



Young Lives Policy Insights on Young People's Education Pathways in Ethiopia

Overview

Young Lives' sixth wave of qualitative research (Qual 6) in Ethiopia provides vital insights into how young people's lives are changing as they navigate multiple intersecting crises, including the impacts of conflict, COVID-19, climate change, high inflation and increasing living costs, and how these challenges have affected their health and well-being, and that of their children and families.

This note is an extract from Young Lives' Policy Brief [Strengthening Resilience of Young Lives in Ethiopia in Times of Crises](#) (Ford et al., 2026) presenting emerging recommendations on supporting young people's education pathways in Ethiopia, based on initial findings from Qual 6 and more than two decades of Young Lives longitudinal research.

This is one of eight interconnected research themes, as presented in the Young Lives Research Report, [Experiences of Young Lives During Crises in Ethiopia](#) (Tafero et al., 2026) and drawing on the Young Lives [Literature Review of Health Services and Trends in Health Expenditure and Health Outcomes in Ethiopia](#) (Endale, 2026).

It also incorporates insights from discussions at the [Young Lives Qual 6 high-level event](#) held in Addis Ababa on 29 January 2026, which brought together over 130 policymakers, researchers and practitioners, helping to ensure that the policy recommendations reflect local contexts and, where possible, align with key government priorities.

Young Lives study and Qual 6 in Ethiopia

[Young Lives](#) has been following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, from infancy into early adulthood, since 2001. In Ethiopia, the study follows 3,000 young people located in 20 sites across Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), now located within the Central Ethiopia Regional State, South Ethiopia Regional State and Sidama Region.

Young Lives is one of the few longitudinal studies collecting data in the conflict-affected areas of Tigray and Amhara – including through a COVID-19 phone survey in 2020–21 and in-person Round 7 survey in 2023–24. Young Lives has also conducted in-depth longitudinal qualitative interviews since 2007 with a sub-sample of young people, their families and communities located in seven sites across Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, Sidama and Tigray. The current Qual 6 programme, co-funded by FCDO and Irish Aid, has enabled Young Lives to undertake a sixth wave of qualitative longitudinal data collection in 2025, involving a total of 494 respondents.

Young Lives is led by the University of Oxford, in partnership in Ethiopia with the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) and Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting (PDRC).

Education Policy Context

Ethiopia's education policies are guided by the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), with the current phase, [ESDP VI \(2020/21–2024/25\)](#), emphasising equitable access, quality improvement and relevance to national development priorities, and aligned with SDG 4 – ensuring a quality education and lifelong learning for all. At the secondary level, it focuses on expanding enrolment, improving learning outcomes and strengthening science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education. It also prioritises inclusive education, aiming to reduce disparities for girls, rural students and learners with disabilities, while enhancing teacher training and curriculum development.

At the tertiary level, ESDP VI aims to produce skilled graduates who can contribute to industrialisation and the green economy, including through expanding technical and vocational education and training (TVET). It further emphasises strengthening partnerships with the private sector, promoting research and innovation in universities, and integrating technical, vocational and higher education pathways to build a flexible workforce aligned with the country's development goals. Notably, ESDP VI sets out guidelines for national examinations, including school-leaving and university entrance and exit exams.

Unfortunately, progress toward implementing ESDP VI has been constrained by overlapping crises – including conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple climate shocks including severe droughts and flooding – which have further undermined learning conditions through persistent poverty, food insecurity, inflation and infrastructure disruptions.

Young Lives findings on Education Pathways

Multiple crises have disrupted young people's educational pathways, creating a gap between their aspirations and attainments ([Woodman Deza, 2025](#)). Despite their childhood ambitions, most young people in the Qual 6 study have not achieved their goal of progressing to higher education, due to the impacts of conflict, COVID-19 disruptions, rising living costs and the introduction of competitive university entrance exams. Of the 181 young men and women interviewed in the Qual 6 study, only 26 (one in seven) had graduated from college, while more than half (95) dropped out before completing secondary or even primary school, highlighting the significant barriers to educational attainment.

Urban–rural inequalities are stark, with young people in rural areas typically leaving education after primary school, while access to secondary schooling is often limited by long distances and the high cost of living in towns. Increasing tuition costs, the introduction of entrance exams for university students and high levels of graduate unemployment also discourage many young people from investing in higher education, contributing to widening inequality. Girls and young women face the additional risks of sexual violence associated with travelling and living away from home to attend higher education. However, despite these extra barriers, the study found that females are more likely than males to be still studying or to have completed their education.

The conflict in northern Ethiopia has severely disrupted education, causing prolonged interruptions and lasting setbacks to young people's learning trajectories. By 2025, many educational institutions had still not fully resumed operations. The young men and women who have been exposed to extended conflict were less able and motivated to continue their studies.

Policy Recommendations on Education Pathways

These evidence-based recommendations are primarily designed to guide government policies and programmes, informing decision-makers in the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Skills (among others). Their effective implementation requires a broad, coordinated approach that promotes cross-sectoral collaboration across government ministries, agencies and organisations.

- 1. Expanding access to quality higher education is essential, particularly for economically disadvantaged and rural youth.** Addressing the economic and social barriers to higher education is increasingly important in the context of rising university fees. This could include promoting outreach to schools in poorer areas, increasing scholarships and improving student accommodation, especially for young women from rural and marginalised backgrounds.
- 2. Improving the quality of higher education requires a coordinated approach to strengthen teaching, course relevance and institutional capacity.** This includes investing in the professional development of academic and teaching staff, aligning curricula with labour market needs and national development goals, creating supportive learning environments and strengthening leadership across higher education institutions.
- 3. Efforts to improve access to quality higher education must be underpinned by sustained investment in early childhood, primary and secondary education.** Previous Young Lives evidence shows that affordable access to quality pre-primary education plays a critical role in skills development and foundational learning throughout childhood, with long-term benefits for school enrolment and grade progression, right through to completing secondary and higher education.
- 4. Young people need better access to alternative skills training.** Expanding TVET, strengthening links between training and labour market opportunities, and promoting distance learning beyond urban areas are essential to reach more young people in rural communities. Skills programmes should also specifically target students who did not pass the Grade 12 national exam and are therefore unable to transition into higher education.
- 5. Alongside skills training, graduates should also be supported to develop entrepreneurship skills,** with access to seed funding and microfinance to help them establish small-scale enterprises and build sustainable livelihoods.
- 6. Revising current policies to promote fair and accessible exam systems could help to reduce growing inequalities in higher education.** Addressing concerns about increasingly tougher school-leaving and university entrance and exit exams could reduce feelings of exclusion and demoralisation, while encouraging more applicants to pursue university education. Policies should account for differences in learning environments, such as disparities between public and private schools and between rural and urban settings.
- 7. More support is needed to help those who drop out of school and other young people whose education has been disrupted or interrupted, particularly girls and young women from rural areas and learners with disabilities.** This should include expanded adult education programmes to enable married women and people who have dropped out of school to re-enter and continue their education and training.
- 8. War- and conflict-affected youth should be actively supported and encouraged to return to education** through targeted measures such as catch-up programmes, accelerated learning and adult education. Holistic approaches are needed, including raising awareness of the impacts of conflict on education and employment, advocacy for conflict prevention, and livelihood support to address economic barriers and enable sustained participation in education.

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