

UNDERSTANDING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DRIVERS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL DROPOUT IN RWANDA

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ABSTRACT: School dropout remains a critical global challenge, affecting both developed and developing nations. UNESCO estimates that approximately 244 million children and youth worldwide are out of school, with the highest prevalence occurring in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Despite a global primary school completion rate of approximately 87%, persistent barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, conflict, disabilities, and geographical constraints hinder progress. In Rwanda, many children fail to complete basic education because of economic, social, and environmental factors, despite government initiatives to strengthen the education system. However, there is limited research on the underlying causes, impacts, and effective interventions to address dropouts in Rwanda. This qualitative study explored the causes and consequences of school dropout in the Amayaga region of Nyanza District, Southern Province, Rwanda, using observations and semi-structured interviews with 85 household heads. The findings reveal that internal migration driven by employment and living conditions, family-related issues such as divorce, single parenthood, partner imprisonment, and systemic barriers for children with disabilities significantly contribute to dropout. Consequences include child involvement in labor, street begging, relocation to extended families, and, in severe cases, placement in rehabilitation centers due to crime and deviant behavior. This study recommends strengthening family and community support systems, promoting inclusive and accessible education, and implementing continuous monitoring and evaluation to improve school retention and completion rates.

Keywords: School dropout; education access; social and environmental factors; Rwanda.

Introduction

School dropout is a global challenge that affects both developed and developing countries. It refers to the situation where students leave school before completing the level of education, they have started especially primary or secondary education (World Bank, 2021). UNESCO (2023) estimated that 244 million children and youth worldwide are out of school with so many numbers of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The completion rate of primary school is approximately 87% but the main challenges observed include poverty, gender inequalities, conflict, disabilities and geographical barriers (UNESCO, 2022).

Globally, the consequences of school dropout are more likely to experience unemployment, low income, poor health and social exclusion (World Bank, 2021).

For the case of Rwanda, the government tried to put in place different commitments to strength education, but many children continue to leave school before completing the basic education

cycle. The main challenges are associated to economic, social and environmental factors that push children to drop out of school (MENEDUC, 2022).

Above all, the United Nation for Child Rights Convention (UNCRC) of 1989 ratified by Rwanda in its article 28 indicated that every child has the right to an education. Primary education should be free. Secondary and higher education should be available to every child. Children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level possible. Again, the Rwandan constitution of 2003 indicated that every person has the right to education in Rwanda (Republic of Rwanda, 2003). However, each state including the government of Rwanda should put in place measures and mechanisms to facilitate children return to school so that they will benefit and enjoy free education policy (UNICEF, 2024).

The study conducted by Save the children (2024) in its project called Zero out of school children indicated that 8,659 children dropped out in Nyanza district. The figure 1 shows that among 10 sectors of Nyanza district the top 4 sectors are

mainly located in the Amayaga region of Nyanza district.

Geographically, the Amayaga region encompasses parts of Nyanza, Ruhango, Gisagara and Kamonyi districts. For the part of Nyanza district, the Amayaga comprises five sectors namely: Kigoma, Muyira, Ntyazo, Kibirizi and Busoro sectors. Therefore, it is in this regard, the researcher decided to make an assessment for better verifying the socio-economic and environmental drivers of primary school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district (Fig. 1, 2).

education age which at the time included all children and youths between 6-15 years of age (Pedro & Maria 2014). However, every child who decides to abandon formal education, regardless of the reasons behind such as any reasons associated with health, economic, or social she/he is considered a child dropout.

Socio-Economic and Environmental Drivers of Primary School Dropout. The term socio-economic and environmental drivers of primary school dropout are defined as social, economic and environmental factors that lead

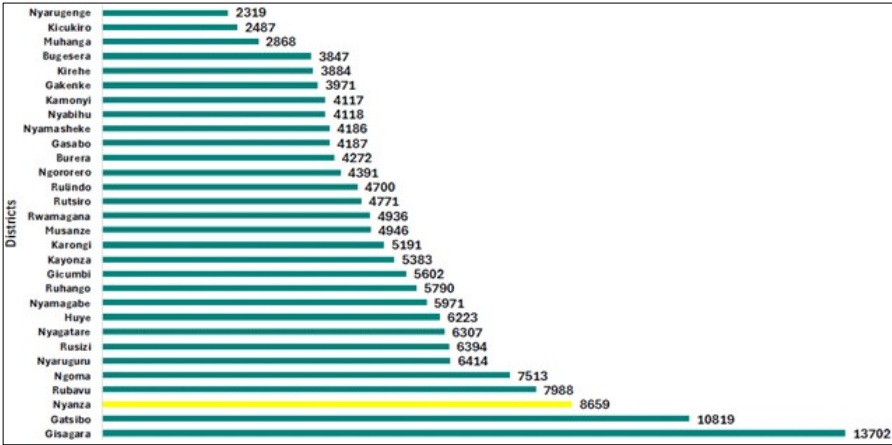


Fig. 1. OOSC Identified Overview - National Context
(Source: Save the children, 2024)

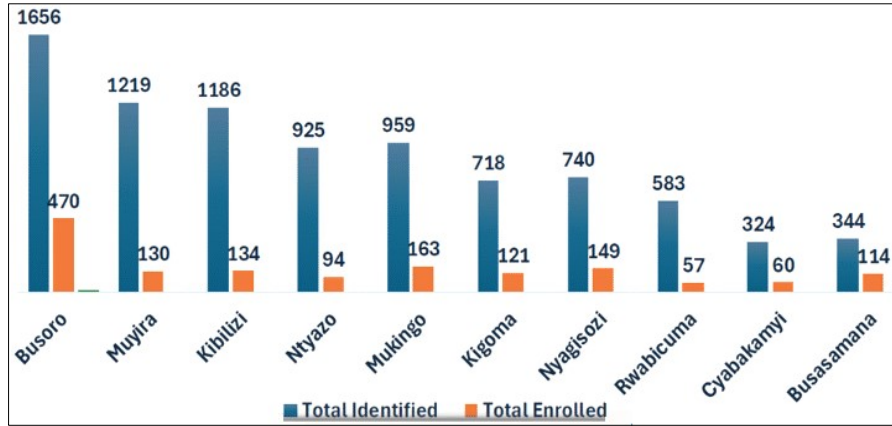


Fig. 2. OOSC Identified vs Enrolled - District Overview
(Source: Save the children, 2024)

Literature review

School dropout. School dropout is a phenomenon of discontinuation of formal education before its completion (Souad & Samira, 2024). School dropout also is defined as not attending school during legal compulsory

children to leave their education before completing primary school. Mostly, the socio-economic barriers, including poverty, household responsibilities and lack of parental education are likely contributed to school dropout (UNESCO, 2015).

Socio-economic drivers: these include poverty, unemployment, low pay of the household and limited parental awareness of the importance of education. Children from poor households are more likely to drop out of school because of economic pressures and the need to contribute to family income (World Bank, 2018).

Environmental drivers: Involve the physical and contextual conditions that affect access to schooling. These include distance to school, poor infrastructure, and exposure to natural disasters that can disrupt children's schooling (UNICEF, 2020). Different research indicated that school access and retention in sub-Saharan Africa are constrained by both poverty and environmental vulnerability, which together create multiple barriers to participation (Lewin, 2009)

Causes of school dropout

Causes of school dropout are classified into two main categories: These include micro level and the macro level (Júlia et al, 2021). At micro level, the possible causes are associated to the students themselves. The students' specific reasons can be categorized into psychological, intellectual, health, and academic factors. Among the most significant psychological factors is the inability to pay attention (Zarouk, 1979).

It is also inferred that causes of a personal, financial or psychological nature are in the group of reasons that lead a student to drop their studies. At macro or institutional level, the school is the other party contributed to school dropout (Dore, 2013). For example, students feel that rules and regulations imposed by school are very complicated and are against freedom. Students at risk of dropping out have a strong and clear tendency towards non-compliance with school rules and regulations, which directly leads to academic weakness, then academic failure, and finally dropping out of school (Al-Nacer, 2014).

Consequences of school dropout

School dropout has negative impacts on both individuals and the community in general. Mostly, negative impact is observed from childhood and continues to develop antisocial behavior and deviance. According to the Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and Science. (1973) dropouts lack the qualities of a good citizen, are easily manipulated, and are less productive and less adaptable to societal norms. However, the phenomenon of students' dropout exacerbates social backwardness, influencing and being influenced by other forms of backwardness in the economic, cultural, and political fields.

The school dropout brings a gap in intergenerational so that often perpetuates a cycle of poverty. For example, parents who did not completed school are less likely to support their children's education. Hunt (2008) agreed that intergenerational effect contributes to continuous educational inequalities and hinders social mobility in developing any region like sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodology

The data of this assessment have been collected through purposive sampling method. In research, purposive sampling is defined as a data collection method that relies on the researcher's judgment when choosing population members to participate in their study (Aguinis , 2024). Although, 85 children dropped out of school and their caregivers have been sampled through simple random sampling in order to reach out them faster.

Questionnaires, interviews and direct observation have been used to collect data from respondents. However, the data have been collected by using electronic software then analyzed with explanations through tables, bar graphs and pie charts (Tab. 1).

Tabel 1

Categories of respondents	Gender		Age categories					
	F	M	5-10	11-14	15-20	21-30	31-50	51+
Children	27	58	22	27	36			
Caregivers	64	21				19	46	20
Total	91	79	22	27	36	19	46	20

Results and findings

The major socio-economic and environmental factors contributing to school dropout in the Amayaga region of Nyanza district. The socio-economic and environmental factors contributing to school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district are connected to family background history, the behavior of children, and geographical location. Let's quit analyze them for better understand the major causes in place.

Instability of families. Internal migration of families becomes one factor that contributing to school dropout in Amayaga region. In fact, the assessment revealed that 17.6% of respondents came from other different districts to find jobs and

other 50/85 were either in extended families, single parents or family headed by children. By analyzing this situation, the direct observation of data collectors observed that those affected children are born to families with illegal marriage and decided a separation and children born to teen mothers then abandoned and left them to grandparents with no high parental control (Fig. 3).

Parents in conflict with the law

While assessing the causes of school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district, we found that parents in conflict with the law contributed to the dropout. In fact, 11/85 of father parents got imprisonment, among them have been released



Fig. 3. Family structure

improve living conditions. Mainly, they came from other districts of southern province including Nyamagabe, Gisagara Nyaruguru and Huye districts. Not only internal migration but also due to boundaries of Burundi, some families have an origin from Burundi which means that they are temporarily living all together. "Sometimes if I have nothing I traveled illegally in neighboring country to find better living conditions or vice versa so that my children become victims of leaving the school. Said by respondents". However, due to the mentioned movement, children become victim of being dropped out of school and the caregivers also are not motivated to encourage their children to go to school.

Family breakdown

Family breakdown is considered as a major cause of school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district. The assessment revealed that only 35/85 children lived with both parents while the

while the others are still in correction facilities. For another side, there was no mother parents got imprisonment. However, children in single parents struggled with different challenges that hinder to have access on basic rights including attending school. "My husband is imprisoned due to misbehavior so that I lost my focus to care of my children alone". Said by caregiver. Therefore, through collaborative efforts every family should be mobilized to send the children to school and benefit from infrastructure and programs in place such as school feeding program implemented by the government and its partners (Fig. 4).

Inadequate proper occupation of parents/care givers

The parents/caregivers assessed have challenges in occupation which contributed to school dropout. The assessment indicated that 48/85 respondents were farmers of own land and their economic conditions rely on agriculture,

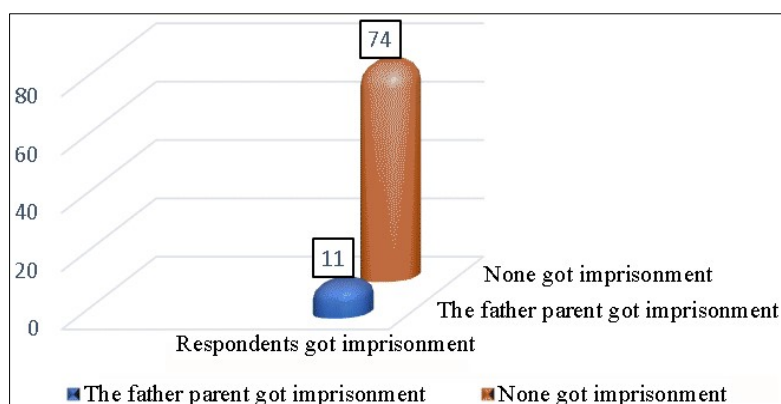


Figure 4

18/85 respondents are casual workers from different fields, 17/85 respondents are farmers of rented land, 2/85 respondents were supported by others in all lives while in all 85 of respondents there was no civil servants identified.

Children were allowed to take lunch at school but because of parents leave from home early morning to find out food, children became an occupied and lack of guidance and preparation for joining school so that they choose to stay home without any reasons. This kind of occupation is also connected to irresponsibility of parents because they should be aware about education of their children as well as try to play their parts such as buying school uniforms as well as school materials (Fig. 5).

Misbehavior of parents

The behavior of parents can contribute to the education of children and shape them for the future. This is the fact that, 47% of assessed

families were live in conflict, for the other side 32% of assessed families were considered as innocent. However, 14% of assessed families were categorized in families that are very drunkard, while 7% of assessed families have the issue of malnutrition.

In analyzing the data, we found that children who dropped out school are the victims of misbehavior of parents especially those who live in conflict, parents who do not aware about the policy of Ministry of health “Tunywe less” means “drink less” and those who are irresponsible to provide primary care and needs for children. Although, this misbehavior impacted individual child and entire community and the nation. So that the issue of school dropout remains a poverty trap and compromise the future generation (Fig. 6).

Disability of children

The assessment revealed that 4/85 of respondents have disabilities such as physical and

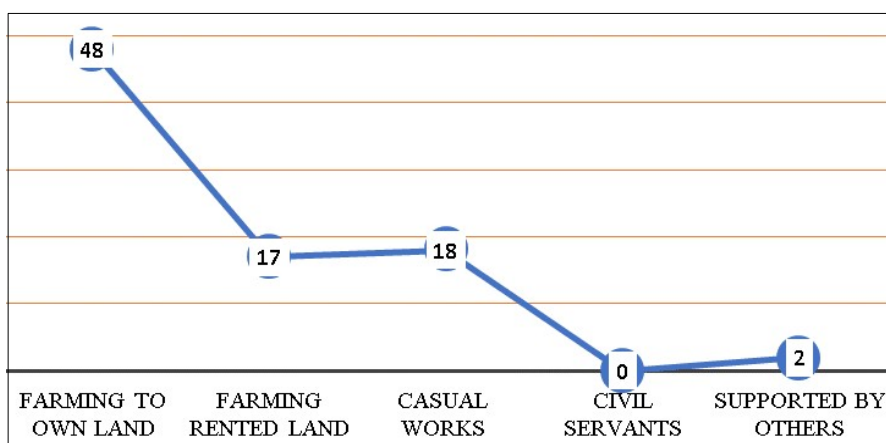


Fig. 5. Occupation of parents/caregivers

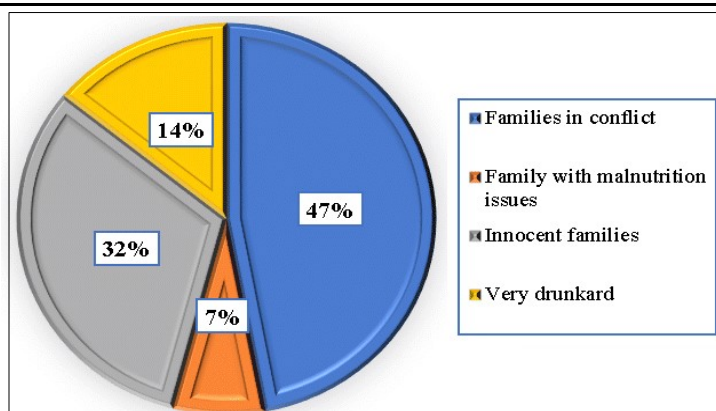


Fig. 6. Misbehavior of parents

mental disabilities. During the assessment, the caregivers agreed that they have no choice to facilitate their children to have access on education and have no power to send them in specialized hospitals. “My child is disabled, I have no choice on that so instead of finding job, I spent more time caring for him at home. And also, I have no means to connect him with special needs education”. Said by the mother. Indeed, it seems to be a syndrome of educational inequality existing in rural areas.

The role of schools and community in reducing school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district

When assessing the causes and consequences on identified children dropped out of school, we found that 52% of respondents have been returned back to school due to different measures put in place. This includes the collective efforts made by the district and its partners such as Save the children, involvement of sector level and the use of existing home-grown solutions composed by community volunteers including friends of families (Inshuti z’Umuryango) and youth volunteers.

However, the assessment indicated that there were some head teachers that did not supported the policy of facilitating children to returned back to school. It is the fact that a child nicknamed U. Carine has been mobilized to return back to school but head teacher refused to record her in P6. “Our child passed P5 with 65%, and got 6th place out of 49 children. However, when she returned to school, the headteacher told her that she had no right to be a P6 student. The only available chance was to stay in P5” said by grandparents.

Positively, in close collaboration with the district and Save the Children, the children who returned to school got assistance with school materials as well as the school feeding program.

The socio-economic and environmental consequences of school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district

After being dropped out of school children suffer from different challenges that impact their lives from present to the future. In this assessment, the findings indicated that some of children changed location by finding the occupation which is not appropriate to their age. Not only this but also some of them became victims of the conflict with the law so that they got rehabilitation services (Tab. 2).

The table above indicated that 73/85 of children dropped out of school stay at home and involved in different activities including those which are considered as child labor, helping parents for family business or stay at home with no specific occupation. 7/85 of children moved from home to work as child labor in different cities including Kigali city. 3/85 of children moved from biological family to extended family and 2/85 went in unknown place. In analyzing this data, this study revealed that in case of children dropped out of the school they exposed to be abused in different forms such as physical abuse, child labor, emotional abuse as well as sexual abuse (Tab. 3).

While conducting the assessment, the findings revealed that only 71/85 children that did not in conflict with the law. For the other hand 4/85 children became victims of the conflict with the law. However, these children facilitated with

Tab. 2. Location of the children after school dropout
(Source: Primary data, October, 2025)

Location of the child	Responses
Stay at home	73
Moved to extended family	3
Went in child labor	7
Went in unknown place	2
Total	85

Tab. 3. Children in conflict with the law
(Source: Primary data, October, 2025)

Types of victimization	Responses
Children with no conflict with the law	71
Victim of conflict with the law	4
Total	85

rehabilitation services so that if they return to school, they can shape their future with long history.

Practical recommendations for reducing dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district

In order to reduce school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district the following recommendations are made:

Strengthen family and community support systems

Promote parental responsibility: In collaboration with local leaders and child protection and welfare officers should organize community sensitization campaigns that focusing on the importance of parental involvement in children's education. Parents should be encouraged to monitor attendance, prepare contribution on meals and provide school materials timely.

Empower Friends of family (IZU) and youth volunteers: There is a need of provide training and support for community volunteers in order to be able to monitor at risk children and ensure timely reintegration of dropouts into schools.

Community sensitization on responsible parenting: there is a need of conducting awareness sessions on the impact of domestic violence, excessive alcohol consumption and neglect of children's education.

Introduce family mentorship program: For better having success stories, there is a need to organize sessions especially for families whose children have returned to school in order to coach them positive parenting and ensure that every child's rights are restored.

Reinforce the "Tunywe less" campaign:

The local leaders and security organs should intensify the campaign in Amayaga region to reduce alcohol abuse among parents

Improve economic empowerment of families

Support income generating activities (IGAs): Partners operating in the district should work closely with the district officials in supporting families in graduation and other category of vulnerable including single parents to stabilize household income.

Promote agricultural productivity: Given that most of parents in Amayaga region of Nyanza district are farmers, the district should strength agricultural extension services and cooperatives to increase household income to enable families to better support education of children.

Enhance inclusive and accessible education

Support children with disabilities: In collaboration with district partners, concerned Ministries and governmental institutions should establish special education funds in schools by providing assistive devices and provide health

care for children suffer from physical and mental disabilities.

Providing school materials and uniforms:

District partners such as Save the children should continue to distribute learning materials and uniforms to children from vulnerable families to reduce financial barriers to schooling

Train teachers on inclusive education:

There is a need of provide capacity building to teachers in order to handle learners with diverse needs and prevent discrimination

Improve school management and accountability. Monitor school leadership performance: The District Education Office (DEO) should regularly evaluate school headteachers to ensure compliance with national policies on child rights and reintegration of dropouts.

Establish feedback mechanism: There is a need to create complaint channels for parents and students to report cases where school officials discourage reintegration or unfairly deny re-entry to learners.

Encourage school-community collaboration: Empowering Parent-Teacher Committees (PTCs) to ensure that dropout cases are tracked and facilitated collaboratively.

Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Establish a dropout tracking database: The district education office should maintain an updated record of dropout cases, comprises the section of causes and interventions to inform future planning and attract partners

Conduct regular assessments: In collaboration with district Partners through JADF, there is a need of conducting annual evaluation to measure the impact of interventions and identify emerging challenges on the issue of school dropout.

Conclusion

The assessment on the causes and consequences of school dropout in Amayaga region of Nyanza district revealed that school dropout remains a challenge that is rooted in socio-economic, familial, and institutional factors. From the assessment, the findings indicated that poverty, family instability, parental misbehavior, internal migration and lack of parental responsibility are primary drivers of children leaving school prematurely. The other contributing factors include children with disabilities, limited school support system and weak enforcement of re-entry policies for dropouts.

The consequences of school dropout are both social and economic. These are not affecting children only but also the whole community. Some dropouts engaged in child labor, higher risks of conflict with the law which perpetuated cycles of poverty and vulnerability. The study further indicated that despite existing government initiatives and community-based interventions such as school feeding programs and work of community volunteers including Inshuti z'Umuryango and youth volunteers the problem persists due to lack of proper coordination, limited capacity among families and inconsistency school level management practices.

To huddle this issue, the findings underscore the need for strengthened family and community support systems, economic empowerment of vulnerable households, inclusive education services and enhanced school accountability. Promoting responsible parenting, reducing alcohol abuse and increase of agricultural productivity are essential measures to ensure that children remain in school. Finally, sustained monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are very interesting to track dropout cases and assess the impact on intervention over time.

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