



LUWINGU

DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

DROPPING OUT?

A PARTICIPATORY EXPLORATION
OF ADOLESCENT SCHOOL
JOURNEYS IN ZAMBIA

Research Approach

Commissioned by UNICEF Zambia, a primarily qualitative study was conducted to **understand how decisions are made on whether or not adolescents (aged 10–19) complete their schooling in Zambia**. In order to answer this, the research examined key actors and factors in journeys of school retention and dropout in Zambia. Round Robins, three-day activities with adolescents, provided an innovative and participatory means of gathering information and making adolescents actors in the research; case studies with adolescents and parents, and focus group discussions with parents and teachers, along with stakeholder key informant interviews and a small quantitative exercise in Lusaka, were also used. See *Dropping Out? A Participatory Exploration of Adolescent School Journeys in Zambia – Final Report* for further methodological info. **This report consolidates key findings from Luwingu. These are based on fieldwork conducted in three locations and are informative rather than comprehensive.**



	Town	Rural	Rural	Total
Round Robins	1	1	1	3
Case Studies	3	3	3	9
Parent FGDs	2	2	2	6
Teacher FGDs	1	1	1	3
KIIs	9 (combined)			9

Situating Luwingu

This place is nice, during rainy season, the rains are enough unlike other places where they experience drought and their crops don't grow well. – Adolescent

Parents don't have money to take children to school. This is very frustrating because you find that they don't see any value of school. When it is time for caterpillars, they stop us from going to school and we go to harvest caterpillars with them in the bush. Also, when it is rainy season, they stop us going to school and take us to the fields with them to go and help them. – Adolescent

When asked about the local news, adolescents mentioned problems ranging from announcements around road cleanliness to discussions of

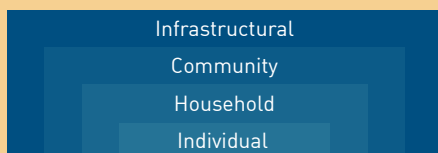
prostitution, pregnancy and witchcraft. Respondents discussed how the “community works together during harvest period” in rural areas and how the lack of tarred roads made travel impossible during rainy season.

Luwingu is located in the heavily agricultural Northern Province, where only 7.3% of the provincial population is in formal employment, and 86% of those in informal employment working in agriculturally-linked role.¹ Northern Province scored lowest of all 8 provinces on the Human Development Index in 2014.²

Respondents discussed farming as major livelihood option, but there was also mention of traditional beer brewing, burning trees for charcoal and caterpillar season.

Here we do farming, although at a small scale. We only lack a good market where we

Key District Findings



Infrastructural: Endemic poverty; lack of roads, electricity, and transport; quality of teaching and facilities; distance to school; child labour

Community: Evolving culture; alcohol consumption

Household: Marriage as an economic coping strategy; parental valuing of education

Individual: Teenage pregnancy; early marriage; risky behaviours

1. Respondents presented household economics as the primary driving factor for school dropouts; however, as in other districts, households with similar economic situations made different decisions around fund attribution, with a variety of (different) factors contributing to this.
2. The broader **dependence on agricultural income** meant that income was earned seasonally, and so adolescent schooling journeys were punctuated with absences linked to short term lack of funds or the need for children to support parents in the fields.
3. Although **parents and guardians were recognised as the decision-makers** around school attendance in the abstract, in reality, there were cases of adolescents themselves exerting agency in the choice to drop out, say when they perceived that their parents struggle to pay fees. It is important to note that **adolescent agency is generally centred around pushing for a dropout rather than enabling retention.**

can sell our products from. We draw water from boreholes while in other places they still draw water from the streams as well as shallow wells. Young people drink beer; the main business people are into here is charcoal burning. – Adolescent

Factors in dropping out



Poverty and seasonal livelihoods.

Respondents of all types, as in other districts visited, underlined the financial challenges in paying fees and other school-related costs as a key, although not necessarily the only determinant, challenge. In Northern Province, 67.6% of the population can be classified as “extremely poor” (compared to a national average of 40.8%).³

The impact of these financial challenges on the general ability of households to send children to school was clear.

There are actually a number of problems that people here encounter but the main factor is high poverty levels. The cause of high poverty in the area is that the economic situation is very bad. There are no markets for people to trade from, leading to financial problems. If people have no money, [then how] do they send their children to school, how do they support their families? – Local leader

The dependence of many households on farming for income implied significant seasonal variations in income, which often led to fractured school journeys with parents able to afford one term but not the next.

The problem is that we are lacking as parents to support our children because we only find money once in a year. We only find money in farming and when there aren't enough rains then we get into serious financial challenges. – Parent

Poverty also led, in some cases, to child labour (see box on caterpillar harvests). It has further been flagged as a driver of child marriage in Luwingu, as some parents saw child marriage of daughters as an opportunity to reduce their household's economic burden and receive a bride price. This was noted both in the more urban location visited as well as the rural.

Because of poverty and hunger, parents end up marrying off children at tender age. This is so because they may want to use that bride price to resolve other problems or even to shift responsibility to the man marrying. – Adolescent

Inability to pay school fees and attendant costs related to dropping out both directly and indirectly, as children were 'chased' from school for not being able to pay fees, in some cases, and in others identified mockery due to old uniforms and lack of books as a contributing factor to dropping out.

If a learner is always chased out of school because he has not paid school fees, the child will miss a lot of lessons. In the end the child drops out because of failing classes. – Parent

If you do not have a uniform, [you] find that you feel out of place since you are the only one who is in clothes. As such, some of the friends start mocking you. – Adolescent

Caterpillar season and child labour

In addition to helping with farming, generally, several adolescents, in both the rural and urban locations, identified the caterpillar season as temporarily stopping their education completely.

When it is time for caterpillars, they stop us from going to school and we go to harvest caterpillars with them in the bush. – Adolescent

Newspaper articles on the topic have reported cases of nearly 90% of children out from a school to harvest caterpillars.⁴



School and teacher quality. The schools themselves posed challenges to adolescents in having successful schooling journeys. Over enrolment, attributed to the lack of classrooms and parents' inability to pay fees for the boarding school in the area made it hard to teach children well.

Most of the parents are farmers; there are very few who work, so there very few that can support the learners to go to boarding school, so they opt to bring the learners here. As a result, we have had over enrolled. – Teacher

I can talk of our case, the secondary section, more especially Grade 10 you find that in one class there are even 90 pupils. Now the cause of this is the limited space that we have in the school. If we had more classes, these can be split and then the teachers would have time to attend to individual pupils. – Teacher

The infrastructure of the school themselves was reported to be of poor quality. While this was not directly attributed to children dropping out, such issues as say, poor bathroom quality have been shown to reduce children's attendance, especially girls, and lack of clean water can cause illness, which disrupts attendance as well.

For the sources of water in case of our school, we draw our water from the well down the stream there. It is not very safe. As teachers, we have to carry our own drinking water in bottles. – Teacher

From a purely practical perspective, the rains, combined with the distance to school for some children, made attendance impossible for weeks at a time.

The other thing is that some children in some areas like this one have no boarding schools to stay in. When in the rain season, the children can't manage to cross the rivers to learn. They would rather stay home. As a result, they would miss lessons that the friends that stay nearby have learned. Children that stay in places that are far away from the school are left behind. – Parent

Finally, in one of the rural locations, there were some complaints about teacher quality.

Some of the teachers that are brought here are sick. They mostly have mental disorders. Others take so much alcohol instead of being in school teaching. We have most of such teachers here. – Parent



Risky behaviour. Especially in one of the rural locations visited, alcohol was underlined as a contributor or cause of dropout for both boys and girls, through their own consumption as well as that of teachers.

All of girls and boys take a lot of alcohol from this area and the stop going to school at an early age just because they want to be drinking and dancing once they get drunk [...] I want the school and community to build awareness to help all the boys and girl to know that drinking is not life; that they can find something to else to do in life other than drink. – Adolescent

Some children complain about the teaching of their teachers as the reason they fail in school, because maybe a teacher gets drunk most of the time, cannot teach well. Then the children lag behind in learning. – Parent



Evolving cultural practices. The evolving culture of Zambia, and external influences, were linked to school journeys both positively and negatively, underlining the breadth of opinions and reactions to these present in Luwingu.

I like this place because there are no traditional practices that refuse us children from getting educated.⁵ Even for example those girls who got pregnant, they still go back to school. – Adolescent

A change from the ‘traditional’ was suggested as both promoting school attendance in some cases and increasing adolescent agency, and as promoting dropping out in others.

You find that they spend more time on Facebook, WhatsApp and these other devices which have come. They are spending more time on these devices rather than allocating their time to studying. Yes, so these has greatly contributed to their bad performance academically. – Government official

Case Study: Ruth, age 17, dropout

Ruth (name changed), age 17, dropped out of school after Grade 8. As Ruth described this journey,

The last time I was in school was in 2016 and I was in grade eight, the reason why I no longer go to school is that my parents do not have money to pay for my school fees, I only have my mother who should also support my siblings the money is never enough to care for all of us like I said my father left home. [...] I got frustrated when I dropped out of school due to financial challenges at home. I started thinking my parents do not love me when they failed to pay for my school fees.

I decided to drop out of school so that my mother cannot stress that much and this decision was entirely influenced by myself because I knew that no matter how much I push things it will not work out. I went to Winfrida the lady who works for community development here in Luwingu to try and ask if she can help me out through social welfare department.

My mother also tried to visit some other family member seeking for help but it could not work out because families of this generation only help their biological children. [...] For the decision that I made to drop out of school, I think it was a good decision because I had to think of who is going to raise money although my mother wanted to argue against my decision but that I continue but she never had any capacity to find money to pay for me.

Ruth’s mother, however, identified pregnancy rather than finances as the primary cause of her dropout.

The reason why my daughter dropped out of school is that she got pregnant in Grade 8; that was in 2015. She just felt shy to tell you because pregnancy brings embarrassment. I went to school to tell the head teacher that my daughter is pregnant, and they advised me to let her deliver and then you can bring her back again because even the boy who gave her that pregnancy was very immature.

I got the baby after she delivered, and she went back to school, but after she passed Grade 9, I had no means of raising money to pay for her school fees and that is how she dropped out. I wish that my daughter could go back to school because she is still young and qualified to go to Grade 10.

Decision-making and dropout journeys

Some adults cited an increased knowledge of human rights, in particular, as being used by some adolescents to increase their own agency, reducing the traditional decision-making power of adults around both schooling and other elements.

This issue of young generation is actually very critical because you find that this generation is being governed by human rights. You would find that a child is doing something against what the parents want him or her to do but he will tell you I have my own rights to do what I feel like doing at any time. – Local leader

That being said, the decision-making model most commonly reported was of parents and guardians as the key decision-maker around school attendance.

Parents acknowledged this responsibility, and children agreed that while under their parents' roofs, their parents were the key decision-makers.

Gendered access limitations

The distance to schools – and lack of boarding schools – was underlined as a particular risk for girls. Girls in Northern Province have the next to lowest school attendance rates at the secondary level, according to the ZDHS.

You find that the girl child is coming from very far, long distances for them to reach the school and get an education. That girl will automatically be exposed to sexual harassment. – Government official

My father is the final decision maker in my life even those that concern education. Even when I dropped out of school, he is the one who told me that the distance was too long for me to cover it alone in case there are dangerous things on the way. – Adolescent

Parents are still in charge because you are still in their house. – Adolescent

However, others suggested that this decision-making power was in great part predicated on parents' ability to pay school fees. Adolescents in several instances reported having made a 'choice' to drop out because their parents could no longer pay fees (see Case Study on page 5 for an example).

Thus, while nominally, parents were the key decision makers, **children could frustrate this power**, negatively: essentially, while they cannot force their parents to send them to school, they can make a unilateral decision to stop attending school, which their parents cannot necessarily fight.

I used to follow my friends when they went to mine stone. At home, they used to think I had gone to school hence I was busy somewhere else trying to get some money to buy whatever I want because my parents could not manage. I am still very happy because I am able to make some money and nothing will change. I am responsible for stopping school. [...] I have the rights to do whatever I want. – Adolescent

But mostly when it comes to dropping out of school, the parents are not involved. You find that the learner has just decided to rebel and stop on their own. As such, you find that parents have no option because they are tired of pushing that he go back to school. – Adolescent

When other relatives were identified as decision-makers around schooling, it was generally because they were paying school fees. Their influence – and that of the community and children's peers – was more directly felt on other matters which can link back to dropout journeys. For example, child marriage:

I could not pay for school, so I was sent home. After I was out of school I got engaged and that's how I got pregnant. I felt bad because I was just forced into it. I tried to tell them to take me back to school but they refused. My father's family members are the ones that forced me. My uncles made the decisions. I got married to the guy that got me pregnant. – Adolescent

Irregular dropout journeys. The non-linear paths to school dropouts came out strongly in Luwingu. Child labour, seasonality of income, and several cases of adolescents who had left school returning to class underlined that this is not a binary, permanent decision. Adolescents and parents themselves seemed to keep open the possibility of returning to school one day, in particular when finances or pregnancy had driven dropout (see Case Study on page 5 for an example).

My daughter got pregnant and now she is back in school. This has helped her to concentrate in school. Her performance is even better now than before. She is utilizing her second chance of being in school wisely. – Parent

Conclusions & recommendations

It appears expensive but they say 'if you think school is expensive, try ignorance' so for me, it is worth it, truly speaking. – Parent

Adolescents in Luwingu faced the multiple challenges of an infrastructurally constrained schooling system, parents who may not always share the opinion cited above, and few obvious opportunities stemming from school as the province as a whole remains largely agricultural and economically deprived. Children's participation in agricultural activities in particular was underlined as having negative impacts on school journeys. There are limited examples of 'success stories' on which to focus. Their dropout journeys resemble those of adolescents across Zambia; nonetheless, recommendations can be proposed to address key local contributing factors.

1. Given the extreme poverty levels in Northern Province as a whole, it is crucial to **create further linkages to the development sector** in order to improve households' wellbeing. This would, of itself, improve the ability to pay fees, as well as reduce the financial incentives for both child labour (such as in the caterpillar sector) and early marriage. This will be a more long-term effort.

2. **Focus on both promoting the value of education and involving parents and community members in school** to build a more communal responsibility for adolescents' education and understanding of benefits of education. This can be done through planning school improvement projects; bringing role models from the community who can explain how education has impacted their life, and present different career opportunities; and promoting TVET and skills programmes.
3. **Build programming for adolescents, including school schedules, that take into account the realities of household responsibilities.** Schools in particular can consider how to account for caterpillar season in school activities. More flexibility by schools can improve overall attendance and reduce the numbers that fall behind in their lessons.

- 1 Central Statistical Office (2015), Zambia Living Conditions Monitoring Survey, pp. 61-62
- 2 UNDP (2016), Zambia Human Development Report, p. 33
- 3 Living Conditions Monitoring Survey, op. cit., pp. 105-106
- 4 See for example, "Pupils in Luwingu Abandon Classes to Harvest Caterpillars", Lusaka Times, 22 November 2012, accessed at <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2012/11/22/pupils-luwingu-abandon-classes-harvest-caterpillars/>
- 5 **NB:** Initiation rites were brought up by another as emphasizing that a woman's role is in taking care of the home.



Community voices: Recommendations

Research participants were asked to highlight what they considered top needs and approaches to support to reduce school dropouts in Luwingu district, and underlined the following:

- Quality and relevance of teaching and learning materials:

We have a new curriculum, but we have no material and the output is low. – Teacher


[Vocational and technical skills training would be] useful because many adolescents that have dropped out of school and some that are just in the community have grown so much, they cannot go back to school. – Parent

- Infrastructure improvements:

When there are no toilet blocks, students defecate anywhere anyhow, and this causes diseases, so they need to make sure the toilets are clean. When the pupils are healthy, they won't be dropping out. – Adolescent

- Parental involvement:

As parents we have to come together to look for the adolescents that are in the community that are not in school in order to see how best we could help one another. If it means contributing money to set up this thing in school or outside, we have to do it for our children to also earn a living. – Parent

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The findings of the study 'Dropping Out? A Participatory Exploration of Adolescent School Journeys in Zambia' are presented in the following report documents:

- Final Report
- Katete: District Highlights
- Lunga: District Highlights
- Lusaka: District Highlights
- Luwingu: District Highlights
- Mufulira: District Highlights
- Petauke: District Highlights
- Rufunsa: District Highlights
- Senanga: District Highlights