



National Study on the Situations of At-Risk and Out-of-School Children in Ethiopia

Background

In the past few decades, Ethiopia's Ministry of Education (MoE) has achieved commendable progress on expanding school access at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary school levels. Despite this progress, educational disparities and high out-of-school rates persist in the Ethiopian education sector.

Study Overview

To understand the current challenges that are driving out-of-school rates, the American Institutes for



Research (AIR), in partnership with UNICEF and MoE, conducted a mixed-methods study, including secondary quantitative data analysis*, primary qualitative data analysis, and strategy development. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with national-level government officials, members of Regional Education Bureaus, non-governmental organization representatives, school principals, teachers, and caregivers. The study follows the five dimensions of exclusion (5DE) model focusing on at-risk children.

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify, analyse, document, and understand the following components
 - 1) **'What'** and **'Where'**: Profiles of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) and those at risk of dropping out in Ethiopia
 - 2) **'Why'**: Barriers and bottlenecks (demand and supply side) that keep children out of school
 - 3) **'How'**: Policies and strategies to address challenges that impede children not to come to school
- Generate evidence-based recommendations on OOSC to inform equitable access to education

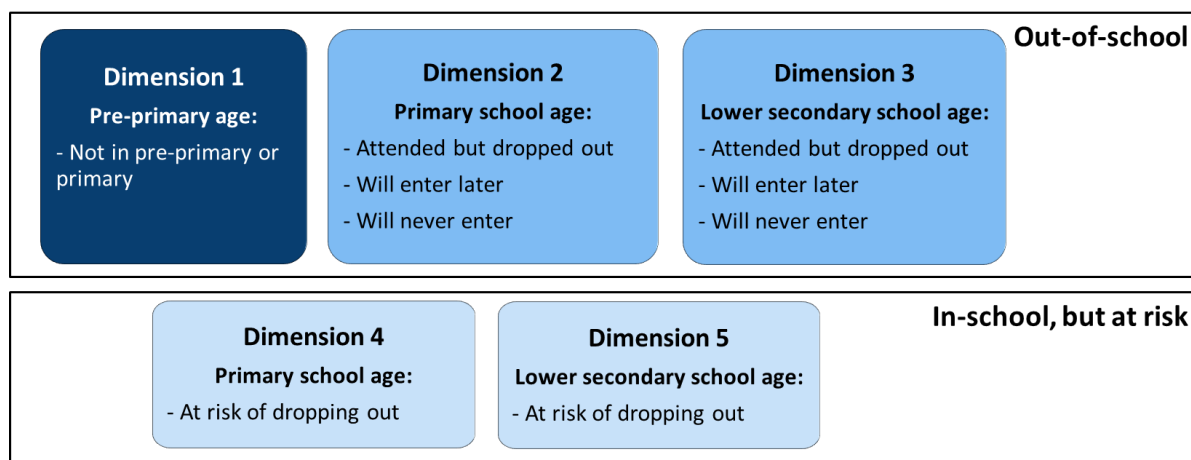
Proposed Costed Strategies

The study developed a series of recommendations that respond to the identified drivers of out-of-school rates. Priority recommendations are accompanied by six actionable, context- and region-specific costed strategies. The data indicated that enrolment is less of an issue than retention, and that when children are enrolled, it does not necessarily mean that they attend school. Thus, the strategies focus on Dimensions 4 and 5 of the 5DE. The costed strategies include synthesized qualitative and quantitative information that produce a high-level understanding of the salient dynamics and trends that are shaping the OOSC context in Ethiopia. The strategies align with the priorities outlined in the Education Sector Development Programme V (ESDP V) and the new Ethiopia Education Development Roadmap (2018). The costs for each of the strategies were estimated based on

on available data and assumptions of which activities may be required for implementation. The strategies that were developed are the following:

1. Strengthen the child tracking and cross-sectoral (E)MIS;
2. Expand access to pre-primary education through formal schools and mobile education programmes;
3. Expand access to secondary schools;
4. Revise existing secondary curriculum to one that is employment outcomes-focused;
5. Provide safe drinking water at schools through improved and functional water sources; and
6. Provide school feeding programme for food insecure households.

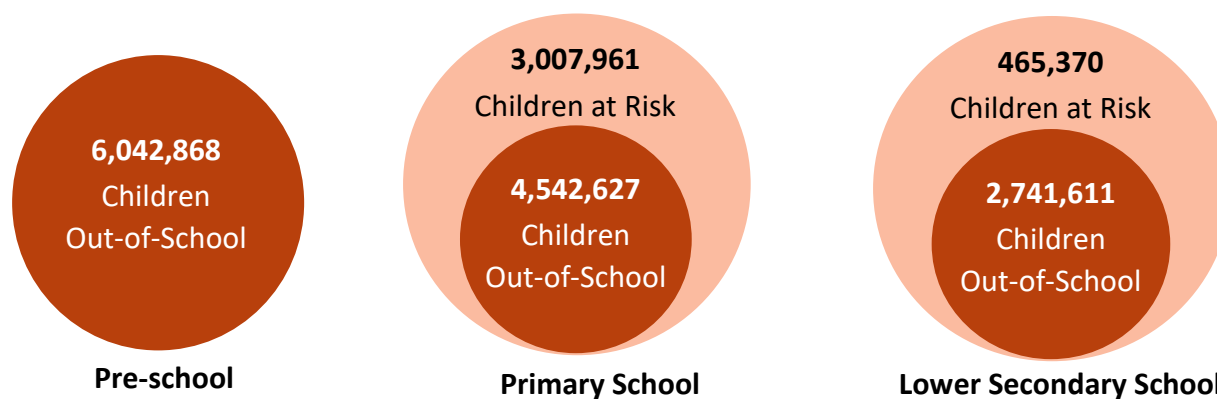
Five Dimensions of Exclusion (5DE) Model



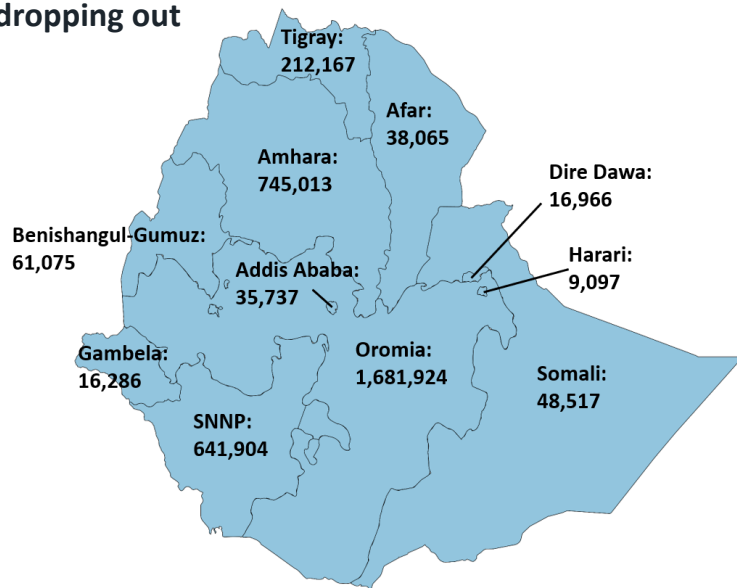
Source: UNICEF. (2015). *Global Out-of-School Children Initiative Operational Manual*

‘What’ and ‘Where’: Profile of Excluded Children

- An estimated **3.5 million primary and secondary school students are at risk of dropping out** in the course of the school year (using survival rate estimations by grade).
- The number of children at risk of dropping out is in addition to the **7.3 million children who are already out of primary and secondary school** according to the MoE OOSC study (Luminos Fund).
- Based on survival rates, students who are transitioning into primary school (Grade 1) and lower secondary school (Grade 9) are at the highest risk of dropping out.
- Survival rates for girl and boy students are similar overall. Girls have a lower likelihood of staying in school past Grade 7.
- Across all grade levels, private schools (using EMIS classification for school ownership) have the highest survival rates as compared to government and religious schools.



Absolute number of children at risk of dropping out



Regional-level survival rates

- The highest average survival rates are in Addis Ababa (96%), Gambela (95%) and Somali (94%).
- The lowest average survival rates are in Afar (80 per cent) and Benishangul-Gumuz (79%) resulting in 38,000 and 61,000 children at risk. In absolute numbers, Oromia, Amhara and SNNP have the highest number of children at-risk.

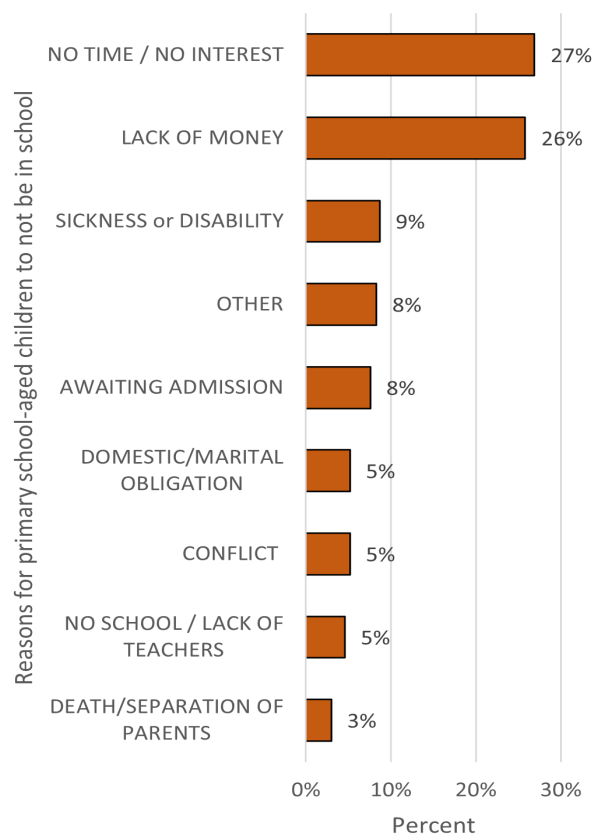
‘Why’: Barriers and Bottlenecks

Demand-side Causes

Households’ poor economic conditions are the primary demand-side barrier inhibiting school enrolment and retention. Economic deprivations affect enrolment and dropout decisions in the following ways:

- **The perceived opportunity costs** of education influence parents and caregivers’ decisions to pull children out of school. These factors are particularly pronounced in agrarian and pastoralist regions.
- **Indirect school costs** such as educational materials and uniforms remain cost-prohibitive for low-income households.
- The economic and psychological burden caused by the **COVID-19 pandemic** as well as **regional conflict** adversely affects caregivers’ ability and willingness to send children to school.

Reasons for Primary School-aged Children to be Out-of-School



Source: Authors’ estimations using the Socio-Economic Survey 2018-19

The main socio-cultural barriers that affect school enrolment and retention are:

- Parents and primary caregivers' concerns for their children's **safety against violence**, especially for girls, cause them to stop sending the children to school, particularly in rural areas, where distance from homes to school may be greater.
- **Child marriage practices** cause girls to drop out of school, particularly in rural areas.
- Some parents and caregivers hold **low perceived value for girls' education**.



Demand-side recommendations

- ◆ **Provide legal ground for equity-based budgeting:** A legal mandate, with regional rollouts and instructions (e.g. continuation of the PSNP cash transfers), help lift economic burden to attend school.
- ◆ **Strengthen availability and quality of employment outcomes-focused curriculum,** including the expansion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and prioritizing focused tracks for skills that are in high demand in the regions. This will address caregiver concerns about the contribution of education to improved livelihoods.
- ◆ **Appoint gender focal points in Regional Education Bureaus** to help implement regional gender policy recommendations, including training of school staff to effectively implement the Code of Conduct on Prevention of School Related Gender Based Violence in Schools.
- ◆ **Hold community-led conversations on gender:** a low-cost way to continuously educate school communities on issues such as harmful marriage practices, the value and benefits of education, and gender-responsive pedagogy.

Supply-side Causes

The study found these supply-side barriers to school enrollment, though these problems are less pronounced in Addis Ababa:

- **Lack of potable water and school meals** are disincentives to school attendance.
- The **curriculum's lack of relevance to local labour markets** reduces the perceived benefits of education.
- **Deficits in infrastructure**—including WASH facilities and provisions for students with disabilities—make schools less child friendly. These supply-side barriers are especially pronounced for refugee, internally displaced, and migrant students.

Supply-side recommendations

- ◆ **Aim to reach universal school feeding:** Poverty and lack of nutrition are key reasons for children to be out of school or at risk of dropping out. However, the findings indicate that there is a lack of adequate coverage of existing programmes and concerns that they will phase out. Scaling up school feeding programmes would address these concerns.
- ◆ **Improve safe drinking water provision at schools through improved water sources:** The lack of potable water facilities in schools disincentivizes school attendance, particularly in regions with low coverage of improved drinking water or water insecurity.

‘How’: Policies and Change Strategies

Perceived Effectiveness of Existing Policies, Strategies, and Programmes

- Education officials and practitioners **generally perceive that existing policies, strategies, and programmes have been effective in improving enrolment and retention in the past 10-15 years.**
- The **elimination of school fees** for primary and secondary education is believed to have driven the growth of enrolment in general education.
- The current policy environment is blamed for creating an **undersupply of qualified teachers**, eroding educational quality and indirectly contributing to drop out.
- The government’s investment into **Early Childhood Care and Education programmes** and policies has been credited for increasing pre-primary school enrolment rates.
- In pastoralist areas, **Alternative Basic Education (ABE)** helped increase enrolment rates on a limited basis. Problems of low quality and of transition to the formal school system remain.
- **Gender-based policies and programmes** were effective in addressing barriers for girl students, though restrictive socio-cultural traditions and beliefs in more rural and religious areas still inhibit girls’ access to education.

Cross-sectoral Approaches

- Ethiopia’s **social protection policies and programmes such as the Productive Safety Net Programme** have positively influenced a range of factors that affect school attendance such as child nutrition, food and income security, and child labour.
- **School feeding programmes** are perceived to be particularly effective in boosting enrolment and retention but have difficulty with scale and sustainability and are reliant on donor funding.
- Experts, government officials, and practitioners recognize **a need for improved cross-sectoral coordination** between the social protection and education sectors. Similarly, a lack of coordination in other social sectors (i.e., WASH, health, etc.) limits programmes in effectively addressing the challenges and barriers that keep OOSC out of school.

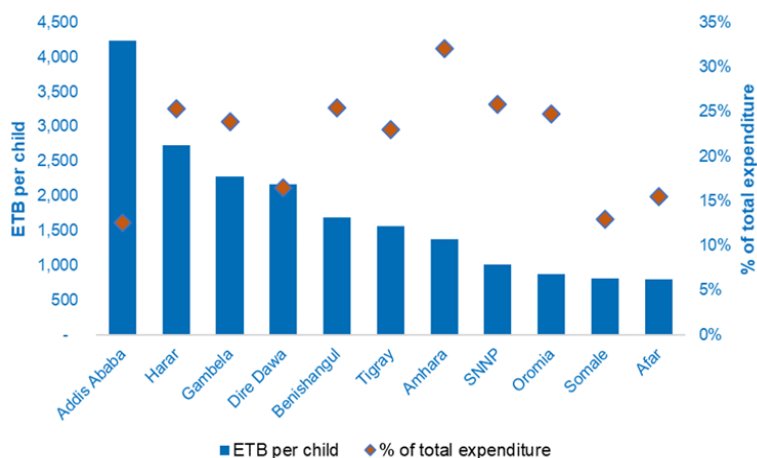
Policy and strategy recommendation

- ◆ **Incorporate regional and local level rollout plans into every new policy:** The study found a lack of coordination between the national level and local and regional level governments.

Resource Allocation

- Public expenditure on education is relatively high at the national level (24% of total expenditure), but **funding gaps and inefficient allocation of resources** restrict e.g. infrastructure upgrades, provision of school meals, new construction of schools.
- Existing policy and strategy frameworks recognize the importance of equity-based budgeting, but large differences between urban and rural areas and regions persist.
- **National expenditure on education focuses on higher education**, which tends to be accessed by wealthier households.

Expenditure in education per region in birr per child and in percentage of total expenditure (2018/19)



Source: UNICEF (2021)

Financial recommendations

- ◆ **Boost investment into formal pre-primary education** to improve retention in the formal school system. The Ethiopian government has fallen short of their pre-primary enrolment targets set by Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP-V).
- ◆ **Boost investment and access into secondary education:** Secondary school-aged children drop out because of lack of schools or teachers and lack of time, which is affected by transportation and school availability nearby their homes.

Institutional Constraints and Bottlenecks

- Implementation and scale-up of policies and programmes are inhibited by **funding gaps, technical capacity constraints, and a lack of overall coordination**.
- Ethiopia's standalone policies are well-developed and stress inclusion of all students, however they lack follow-through and institutionalization which is important for **continuity and sustainability**.
- A **lack of overall coordination among national, regional, and local levels as well as across key sectors such as WASH, health, and social protection** inhibits the ability of the government to implement effective solutions. Poor coordination is exacerbated by a **lack of ongoing and appropriate monitoring**. For example, without integrated case management, strategies are not targeted to address root causes of low enrolment and retention efficiently and effectively.

Institutional recommendation

- ◆ **Strengthen the child tracking and education management information system** could help streamline processes, including cross-sectoral collaboration, allocation of resources, and ensuring that migrants and other disadvantaged children are staying in school.