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Education in Mongwe, Tanzania
A case study assessing education access and quality

Summary

In this study, we explore the quality and accessibility of education in Mongwe, Tanzania, using a mixed-methods approach that includes household surveys, life stories, and key informant interviews. The findings reveal significant challenges affecting education in the community. In terms of access to education, a major obstacle is the distance to schools, exacerbated by unsafe travel conditions during the rainy season. Additionally, economic constraints prevent some families in Mongwe from affording school supplies and secondary education for their children, contributing to high dropout rates. Educational quality and outcomes are further hindered by frequent teacher absenteeism and inadequate infrastructure, with schools facing shortages of resources, furniture, and poor facilities. Despite these challenges, there is a positive perception of the school climate, with strong community support for education. However, the transition to secondary education remains difficult, with only 14% of secondary-age children enrolled. The study underscores the need for comprehensive reforms to address these issues and improve educational quality and access in Mongwe.

Introduction

Mongwe is a small and remote village in Tanzania. Its isolation and poverty significantly hinder children's access to quality education. The village has one primary school, with 342 students (175 boys, 167 girls) and 5 teachers. Many primary schools in Tanzania struggle to provide broad access to education while maintaining high quality. Common issues in (rural) education entail challenges with students' transportation, teacher shortage, limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, household poverty, poor learning outcomes and limited access to secondary school. About 3.2 million of the country's children are out of school, with over 1 million never having attended. Only 27% of secondary-age children are enrolled. Rural schools are unreachable and face severe shortages of resources and teachers. Efforts by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology to expand access have compromised educational quality, as the emphasis on increasing enrollment has resulted in a shortage of teachers, materials, and resources (UNICEF, 2024).

Leveraging the theoretical frameworks on education quality and access, we examined Mongwe's education system through household surveys, life story interviews with secondary school students and dropouts, and key informant interviews with community and school leaders. We aimed to identify the main

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Theoretical Framework

Although policymakers and researchers are focused on improving educational quality, challenges to access remain significant. This section presents a framework addressing both access and quality, with Figure 1 visualising constraints to education **access** by highlighting the financial and non-financial costs affecting families, communities, and governments, as well as opportunity and time costs.

For education **quality**, we adopt the Input-Process-Output approach, described by Tawil et al. (2012) which includes five dimensions (see Figure 2). The framework first identifies three broad **input** dimensions significant for education quality: the individual student, the household and community environment and the school. With regards to the **process**, it distinguishes between the teaching and the learning process, and the school climate, all of which influence education **outcomes**, including cognitive development, formal attainment and adherence to official learning standards. Additionally, contextual factors, like socio-cultural influences and governance structures, shape educational dynamics as well.

By comprehensively considering these dimensions, different stakeholders can develop informed strategies to enhance both access to and the quality of education, thereby fostering more equitable and effective learning environments.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed methods approach, using three data collection techniques to capture different perspectives and to ensure the robust findings through triangulation:

1. 13 in-depth life story interviews with adolescents aged 13 to 17, offering qualitative insights into their educational experiences and life satisfaction.

2. 6 key informant interviews with numerous stakeholders from the education sector , including political and technical duty bearers (Village Executive Officer, Village Chair, Ward education officer) and school personnel (teachers, head master as, school committee chair), providing contextual information and expert perspectives on educational challenges and opportunities.

3. Interviews with all 73 households in the xxx hamlet in Mongwe. A detailed survey was conducted with 59 female adults in households with children, while male heads and other adults (14) received a shorter survey. The approach covered over 97% of all households[1] in Mongwe., capturing

diverse of views on education quality and access. Furthermore, engaging with Tanzanian students not only facilitated seamless communication and collaboration, but also removed language barrier and built trust within the community.

By incorporating perspectives from students perspectives (life stories), households (survey and social network analysis), and key decision-makers (KII), we gained a holistic understanding of the educational landscape in Mongwe.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of access to educations
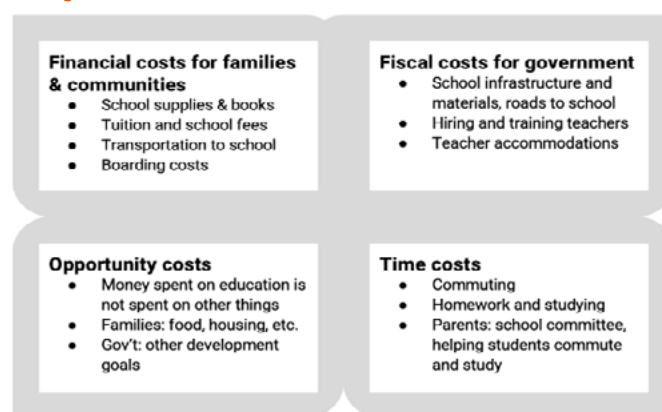
Inspired by Bhalla, A.S. (1992). Access to Education. In: *Uneven Development in the Third World*

Figure 2: Quality of Education Theoretical framework
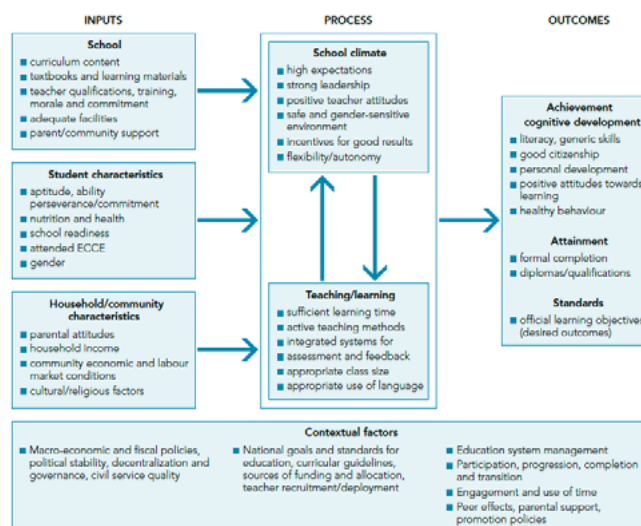
Source: UNESCO (2002). *Global Monitoring Report. Education for All: is the world on track?; in Twail et al., 2012, p.8*

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1   The choice for the female head of the household to answer the questions related to the children's education, was based on the choice for the most knowledgeable informant, assuming women to be the prime caretaker of most children and hence also best informed about their childrens' education.

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Results

The household surveys revealed major educational challenges in the community, such as long school distances, a scarcity of nearby educational institutions, high material costs and frequent teacher absenteeism (see Figure 3).

These findings highlight issues in both access and quality across all input levels (child, household, school) and process levels. We will now examine these challenges in detail within the framework's dimensions.

Access

Distance is a major concern, with many students commuting an average of nearly 50 minutes, and over a third travelling more than an hour. Key informants noted that this issue worsens during the rainy season. The village chair reported that "*many students fail to cross the rivers because it is very dangerous, so they are forced to stay home until the rivers subside, thus missing lessons*". A teacher added, "*I cannot attend school when it rains, because there is no bridge to cross*".

Additionally, the absence of nearby secondary schools forces students to travel longer distances or abandon higher education. Mongwe students must move or commute to Mzumbe Secondary School, an expensive proposition. The Village Education Committee Chair noted that boarding students at Mzumbe "*are required to cook for themselves, fetch water, and perform other tasks*", leading to low secondary school continuation rates.

Input (student & household learning environment)

The high cost of school materials is a major challenge, with many households unable to afford essential supplies, (Figure 4). This **financial strain** limits access to learning resources, as nearly 75% of households lack books, and only 7% have more than two books.

Despite economic challenges, surveys revealed **positive perceptions** of the school climate and positive attitudes towards education. Majority of the parents (90%) in Mongwe desire better education outcomes for their children, reflecting a community-wide commitment to educational advancement. Respondents also strongly supported education for both boys and girls, emphasizing the importance of literacy and learning opportunities for all children.

Figure 3: Biggest Educational Problems according to (fe)male household heads in Mongwe.
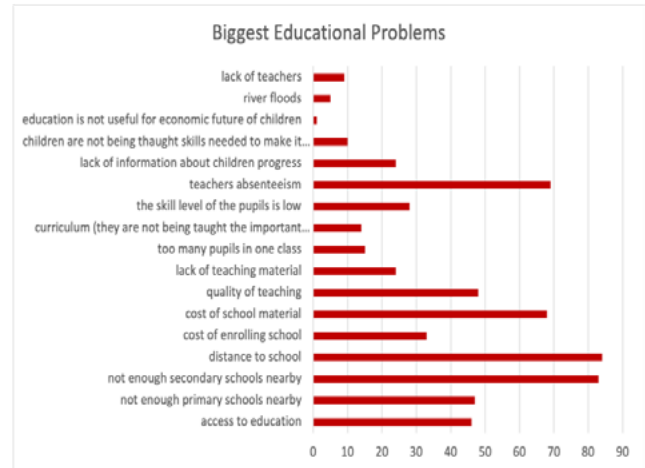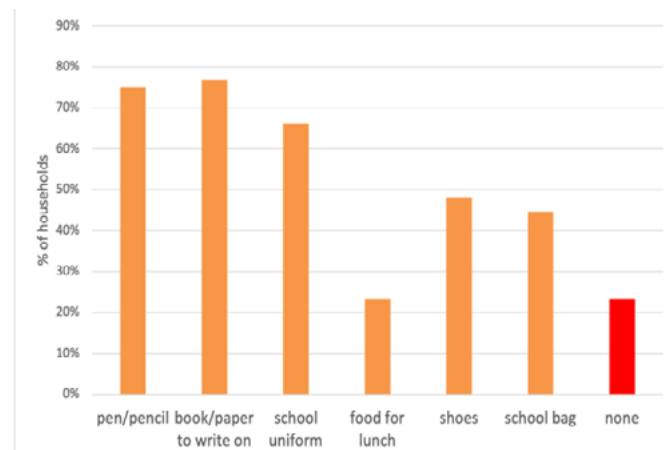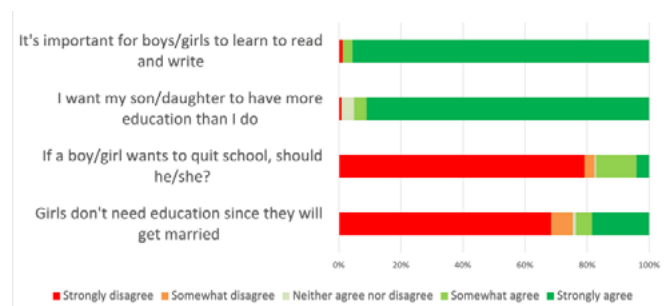

Figure 4: Available School Supplies in Household

Figure 5: Parental attitudes towards education.

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Input - school

Figure 6 reveals gaps in **curriculum** delivery, technical skills and English literacy. Over 60% of household heads report that English is poorly or not at all taught in primary school, highlighting the need for curriculum reform and teacher training in Mongwe.

Teacher absenteeism is another critical issue in Mongwe, marked by irregular attendance and reported low commitment and morale (Figure 7.)

The school needs nine teachers but has only five, largely due to poor living conditions in the remote village leading to a high turnover.

Mongwe Primary School also faces severe shortages in resources and infrastructure. Students often sit on the floor due to lack of desks, and the dilapidated toilets compel students to relieve themselves outside (Head Teacher). Additionally, inadequate meals negatively impact learning outcomes.

Economic difficulties, particularly among subsistence farmers, restrict families' ability to afford school supplies and secondary education fees, leading some parents to discourage their children from continuing their education.

Process (school climate & teaching and learning)

Overall, more that 70% of respondents view the school climate positively, noting that schools encourage children to excel and develop their potential. About 65% believe schools motivate students to achieve good results (see Figure 8).

Students also report a supportive leaning climate and positive relationships within the school community. They value effective teaching methods, as noted by a 15-year-old student: "*The teaching and learning conditions at our school are favorable. Teachers provide us with various assessments, homework, assignments, and exercises.*"

Outcome: cognitive development- attainment- standards

While almost 90% of primary-aged children are on track with their education, the transition to secondary education remains challenging. Figure 9 shows that 67% of secondary-aged children failed to progress after primary class 7, with only 14% of them actually enrolled in secondary school.

Figure 6: Parental appreciation of curriculum

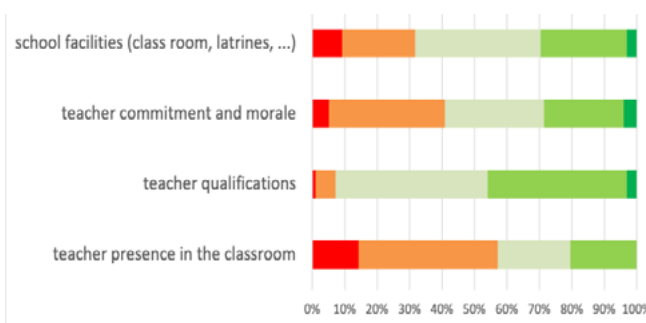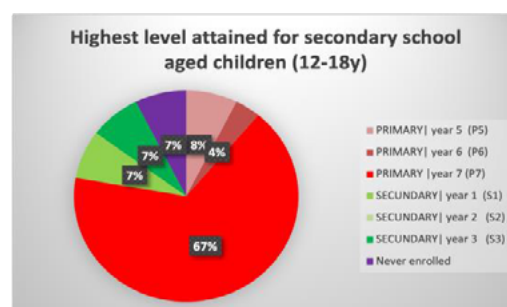

Figure 7: Perceived school facilities and teacher quality

Figure 8: School climate perceptions

Figure 9: Attainment level children aged 12-18 years.

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The children's life story perspective

Life story interviews with both secondary school attendees and non-attendees confirmed key issues: a positive school climate but persistent teacher shortage, large class sizes, poor infrastructure. Most notably, many students who couldn't continue to secondary school due to financial, distance or other constraints expressed deep disappointment and were significantly impacted by their disrupted education.

> *"When I completed primary education, I passed the Primary School Leaving Examination but… I lacked the money to go to school. My friends who went are now in Form Four. I cried a lot when I saw my peers going to school."*
> — *Female student, 16, primary only*

> *"I didn't pass the Primary School Leaving Examination. My father was angry. I wish I could have gone to secondary school. My friends are in secondary school."*
> — *Male student, 17, primary only*

Students are generally content when able to attend school, valuing "finishing school" and "earning a diploma" highly, a sentiment shared by their families and communities. This positive attitude is supported by parental and community involvement, such as assisting with homework and fostering study environments. However, students face numerous challenges including balancing schoolwork and household chores and farming duties, financial constraints and inadequate study environments at home. The economic burden of secondary school, including opportunity costs and long commutes, further complicates access to education. These issues align closely with the framework of education access (Bhalla, 1992).

Policy and Action Recommendations

- Advocate for increased support for education at village level by leveraging stakeholder backing.

- Foster improved relationships between parents and teachers through increased dialogue, by addressing tensions particularly concerning child discipline and the provision of school and cleaning supplies, to strengthen collaboration and support for student success.

- At the (Mlali) ward level, build desks and improve the conditions of the teachers' housing in Mongwe.

- Push for enhanced funding and resource allocation to Mongwe Primary school to improve education access and quality.

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