***Original Research Article***

**An analysis of the factors influencing demand for education in Tanzania**

**ABSTRACT**

The concern over the participation of children in education is a global issue, as some children do not attend school for various reasons. In light of the growing proportion of children leaving the education system in Tanzania, the paper examines the factors that influence decisions to withdraw from educational systems. Given the strong correlation between economic development and education, this growing phenomenon is particularly problematic for Tanzania’s development priorities and ambitions as per Vision 2050. The study engaged with community members, educational experts, teachers and children, to get insights of the factors that contribute to children leaving the education system.before they complete their cycle.The paper utilises an inductive approach and qualitative Case study approach, supported by a critical relational lens, to explore this trend in the Mara region, North Tanzania.The findings identify economic barriers; market-based needs; and socio-cultural factors as key drivers influencing who is encouraged to attend, why, and to what degree. The paper argues that daily life, modes of material production, and rigid social structures underpin systems of extractive and transactional social relations leading to high male and female non-progression rates at different stages in the academic progression cycle.

***Key words***: Critical relational theory; Out-of-School Children; Gender relations; Demand for education; Systemic inequalities.

**1. Introduction**

The relationship between sustainable development and formal education is well established and rigorously researched. Championed at a global institutional level by UNICEF and the Education for All initiative, numerous reports point to the relationship between higher levels of education and economic development and growth, improved life expectancy and health, higher levels political participation and well-functioning democratic systems. Higher levels of education for girls and women also correlate with improved health, educational and economic outcomes for their children and a declining birth-rate over time as populations live longer, healthier and more prosperous lives. Featuring centrally in the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015-2030) all countries, including higher income (HICs), middle income (MICs), and lower income locations (LICs) have committed to enhancing, deepening, and improving their educational systems for their citizens from pre-primary levels, through to tertiary levels, and into lifelong learning programmes (Pisano, Mulholland, and Berger, 2016; United National General Assembly (UNGA), 2015). As a core positional good, education is linked to social status, levels of social mobility, and economic opportunity (Piketty, 2019). It is also taken to be a critical ingredient in driving national development objectives and in moving countries from a status of LIC to middle income and HIC (Sachs, 2015). Education derives benefits for multiple actors across multiple scales, from individual capacity development, to community, regional and national development.

The last two decades have witnessed a significant increase in access to primary and secondary education for children in all countries across the globe. This was severely disrupted by the outbreak of the COVID 19 Pandemic in late 2019. The estimated figure of out of school children stood at 290 million globally during the early months of the COVID 19 Pandemic in the first half of 2020 but has decreased since that peak. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), approximately 258 million children, 17% of the global total, are out of school (UNESCO, 2020: 4). Worryingly, in recent years, this number has begun to increase in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Concern Worldwide (2024) children not being able to attend and complete their education circle is one of the concerns that need to be worked upon.The United Republic of Tanzania in East Africa has experienced this trend. Tanzania, with a population of approximately 57 million people, ranking at 159 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (2020). It has the largest population in East Africa with approximately one-third of its citizens based in urban locations (CIA Factbook, 2020). Agriculture remains the solid backbone of the economy and economic activity. With two-thirds of the population under the age of 25 years (43% under the age of 14 years), and a growth rate of 3% per annum, the demands for education to assist in translating this demographic profile into a economic dividend is strong. Further Tanzania’s vast natural resources have supported its strong growth rates up to 2017 of between 6 and 7% (ibid). Tanzania’s government expenditure is approximately 3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on education.

Following studies undertaken in 2015 and 2016, with data verification confirmed in 2018, it is estimated that Tanzania has approximately 3.9 million pupils out of school (1.7 million primary school children aged between 7 and 13 years; and 2.2 million lower secondary school children agreed between 14 and 17 years) and a further 2 million children under the age of 7 not attending either pre-primary or primary educational facilities (UNICEF 2018b: 1). The challenge presented by this scale of children not attending school in Tanzania’s development plans to attain MIC status by 2025 (United Republic of Tanzania, 1999) and to the attainment of the UN SDGs relating to education cannot be underestimated. As a signatory to the UN SDGs and the Education for All (EFA) goals, the current situation of out-of-school children presents a significant political, economic, and social challenge to Tanzania’s progress.

Since 2015, the government has collaborated with UNICEF and researchers from a number of locally based universities to identify the number of out-of-school children, the profiles and characteristics of this group, and to explore the reasons that can explain this trend (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014, 2017, UNICEF 2918a, 2018b) . This paper emerged through this collaborative process and is intended to provide theoretical and empirical insights to examine why Tanzania is experiencing this trend despite the increased investment in education infrastructure, in teacher training, and increased access opportunities for all children with the introduction of fee-free primary and lower-secondary public schooling. A decline in demand for education was identified in a study by UWEZO(2016) who found that the net enrolment ratio (NER) fell from 97.3% in 2008 to 89.7% in 2013. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) fell from 114.4% in 2007 to 96.2% in 2013. This decline in real terms is particularly notable given the increasing growth of the school-age population during this time.

Further fine-grained analysis of the official data reveals that the number of pupils who sought to access education and registered as standard one pupils in 2019 has decreased as they move through the years to standard five in 2023 from 1,754,307 in 2019 to 1,376,805 in 2023 which is equivalent to 21.5% (United Republic of Tanzania 2020,2021,2022,2023). Thus, there are serious concerns regarding not only access to the school system, but progress through this system. This gives rise to questions on the demand side factors and reasons to explain the apparent declining demand for education as students progress through the academic cycle.

This paper set out to unpack this problem. Through engagement with communities, educational experts, and children, it explores why students are leaving the education system. Utilising an inductive approach and qualitative methods, supported by a critical relational lens, the paper explores the contextual factors that influence school participation / non-participation rates. A relational lens requires the researchers to examine locally embedded governance and economic structures and norms, and the familial and communal relationships within these decisions are made regarding who is educated through formal schooling, why, and for how long. Three districts in the Mara Region, Northern Tanzania were selected for the study. Qualitative data was collected from 225 participants across 12 schools (6 primary schools and 6 secondary schools) through semi-structured interviews to understand, from the perspective of children, teachers, parent, guardians, and community leaders, factors influencing participation rates. The findings identify economic barriers, including extreme poverty the loss of labour and income to households; social factors, including internalised gendered beliefs and values which influence who, within a family, is likely to progress and to what level; familial structures; teacher behaviour; and experiences of violence against children within and outside of the school context; and an apparent disconnect between economic activities within the area and the content of curriculum focusing on academic attainment over practical skills.

Using a critical relational lens to explore dominant norms and practices that sustain systemic inequalities, the paper argues that daily life, modes of material production, and rigid social structures underpin systems of extractive and transactional social relations leading to high male and female non-progression rates at different stages in the academic progression cycle and for different reasons. Males are more likely to drop out of school intermittently, to assist in economic activities and to bring income to the household over the course of their studies. They are more likely, overtime, to complete a higher number of years in education. Females are more likely to leave or be removed from school earlier on a more permanent basis, to be married and thus bring bride wealth to the household. Girls contribution to the well-being of the household is considered temporary. It is assumed that they will be married and it is the family into which they marry that will benefit from their practical skills, their capacity for caring and domestic non-market based productive activities, and their role in perpetuating that family line.The following begins with a review of the literature on factors influencing education participation rates and demand side considerations. An outline of the methodology and methods is then provided, followed by results and a discussion of the theoretical and empirical insights of this study.

1. **Literature Review: What do we know and where are the gaps?**

Sarpkava (2010), in their study on demand for university places in Turkey, defines demand as the quantity or the rate at which a customer wants to buy a product which is often determined by the *desire for that particular good* and the *ability to buy* in terms of wealth or income. Demand for education, particularly the public education system, has traditionally been articulated almost exclusively in terms of access to more, better, and higher-status opportunities within the existing system. In this case, poorer and more marginalised populations would seekthe opportunity for social mobility through the education system, while more privileged groups will seek to maintain their status (Sarpkaya, 2010). This suggests that demand is heterogenous in nature, with motivations differing from one individual, group or class to another depending endogenous and exogenous factors including individual capacities and social and economic background conditions.

A study by Newman and Owens (2010) on determinants of demand for primary and secondary education in Tanzania identifies three core factors; the direct and opportunity cost, the benefits/returns, and household preferences for education.

*2.1 Costs for Education*

Cost is a key factor influencing who can participate in education, to what level, and for what duration. This includes direct costs (school fees, uniform, books, and costs of transportation); opportunity costs (all foregone income or production the child could have contributed to the household had he or she not been in school); and indirect cost (school contributions such as for the watchman, water bills, study tour and various celebrations) (UNICEF, 2018b).

Newman and Owens (2010), assert that, from a theoretical point of view, achild’s education can be understood as both consumption when a utility is derived directly from education; and as an investment when long term future returns are expected. The household’s demand-side factors for the education of its’ young will, therefore, be on the perceived benefits of or returns from education in comparison to the cost involved for sending that child to school.In addition, cost as a demand factor will involve the consumption value derived from schooling and longer-term returns. In other words, even when the State, in terms of cost, provides fee-free education, a household might still not demand education and decide not to send their child to school if they perceive there is no benefit or returnsfrom that particular investment of time and resource. Further, asSumra and Katabaro (2014) note,while acknowledging cost as one of the demand side factors for education, direct cost alone is not the only factor determining demand. Indirect costs and opportunity costs have, they argued, a greater role in determining demandwithin households.

*2.2 Returns from education*

Education is found to correlate with a range of positional goods including increased opportunities for employment and income. Fasih (2008) studies in Pakistan and Ghana revealed that, the degree attained, and grades completed by an individual were among the key determinants of labour market outcomes as people who had adequate education had more chances of being employed. This suggests that basic literacy and numeracy skills acquired through education matter greatly to people’s economic outcomes and become a factor for demanding education. But quality of education matters. Joshi and Gaddis (2015) found that the Tanzanian education system produced graduates who lacked the basic skills and competencies required in the labour market. This implies that there was a lack of relevance attached to the education provided which becomes a factor for households not to demand education.

*2.3 Households’ Preferences*

A study by Glewwe and Jacoby (2004) found out that providing greater access to schools, by itself, would not necessarily be successful in increasing household preferences for the education of their young as well as in promoting human development. Additional incentives, such as targeted subsidies or loans for education were found to be more effective in providing choice for households based on their resources and contribute to demand in education.

Patrinos (2007) contends that choice and diversity in education are important aspects of demand. This study found that provision of economic supports such as voucher not only gave households choices on the type of education their children could receive but also improved the performance of voucher recipients and therefore increased demand for education. Yousaf et al.(2020) found that age, household income, distance to school, and nutritional status were significant determinants of school enrolment and continued progression. Of the four factors, nutrition was the most influential in explaining low demand for education as the analysis indicated that at age seven and eight, the probability of going to school were 33% and 29% respectively lower for stunted children compared with the non-stunted children. This points to multi-dimensional poverty levels within households where food insecurity and income poverty interact to block access and/or progression due to associated costs.

In synthesising the empirical studies above it is evident that demand-side factors for education are manifold. Some can be classified as characteristics of the household itself while others are based on the economic status of the household. Demand factors are the interplay of several interrelated issues and not just one aspect. Although the economics and human capital frameworks employed in the studies above point to the economic and labour market opportunities, educational theorists in the capabilities school of thought point to the intrinsic value of education and the range of non-positional goods to which educational attainment can give rise. Engagement with education and learning is not a simple market transaction. Education is intrinsically valuable to the development of agency, one’s capacity for autonomy and overall empowerment of the person (Sen, 2009; Unterhalter 2009). Thus, to borrow a distinction from Sen (1984), education is essential for achieving the instrumental necessities for well-being freedoms as well as the opportunities to nurture intrinsically valuable agency freedoms. A study by Mwita and Murphy on the reasons to explain the non-progression of female students through the secondary school cycle in a rural Tanzanian community found that a range of non-positional harms arise that carry life-long implications when young women are withdrawn from educational systems (Mwita and Murphy, 2017). Non-positional harms included forms of epistemic exclusions and the reinforcement of harmful gender social norms that undermine aspirations of equality of opportunity, empowerment, and agency freedoms.

Drawing also upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) bioecological model of human development, learning and education are experienced through individuals and the systems in which they operate and live, and the associated interactions between these systems. Thus, social, political, and cultural norms and practices, as well as the economic conditions of a context matter in understanding the determinants of educational demand and outcomes. Human activities, behaviours, expectations and decisions are embedded in situated contexts, influenced by the particularities of daily lives, refracted through learned mental conceptions, and controlled through locally embedded power structures and dynamics ( Harvey, 2017). A simple market-based lens which reduces education to a transactional activity, with demand measured through cost, returns, and revealed preferences, simply fails to capture the range of relational and non-material factors that influence decision-making.

In the Tanzanian context, costs of education, both direct and indirect, have reduced over the last decade. Further, the Government of Tanzania has actively engaged in building the physical infrastructure and policy architecture necessary to deliver education for all. In spite of the improving affordability of education and the enhanced political will supporting robust educational systems, the number of out of school children continues to increase. This seems counterintuitive. Thus, the research question driving this paper is what other factors can explain the decline in demand for education. This requires a critical relational analysis of the socio-cultural factors and local political context within which individuals and families are based and from which they make decisions on whether or not to continue to engage in educational systems.

1. **Methodology & Methods**

*3.1 Research design*

A case study approach was selected for this study due to the need to conduct in-depth analysis across a range of observable and non-observable variables. This study has blended both descriptive and exploratory analysis (Yin, 2014:8), seeking to provide a clear outline of the context within which the communities are based. An exploratory process to gather insights and understanding through dialogue with community members, has also been used to help to explain why demand for education is low and declining in this space. As the study does not engage in quantitative methods and analysis, it does not seek to identify causal factors or generalisable claims that can be extrapolated to other contexts.

The case study site, Mara, in Northern Tanzania, was selected for two key reasons. Firstly, it was due to its ethnic diversity, it is the ancestral home to over twenty different ethnic groupings, each with very different socio-cultural norms and values, and distinct economic activities. Secondly, it is an economically diverse space, with the populations engaging in agriculture, in particular cattle farming, fisheries (due to its proximity to Lake Victoria), small scale mining, and tourism (it is home to the Serengeti National Park) with a high degree of petty trading opportunity.

In order to identify appropriate schools and communities to participate in the study, documentary analysis of school records took place in collaboration with the District Education Offices and the Regional Education Office. Three districts - Musoma Urban, Musoma Rural, and Tarime - were purposively selected following this analysis. These districts all experience a high prevalence of non-progression. Further, the local economies are based around a diverse range of economic activities in which all communities members engage or expect to engage over time.

*3.2 Sample size and sampling method*

A total of twelve schools were visited, six being primary schools and the other six being secondary schools. A total of 225 participants were involved in the study as summarized in Table 1. These included district education officers (DEOs), regional education officers (REOs), heads of school, teachers, participating students; non-attending children, village leaders, parents /guardians, and key informants.

TABLE 1: STUDY PARTICIPANTS

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category of Participants** | **Musoma (U)** | **Musoma (R)** | **Tarime**  | **Total** |
| Non- attending children | 23 | 26 | 10 | 59 |
| Children with poor attendance | 33 | 40 | 25 | 98 |
| REO |  |  |  | 1 |
| DEOs | 2 | 3 | 2 | 7 |
| Village leaders | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Heads of school | 4 | 4 | 4 | 12 |
| Teachers | 8 | 5 | 4 | 17 |
| Parents | 9 | 9 | 2 | 20 |
| Key Informers | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Total number of respondents | 84 | 89 | 51 | **225** |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Children in these schools were sampled for interview based on their attendance in school. Reasons for lack of attendance were linked to disability, being over age and belonging to child gangs. Heads of school and class teachers helped to identify children for the study.

Heads of school, special unit teachers, and class teachers were purposively selected due to their relationships to the children, their understanding of the diversity of vulnerabilities, and their access to information on school-wide data. Heads of school and village leaders identified parents with children not attending school and those that were considered to be at risk of dropping out of school. Village leaders were selected on the basis of their positions in the village administrative structure. Key informers were mainly people from government agencies like TASAF and EQUIP Tanzania, NGOs like Jipe Moyo Trust, and those working in charity organizations – like Masanga Catholic mission.

The REO and DEOs provided the significant background information needed to decide on the wards to visit based on school attendance reports. They also provided education reports on such related issues as school facilities and infrastructure, the situation of teachers, enrolment rates, capitation grants, building funds, dropout flows, and strategies to revamp poor school attendance.

**3.3 Methods**

*3.3.1 Interviews*

This case study used in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture detailed knowledge of cases associated with factors influencing demand for education. Interviews were arranged in respective workplaces or schools at times convenient to the interviewees. Information collected during the interview was recorded in notebooks together with personal testimonies from the respondents, which included children, teachers and key informers who were purposively selected for the study. All data was transcribed, collated, coded, and anonymised to ensure participant confidentiality.

Data collected included views from the participants on the reasons which might cause a person to leave school / had left schooling. Interview guides were designed to fit the needs of each groups – those attending school, those with poor school attendance, and those not attending school. The participants age range was from 7 to 21 years. 10 participants were between the ages of 18 and 21, and the remaining 147 were between 7 and 17 years.

The interview guide for key informants, parents, teachers, heads of schools and education officers (68 individual interviews in total) included basic demographic information related to age, gender, and role, but focused more specifically on children not attending school matters. These included invited opportunities to talk about observed cultural beliefs and practices within the region that might have some influence on the teaching environment; demand barriers that would drive children not to attend school, strategies that are in place or have been tried to address the problem; reasons for the increase in number of children not attending school in the Mara Region; policies on inclusivity and disability in particular; matters related to school safety and ethos; and the range on non-government partners with whom they engaged on the issue of children not attending school.

It is interesting to note that educational Officers, key informants and Village leaders were male participants ranging in age from 29 to 59. Teachers, Parents and Guardians, on the other hand, were represented by a more gendered balance group with participants ranging in age from 31 to 70+.

*3.3.2Data Analysis*

Each interview was transcribed after each session, and the researcher maintain personal observations and notes in a separate journal. This ensured that any points of clarification could be quickly addressed by re-engaging with the participant when the interview was fresh in their memory. When the interviews and transcriptions were completed, all data was then organised, collated, coded into a data matrix for analysis. The data was then subjected to deep thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns of responses relevant to the core objectives of the study. Journal data provided information on background characteristics and relationships and acted as an important tool for reflexivity and critical reflection on the researcher analysis and interpretation of the data.

*3.3.4 Ethical Consideration*

The researchers followed the ethical clearance procedures through seeking letters of permits for the research from the University of Dar es Salaam to the regional and district levels. The research team included specialist expertise in educational research with extensive experience in working with children, working in multi-ethnic communities, and working with People with Disabilities (PwD). They took time to ensure that participants in the research were protected – treated with dignity and respect throughout the research process. The selection of the participants was non-discriminatory as participation in the study was based on the specific information needed from the participants. Participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis as the research team had to obtain individual participants’ informed consent or willingness to participate through signing a consent form. Children’s informed consent was sought in addition to parents’ or guardian’s consent. The researchers further ensured that no harm was caused to respondents through either act of commission or omission as a result of their participation.The research was conducted through Kiswahili and so there was not requirement for translators or other intervening factors.

1. **Results**

*4.1 What do the children say? The perspective of the learners*

Voices from 157 children across 11 different ethnic groups were collected. Five cross cutting issues emerged in the analysis of the children’s voices that provide insights into their experiences of school and reasons to explain their non-participation – economic barriers; age; disability; safety; and socio-cultural practices and expectations.

Although the economic status of the children varied from wealthy to very poor, almost all children interviewed, were engaging in work and labour related activities outside of school – both those already categorised as Children not attending school and those identified as having poor school attendance. These activities are heavily linked to the roles and trades practices by their parents, grandparents and communities with different ethnicities engaged in different activities. For example, students identifying as Gita and Jita engaged in fishing activities; Kuria and Kurya engaged in pastoralism and cattle, gold mining and petty trading; Luo engaged in manual labour, masonry and carpentry; Sukuma engaged mainly in petty trading. There was a strong gendered division of labour and activities across all ethnic identities with females engaging heavily in household chores and non-market based productive labour, and males engaging in manual labouring, fishing and cattle herding, trading and mining, and predominantly aimed at market-based income generation. The lived experiences of the children very much mirrored the lived experiences of their communities.

In terms of economic barriers, although primary and lower-secondary schooling are fee free, all students and families are expected. toincur the direct costs of uniforms, books, and transport, and the indirect opportunities costs to households as the children cannot under work to contribute to their household whilst attending schools. The children themselves are acutely aware of the economic status of their households and the inability of many households to contribute to support their education.

A second reason to explain why some students either drop out of school or are at risk of dropping out is linked with age. The term used by the students to describe this reason was ‘over-age’. Although on 3 of 59 children not attending school listed ‘over-age’ as their reason for not attending school, almost one third of the students deemed ‘at risk’ (that is 31 out of 98), noted that they were ‘over-age’ for their form, with those in their teenage years more likely to note this as a reason for non-attendance, although it did include some as young as 7. This suggest some degree of social stigma associated with those who are slower to progress through the curriculum and academic cycle.

Disability emerged as a strong reason for children to be at risk of dropping out-of-school. The researchers did not have opportunities to interview any disabled children not attending school, but approximately 10% of those deemed ‘at risk’ identified as disabled. Interesting, this cut across wealth levels, ethnicities, and genders. Types of disabilities include albinism, visual impairment, deafness, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities and those with underlying health conditions such as asthma. Specific challenges highlighted by students with disabilities to their participation in education and learning included accessibility issues, with school infrastructure found to be unsuitable; lack of trained teachers; lack of safety in traveling to school; experiences of bullying and violence within school, and on route to school.

Safety, both within school and on route to school was a strong concern for many children.

Within school, corporal punishment, overcrowding in classes, and bullying were identified by a number of participants as key concerns and reasons for non-attendance. A large number of students pointed to the distance they were required to travel to school, and safety of the route as a particular concern. For many students, it is a considerable struggle to get to school and when there, their experiences of violence and bullying from teachers and peers, name-calling and beatings both inside and outside the school provides some insight to explain why they are at risk of discontinuing their education.

Finally, and linked to the themes above, social and cultural expectations and practices indicated that many female students either drop out permanently or are at risk of dropping due to expectations of marriage and childbirth. Across all of the interviews, females expect to be married, to have children, and to become part of their husband’s household. Their family receive a bride-price in return. Thus, from the moment of their birth and the identification and allocation of their gender, they are attributed a specific role, and a specific value within the family. Their stay is temporary as they await marriage. Their value is quantifiable, in terms of the bride-price they can achieve. Polygamy is widely practiced across some of the largest ethnic groups (Kuria and Kurya), with stories of the richest men having as many as 15 wives. The number of wives, like the number of cattle one ‘owns’ is a symbol of status and power in the Mara Region. When girls arrive at puberty, they attend circumcision camps and prepare for their roles as wives and mothers. Continued education, for some, is then deemed unnecessary.

*4.2 What the authority figures say? Perspectives of parents and guardians, teachers and education leaders.*

Very different perspectives emerged between parents and those employed and engaged in education practice with each constituency attributing blame and responsibility to the other for the decreasing demands and increasing numbers of children not attending school across the region. Educational Officers repeatedly pointed to the socio-cultural practices and the behaviour of parents and guardians to explain why children are out of school. Bride wealth, wife inheritance, serial marriages, polygamy, practices of witchcraft, child labour, and deeply engrained patriarchal traditions (EO PAR 1). Although the educational officers noted that they believed schools are safe (EO PAR 1, 2, 5), they recognised the risks to child safety caused by the distance that many children need to travel to reach a school. They also pointed to the challenges of low budgets, lack of government funding, low teacher salaries, and poor infrastructure and facilitates as demand side barriers. However, the reasons for children not attending school rest predominantly with the poverty of the people, the dependence on child labour to sustain household, the propensity for serial marriages, early marriages, the attitudes of parents, and cultural practices in the space. The proposed strategy to address these barriers, is compulsory enrolment and attendance (EO PAR 1, 2), fining of parents and guardians (EO PAR 3) and/or legal action for non attendance (EO PAR 4). Only two participants from this group suggested investment in school meals, infrastructure and facilities as a way of increasing demand and decreasing the number of children not attending school (EP PAR 7, 8), although they also support penalties and fines for non-compliance.

Parents and guardians, on the other hand, repeatedly pointed to the additional cost of school contributions (PPAR 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 20), the weak facilities and supports in school (PPAR 1, 2, 7), the poor teaching learning environment due to lack of facilities and large class sizes, and outcomes (PPAR 3), and distance to the school (PPAR 3, 16, 18), corporal punishment practices at school (PPAR 17) and corresponding lack of child safety as key reasons to explain why children are either out of school or at risk of dropping. For some, schools have not demonstrated their value and the children are better off contributing to the family. As one parent notes, ‘parents want their children to support home activities’ (PPAR 10).

Teachers and heads of schools noted a combination internal school factors and socio-cultural factors as the main reasons for increasing number of children not atteding school in the region. They recognised that teachers themselves lack motivation. They pointed to the poor facilities and infrastructure, the lack of sporting activities, distance to school, lack of school meals and food for the children, and the unmanageable class sizes as reasons to explain the poor learning environment. This coupled with the embedded social structures and cultural practices resulted in an overall ‘unfavourable school environment’ for both teachers and learners. One group who came in for heavy critique among teachers were ‘single mothers’ or ‘single parent households’, which are predominantly female-led. Such households tend to experience the deepest levels of abject poverty and as one male teacher claimed, contribute to a ‘lack of understanding of the importance of education’ (TPAR 2). The ‘negligence of parents’ (TPAR 8), that ‘parent do not care for the education of their children’(TPAR 7), and the ‘poor awareness by parents of the value of education’ (TPAR 22) emerged strongly through the teachers voices.

1. **Discussion and Implications**

As noted in the opening paragraphs of this paper, education is identified as an engine of economic and social development. It is lauded by governments, academics, and international organisations for its transformative power. Ensuring access to education for all is based on fundamentally egalitarian principles – to seek to level the playing field to the greatest degree possible and to ensure the best possible start in life for each child. However, the translation of this principle in an implementable policy framework, and then refracted through pre-existing inequalities, asymmetrical power relations, and culturally embedded mental conceptions, can result in very different lived experiences of learners. The findings, presented above, give important insights into some of these lived experiences, and help deepen understandings as to why children and communities are not availing of educational opportunities open to them. The findings point to economic and socio-cultural factors that collectively explain why demand is dropping in the Mara Region, and why the proposed strategies to address this decline are necessary, but deeply insufficient in this context.

*5.1 Economic factors*

Drawing upon Newman and Owens (2010) economic conceptual framework, it is clear from the findings that cost, benefits /return, and household preferences go some way to explaining the declining demand for education in the Mara region. The cost of uniforms, books, transport and, the perceived low levels of value secured through the educational process, and the preference for households to maximise returns on the value of child labour over education seem to be supported by the evidence presented above. The problem in the Mara region is not that there is decreasing demand for quality education, but that the quality of the educational offering is low, and the costs (direct, indirect, and opportunity costs) are prohibitively high, that children and families are declining to engage.

There is disagreement amongst the authorities on where blame rests and how responsibilities to address this problem should be apportioned. However, when viewed from the perspective of the learners, it seems clear that the educational offering with which they are engaging is not conducive for their learning, or to their human development more broadly understood. They are invited to risk their physical and mental well-being to attend institutions that cannot physically accommodate them, or engage with their individual intellectual capacities and learning needs, due to inadequate infrastructure, inadequate facilitates, under-motivated teachers, and excessively large class sizes. Practices of corporal punishment and the prevalence and normalisation of violence both in school and outside of school generates an ethos of fear and feelings of inadequacy that simply do not lend themselves to learning and personal development.

*5.2 Socio-cultural factors*

A range of important socio-cultural factors also emerged through the data that require further consideration and reflection if the determinants of demand for education are to be understood in this context. Disability, gender, ethnicity and social hierarchical structures, and family structures, are also determining factors in who will be educated, for how long, and to what degree. The following factors are explored under the relational conceptions of daily life, modes of production, and mental conceptions below.

*5.3 Daily life*

In highly functionalist communities, where the activities of daily-life and livelihoods are deeply labour intensive, from the moment of birth and the assignation of a specific ethnic and gender identity, functions, roles, and values are ascribed to each human being. Their individual aspirations and interests, capacities and capabilities, are subordinated to the needs of household and the perpetuation of the community traditions, practices and values. Within this community, males are more likely to attend and complete school not because they display a greater propensity towards or interest in academic attainment, but because they function as an important source of income and security to the household over the course of their lives. Girls contribution to the well-being of the household is temporary. It is assumed that they will be married to another family who will then benefit from their practical skills, their capacity for caring, and their role in perpetuating that family line. The underlying political economy of the Mara region provides insights into how this rigid gendered and ethnically diverse hierarchy assigns social roles and values at birth that follow children through the courses of their lives. Males are more likely to be extracted from schools intermittently, to bring income to the household. Females are more likely to leave school earlier on a permanent basis, to be married and thus bring bride wealth to the household.

For those identified as disabled, born into both poorer and wealthy households, their daily life is marked by intersecting forms of inequality that intensify their exclusion and marginalisation. Children who identified as disabled were mainly engaged in schooling activities and not engaged in the market-based and non-market-based activities of their peers. Yet the schooling system is not organised to meet their needs. This is recognised by all those engaged in education and teaching. The facilities are inadequate, classes sizes are too big, and teacher-training and specialist skills are not available. They are at increased risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse on their journey to school and bullying and violence within school.

*5.4 Modes of production*

Economic activity and production are highly segregated on the basis of ethnicity and gender in the research sites. Pastoralists and cattle owners are among the wealthiest, most respected and most powerful ethnic groups in the region. However, cattle wealth and ownership had an inverse effect on the likelihood of children attending school. The study found that the more cattle a family owns the greater the need for the child to stay home and take care of the cattle in search of grass. The REO, DEOs and heads of schools further revealed that families moving from one place to another in search of better pastures for their cattle would often not reintroduce their children to new schools.

Further there was strong evidence of serial marriages and polygamous marriages amongst cattle owners and pastoralist communities. Social status and prestige were attributed to the number of cattle one owns and the number of wives one takes. Thus wealth, income arising, and high social status from this activity had no bearing on improved educational outcomes for children in such families.

Fishing, manual labour, masonry and carpentry, framing and petty trading are each dominated by different ethnic groups. There is little to no evidence that education facilitates social mobility across ethnic communities, although it can contribute to movement within communities.

Across each of these domains, the division of labour between males and females is rigidly applied, with boys and men engaging in income generation and market-based activities, and girls and women holding responsibility for subsistence farming and care to the household. Child with disabilities do not appear to have a role in either spaces.

*5.5 Mental conceptions*

Deeply engrained misogyny was evident in the interviews with teachers and educational officers who often attributed children not attending school to single-parent families, and single mother families in particular. Rather than questioning the widespread cultural acceptance, and even celebration, of men engaging in serial marriages, early marriages, and polygamous relations, the responsibility for the exclusion of children from school rested with the parent (primarily the mother) who remained in situ to care for her children.

The evidence also pointed firmly to the deep internalisation of the gender hierarchy and binary. This was evident in the widescale practicing for female and male circumcision. A specific season is identified to host circumcision camps. Children are withdrawn from school by their parents to attend the camps. Interviews with key informants in Tarime district revealed that traditionally, local surgeons carry out the circumcision without anaesthetic and the girl or boy who stands the painful ordeal without flinching becomes a ‘small' celebrity in the village. The parents of every girl who undergoes circumcision pays elders for the practice, part of which is then used to pay the local ‘surgeons’. Girls are given tokens in the form of money, clothes, goats, and even cows, by relatives and neighbours after the circumcision as a sign of appreciation. Among the Kuria, Female Genital Mutilation is viewed positively and once girls are circumcised the local society encourages them to feel that they are adults and ready to marry while at the same time circumcised boys are also encouraged to start their own families as they are also considered adults. Male and female circumcision are very strong cultural practice amongst the Kuria and Kabwa in particular but are also practice by others. The reproduction of these social practices and cultural traditions continuously reinforces a value hierarchy – solidarity and acceptance are gained through participation in these practices; education and schooling are secondary concerns.

1. **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study explored the factors influencing the demand for education in the Mara Region, Northern Tanzania, revealing the complex interplay between economic, social, and cultural barriers that prevent children from accessing and remaining in school. Despite the well-documented economic challenges such as extreme poverty, which affects household income and labor, the study found that relational factors—such as gendered norms, family structures, and social expectations—play a significant role in educational participation. The findings also highlighted that boys and girls face distinct barriers: boys are more likely to experience intermittent school dropout to support household income, while girls often face early school abandonment due to marriage. These insights challenge the assumption that a direct link exists between education and economic opportunity, suggesting that social, cultural, and political-economic factors have a profound impact on educational demand.

To address the decline in demand for education in the Mara Region, it is crucial to move beyond the traditional economic-focused interventions and engage with the broader relational factors identified in the study. The voices of the learners themselves should be at the center of policy development, ensuring that the issues of stigma related to poverty, disability, age, and gender inequality are addressed. Additionally, the current practices of penalizing impoverished families through fines and legal actions should be reconsidered, as they do not foster educational engagement or improve the quality of education. Instead, efforts should focus on a radical transformation of educational services that encompasses the provision of adequate infrastructure, improved teacher training, and the elimination of gender-based violence and discrimination. Only through these holistic and inclusive measures can a sustainable improvement in school participation and educational outcomes be achieved.

Ethical Approval:

As per international standards or university standards written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

Consent

As per international standards, parental written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

I acknowledge that I have used ChatGPT for only refining some of the sections in the document.

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