Commons Image.

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[Survey data](#), collected together with [Oxfam's WE-Care programme](#), found striking differences between estimates of children's time use reported by their mothers and by children themselves: children, aged 8 to 18, self-reported more time spent on work and less time on leisure and sleep than was reported by their mothers. Differences were especially strong for care and domestic work.

Mothers underestimated their daughters' care and domestic work by 3 hours.

Insight 2: Consider quick and simultaneous tasks

Participant observation showed that children as young as four years were constantly “on-call” while doing something else. Often their parents or older siblings asked them to do quick tasks, such as fetching an object or helping other children. This usually only took a few minutes and would not have been accounted for in the other time-use measures. Observations also showed that learning, playing and working were closely connected and difficult to separate out.

Insight 3: Use visual and participatory methods

Children were often shy to speak up in interviews, but games and drawings in focus groups worked well to engage them. The “draw your day exercise” highlighted children’s daily activities and gender differences. For example, while girls usually drew themselves sitting on the floor and playing skipping, boys drew themselves sitting on chairs and playing football.



In the “bucket game”, children assigned 24 beads representing the 24 hours of their previous day to different activity buckets. Different coloured beads were assigned to boys and girls, which led to interesting discussions around gendered time use.



More information on the visual and participatory methods can be found [here](#) (see section 3.3).

Insight 4: Account for longitudinal dimensions

[Spot phone calls](#) over the period of a year showed that children’s time use patterns were shaped by seasonality and household shocks. I called selected families once a day and asked all household members aged 8 and older what they were doing. In the dry season, children told me about dried-up boreholes making water collection more time-consuming or during school holidays they reported more household labour. I was also able to see how household shocks (e.g. a father’s injury) shaped children’s time (e.g. older children doing more work).

Insight 5: Use different methods and remain open to adjusting them

All the methods had limitations. Using different quantitative and qualitative methods helped to address some of the weaknesses of the other methods. Listening to and observing research participants helped to adjust the methods so that they were better able to capture the complexity of children’s time.

For more information please read my papers on [measuring children’s time use](#) or on the [spot phone call methodology](#).

Lucia Rost is a Research Manager at Plan International. She recently completed a PhD in International Development at Oxford University, which was related to Oxfam’s Women’s Economic Empowerment and Care Programme.

TAGS: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATORY METHODS RESEARCH UGANDA