



Out-of-school Children

**in the Context of New Policy Trajectories
and Interlocking Crises in Zimbabwe:**

A Transformative Social Policy Perspective

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Abstract

In the past two decades, Zimbabwe has experienced an upsurge in cases of children and the youth who drop out of school (OOSC). Emerging evidence suggests that children and the youth who drop out of school reach up to a million, and this translates to half of adolescents in the country aged between 13 to 19 years. Despite the high incidence of OOSC, limited research has been undertaken. To address this research gap, this paper triangulates data from different sources to explore the prevalence and geographical disparities of OOSC; its main causes and its nexus with the currently prevailing multiple crises; and to explore the policy and legislative framework. In doing this, the paper utilises the political economy-oriented idea of transformative social policy as its theoretical framework with education policy being viewed within the ambits of social policy. Our analysis notes that despite the existence of a robust policy and legislative framework, the prevalence of OOSC is very high and, in most instances, it is linked to the multiple crises and socio-economic dynamics. Geographical, wealth, social, religious, cultural, and economic disparities are shown as contributing to the high prevalence of OOSC. From lessons learnt, we provide several recommendations to deal with the scourge of OOSC. These are crystallised around the need to develop a social contract that prioritises the fulfilment of rights, obligations, social justice, social engagement, human capacity, agency, and the re-establishment of a synergetic relationship between social and economic policies and the transformation of social institutions and structures.

Keywords: *education, out of school children, social contract, transformative social policy, Zimbabwe*

Introduction

In 2015, United Nations member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the aim of addressing persistent global challenges (UN 2023; UNDP 2023; UNRISD 2023). While notable progress has been made by countries to meet the targets of the SDGs, several challenges have emerged, impeding implementation, and threatening to permanently derail the Agenda (UN 2022, 2023). The world has recently witnessed a global polycrisis of climate, inequality, conflict, and biodiversity collapse (Kempf et al. 2023; UNRISD 2023) and these are threatening progress made thus far on the SDGs. With the world confronted by crises, concern is increasingly focused on how this has implicated on the provision of education and the attainment of the targets of SDG 4 targets. This is particularly critical given the thrust of SDG4 which ‘...provides a comprehensive

framework to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education for all' (Advocates for International Development, 2022: iii). In the context of the multiple crises, emerging evidence suggests that the world is falling far behind in achieving quality and inclusive education (UN 2022, 2023). This, however, should force a refocus upon the broader objectives of the SDGs that guide prioritization: leaving no one behind and reach the furthest behind first. For SDG 4 on education, those furthest behind are those out of school entirely, which this article draws attention to.

The percentage of children and youth who fall into the official age range for the given level of education but are not enrolled in school are known as out of school children (OOSC), according to UIS (2022) and UNICEF (2022). SDG thematic indicator 4.1.4 is particularly concerned with the issue of OOSC and it reports on the OOSC rate (UNESCO 2023). Estimates of OOSC in 192 countries suggest that in 2021, there were 244 million¹ children out of school. These comprised of '... 67 million children of primary school age (6-11 years), 57 million adolescents of lower secondary age (12-14 years) and 121 million youth of upper secondary age (15-17 years)' (UNESCO 2022:3). In 2023, estimates are that the global number of OOSC has increased by 6 million and it is now at 250 million. This has meant that globally 16% of children in both primary and secondary levels are not attending school; at primary level, one out of 10 children are not in school with 122 million or 48% of the OOSC population being girls and young children (UNESCO 2023). In the absence of further and decisive action, forecasts indicate that an extra 84 million children and teenagers will not be attending school by 2030 (UN 2022).

¹ It is critical to thoroughly review the OOSC data. This is because they vary depending on the source. Historically, administrative enrolment counts generated by education ministries and accompanying population data have been utilised as the source of OOSC data. The estimates are flawed because, in many nations, they are frequently absent, erroneous, or incomplete. The second issue worth noting is that enrolment and population data are sourced differently, which makes mismatches common. In what the UN refers to as a "data revolution," which began in 2015, these problems are being addressed by adding survey data to administrative data (UNESCO 2023). This triangulates data from surveys, censuses, and administration.

The challenge of OOSC has been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused unprecedented disruptions in the education system globally. An estimated 147 million children are seen as having missed more than half of their face-to-face instruction over a two-year period as a result of Covid-19-related school closures (UN 2022, 2023). It was feared that prolonged absence from school would increase the likelihood of children dropping out and not returning (UNESCO 2020). This was seen impacting especially on those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds who are forced to engage in income generation activities, care responsibilities and other socio-economic activities to improve their livelihoods (UNESCO 2020; Jones et al. 2021). Early and forced marriages are also a major factor that are seen contributing to the high prevalence of OOSC (ActionAid 2020; Jones et al. 2021).

In backdrop of the polycrisis facing the world, and particularly the challenges facing OOSC, this paper critically engages with the contentious issue of OOSC with a focus of Zimbabwe. In the country, estimates are that there are 895,000 OOSC (UNICEF 2022). This number is contested, as there are different statistics provided by both state and non-state entities; and one of this paper's main contributions is to examine and make sense of these conflicting narratives. For Zimbabwe, SDG 4 is of priority with a commitment to ensure completion of free, equitable and quality primary education with effective learning outcomes. Also, of priority is ensuring access to early childhood, technical, vocational, and tertiary education (UN-Zimbabwe 2023). For the country, reducing the number of OOSC and ensuring that attaining the goals of SDG4 has become a key priority area. Unfortunately, it comes in a background where the country, just like others in the Sub-Saharan African (SSA) region, is facing multiple challenges in its education system. The region is on record as having one of the highest rates of OOSC in the world. In 2021 the prevalence was estimated to be in the region of 98 million (UNESCO 2022:4). This marked ‘...an increase of 20 million since 2009 and the prevalence in 2022 has been reported at 19.9% for those of primary school age, 33.3%

of the lower secondary school age and 47.8% of the upper secondary school age' (UNESCO 2022:4). Klapper and Panchamia (2023) put the Sub-Saharan OOSC children into context by noting that the region, out of six developing regions in the world, has the highest rates of educational exclusion. They observe that 60% of children between the ages of 15 and 17, as well as one-fifth of children in primary school are OOSC.

Numerous reasons have been put forward as to why there are OOSC in Zimbabwe, an assessment of these causes is a second important contribution of this paper. The above-noted specific causes (e.g., Covid-19 and early marriage) are explored alongside historical, political, and socio-economic settings wherein these crises occur. Notably, in the past decade Zimbabwe experienced an unprecedented political transition (discussed below), a turbulent socio-economic environment characterised by the challenges of poverty and inequality as well as an ecological crisis, each contributing to a crisis that has negatively impacted education provision and the quest to achieve the targets set out in SDG 4. Social and economic policies aiming at attaining faster, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and transformation have been established because of political transitions following the unprecedented political transition witnessed in the country in 2017 (GoZ 2020). The issue of OOSC has come to light throughout in the midst of these policy changes and is now recognised as one of the biggest problems facing the education industry. It needs to be speedily resolved as it potentially has negative ramifications for the present and future if not speedily resolved. Clarity of evidence and causes is paramount to effective decision making, which this article advances.

Despite the issue of OOSC being of major concern in Zimbabwe, there currently exists 'thin' scholarly literature that interrogates the issue from a policy perspective. Available evidence comprises of data generated by development agencies, government ministries and census data, which is found in silos hence there are several empirical and conceptual gaps. This paper notes this lacuna and investigates the issue of OOSC in Zimbabwe drawing from different

sources. The analysis is premised on the political economy oriented transformative social policy theoretical framework which conceptualises education as a function of social policy that has productive, reproductive, protective, redistributive, and social cohesion functions (Mkandawire 2004; Adesina 2011). The paper is crystallised around interrogating three interrelated thematic areas which provide a framing of the research questions. Firstly, it explores the prevalence and geographical context of OOSC in the country. Secondly, it explores the causes of OOSC and how this is related to the interlocking crisis facing the country. Thirdly the paper has a cross cutting thematic focus, in which it explores current policies and the legislative framework that is in place aimed at addressing the challenge of OOSC. The analysis is framed within an understanding how different dynamics on OOSC relate to the realisation of the aspirations of SDG 4 where primacy has been placed on ensuring inclusive and quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. The analysis is contextualised within an understanding of how various OOSC dynamics connect to the achievement of SDG 4, which prioritises guaranteeing an all-encompassing and high-quality education and that encourages opportunities for learning for all. Such aspirations are under threat as an unprecedented number of children drop out of school. Critical for the paper is an analysis of education policy within the ambits of the idea of social policy, where it is presented as a key instrument. This is in a contemporary milieu where the social policy paradigm is considered helpful in eradicating poverty, social exclusion, and inequality in a development environment (Chipenda 2021).

The Zimbabwe case presents unique opportunities for scholarly engagement on the dynamics of OOSC and informed decision making in a social policy context characterised by a polycrisis which has stimulated interventions to reconfigure socio-economic relations. Critical in this context are current interventions aimed at ensuring the rebalancing of state-market relations, fair fiscal and social compact, social justice, the equitable distribution of

resources and sustainable development. The paper is premised on an interpretive research approach, and it triangulates three different sources which include official documents, media reports and secondary sources. In the next section, we briefly look at the concept of TSP which as indicated earlier is the underlying theoretical framework for the paper. This is followed by a brief background of Zimbabwe's educational context and contemporary socio-economic and educational policy issues. A more detailed discussion on the prevalence and geographical dynamics of OOSC is made followed by a discussion on the implications of OOSC in the context of the country's interlocking crisis. Intertwined in the discussion are current policies and legislative frameworks that are aimed at addressing the challenges of OOSC and the utility of social policies in overcoming inequalities, poverty, and social exclusion. The paper then has a critical dialogue on all issues, a reflection, and conclusion.

Theoretical framing: Transformative social policy

Social policy has been defined as '...collective public efforts aimed at affecting and protecting the social wellbeing of people within a given territory' (Adesina 2007:1-2; 2009). It is widely acknowledged that one of the social policy tools is education, and that it serves a similar purpose as other traditional social policy tools such as those related to health, human settlement, social insurance, pensions for the elderly, and labour market reforms. Some of the key features of education as a social policy instrument relevant to this paper are its concerns with redistribution, enhancement of peoples productive and reproductive potential and providing protection during the life cycle. For Spicker (2023), education is important as an instrument of social policy not only as a policy for welfare but as policies intended to deal with the structure of society. From a social policy perspective, education thus serves several important functions. These include developing an individual's intellect which allows them to reach their fullest potential, it is a vehicle for socialisation as it transmits social norms and

values, it provides for the needs of industry and economy and is a vehicle for social change and social control (Noyoo 2023). This has meant that education is a key instrument in the pursuit for social development aimed at improving human wellbeing, social relations, and institutions (UNRISD 2011). In the social policy matrix, education is thus considered critical as it represents an investment in people and is essential for the economy and the labour market (Noyoo 2023).

Given the critical role of education as a social policy tool, we utilise the TSP as a theoretical and evaluative tool to assess the dynamics of OOSC in Zimbabwe. The TSP approach suggests using a variety of policy instruments (including education) in a development context for the goal of ensuring human wellbeing. It was born out of the UNRISD flagship research programme, Social Policy in a Development Context. The basic premise of the TSP is the need to return to the ‘wider vision’ of social policy, with the aim of averting what is seen as the neo-liberal domination of social policy (Adesina 2015) and the urgency of overcoming the stratified, segmented, and segregated social policy architecture which is prevalent in the development context (Fischer 2018). TSP advocates for the halting of the simultaneous rolling back of public provisioning and insertion of the market transactional logic in public service provision.

TSP advances arguments for the need of fundamental structural transformation premised on universal rights with a synergistic relationship between social and economic policy aimed at reinforcing the progressive redistributive effects of economic policies. Its primary driving force is the desire to fundamentally alter social structures and relationships to improve human welfare and the productive potential of people as individuals, communities, and organisations. Critical is the concern with addressing the structural underpinnings of diswelfare and entitlement failure which have negatively impacted on growth, production, reproduction, and protection in society contributing to income losses, poverty, and inequality

(Adesina 2020:18; Hujo 2014). For education, the TSP highlights education as an instrument for production and transformation whereby education policy instruments become critical for economic production, social reproduction, redistribution and protection against life and market risks. This is in addition to its potential of fostering social cohesion and the enjoyment of rights.

For this paper, education is thus considered as a tool for social policy, with the TSP being a critical theoretical and evaluative instrument with utility in answering the research questions posed. It was recognised as useful in assessing the instrumentality of education as part of the coherent whole and an integral part of the social policy architecture. The issue of OOSC was considered as a useful as a point of reference of some of the symptomatic failures of the system. For the study, utilising the TSP framework provides the requisite political economy lens useful for examining institutional and political contexts from the local to the global and the role of different actors with a view of assessing how these impact on OOSC.

Zimbabwe's Education Context: Historical and Contemporary Issues

To understand the dynamics of OOSC in contemporary Zimbabwe, it is important to have an appreciation of the country's education context and legacy dynamics. Formerly a British settler colony, historical educational policy in Zimbabwe were discriminatory based on race. Racialized logic gave priority to the interests of the settler minority in the delivery of public services and it underpinned policy formation and the provision of educational services. Realising the immense potential of education and its utility in enlightenment, the colonial administrators ensured tight control of education provision and limited opportunities for the native majority (Zvobgo 1981:14; Atkinson 1982). These decisions were informed by a settler-colonial political establishment that were interconnected with capitalist industry (e.g., in mining and agriculture) which directly benefited from the institutionalised racial segregation (Chipenda 2022). Consequently, the native majority were alienated and prevented from being

able to benefit from state support. For the settler class, opportunities existed irrespective of their abilities (Atkinson 1984). Attempts to mix races in white independent schools through bursaries were resisted and it was only in 1979, following a protracted war of liberation and constitutional settlement, when attempts were made to abolish racial discrimination in the educational sector (Atkinson 1984). Provision for this was made through the Education Act (1979).

Post independence Zimbabwe stands out as an exemplary model of achievement by a former settler colony to redress the socio-economic rights and injustices perpetrated against the hitherto marginalised African population. Under the leadership of the Zimbabwe African Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the newly independent nation encountered a dilemma with its educational programme in 1980. After winning the liberation struggle, ZANU-PF sought to implement socialist principles of equality, collectivism, and productive labour in schools. It also sought to promote Marxist-Leninist ideas of social reconstruction (Atkinson 1984). Given the prevailing circumstances, the government was forced to retain the existing school system and adapt it to meet the realities and purposes of the socialist state on the one hand while meeting the manpower needs of the economy on the other. This entailed amendments to the Education Act in addition to the wholesale expansion of the educational system (Atkinson 1984). Strides made in the educational sector in the post-independence period were put into perspective by the Educational Coalition for Zimbabwe (2017) and Raftopoulos & Pilosof (2021), finding that at independence primary school enrolment increased from 819,586 in 1979 to 1,235,815, in 1980 marking an increase of 51%. By 1989, enrolment rose to 2,223,000 and further increasing to 2,746,575 by 1995. During the period of 1980 to 1995, the number of primary schools increased from 3,161 to 4,633 while teachers increased from 28,500 to 64,184. In the secondary school sector, enrolment grew from 66,215 to 148,690 during the period 1979 to 1981, which increased to 711,094 in 1995 (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe 2017;

Raftopoulos & Pilosof 2021). Secondary schools increased from 197 to 1,535 with secondary teachers increasing from 3,736 in 1980 to 27,320 in 1995. These developments highlight the educational transformation witnessed in post-independence Zimbabwe, one which was heavily subsidised by the state and later became free. While education development during this period was impressive, there were several challenges, such as the absence of a comprehensive policy framework, limited access and gender inequality, relevance of the curriculum, school dropouts and crippling financial issues (Raftopoulos & Pilosof 2021).

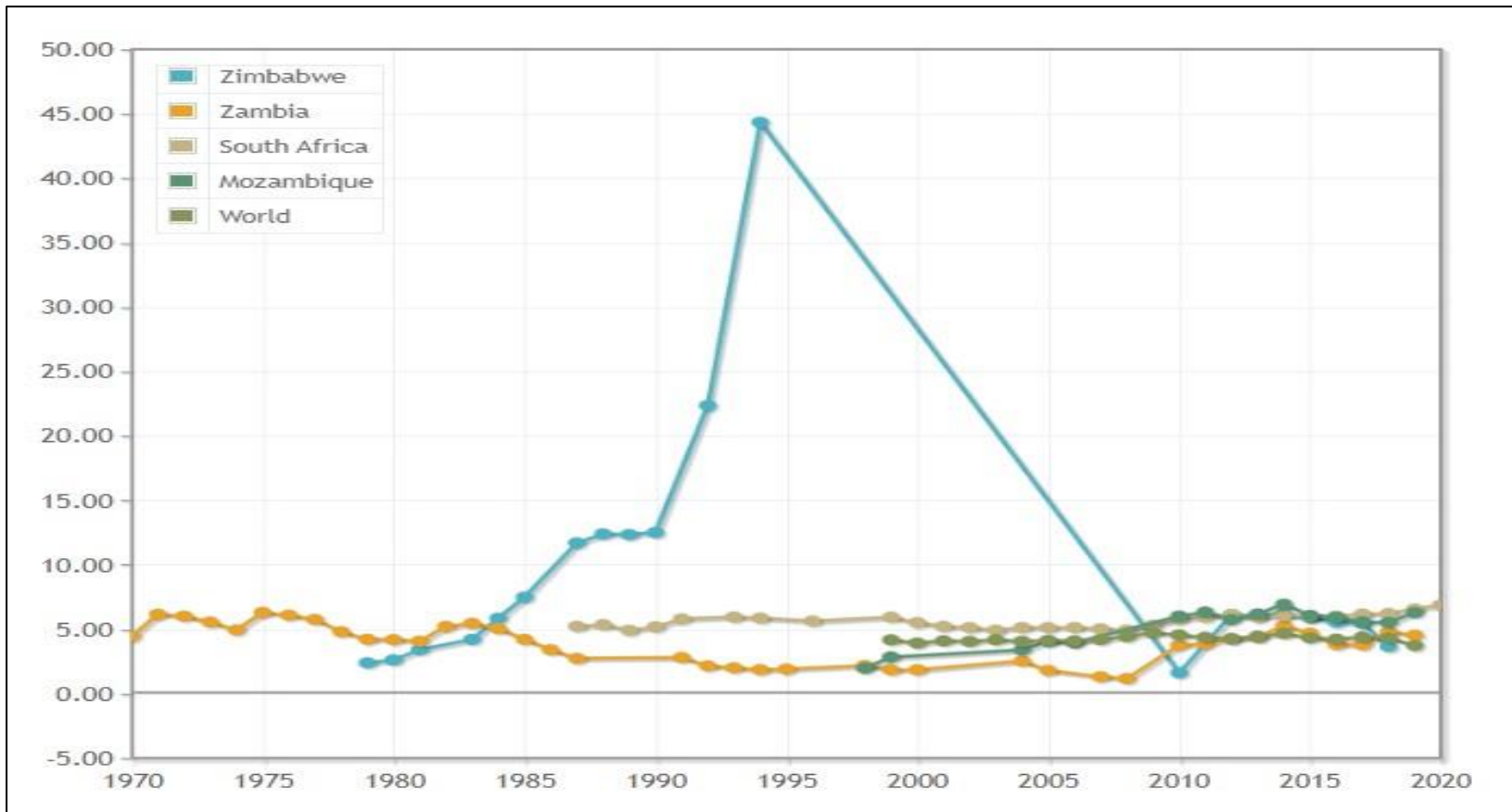
When the state implemented the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which was set of policy reforms recommended by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, investments made in the education sector were undermined in the 1990s (Nyambuya 1994). At the core, ESAP were cuts in government expenditure and introduction of fees in social service provisions. Gains made in the provision of education plummeted as the costs of education increased while the state introduced measures to recover costs in the education and health sectors. In education, enrolments declined between 1992 and 1995 by as much as 5% in both rural and urban schools (Saunders 1996).

The post 2000 period witnessed a continuation in challenges for the education sector. The negative impacts of ESAP coupled with high inflation, low foreign currency reserves, high budget deficits, poor economic performance, the flight of a skilled and experienced human resource as well as targeted economic sanctions by western countries cumulatively contributed to economic collapse, expectedly this negatively impacted the country's education sector (GoZ 2013). These changes occurred in a context where ZANU-PF, for the first time since independence, faced real threats to its political dominance by the newly created Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), an opposition party aligned to the left. In order to safeguard its power, ZANU-PF resorted to intimidation and violence against the populace, particularly against individuals who were thought to be pro-opposition (Mhike 2018; Mwonzora &

Hellicker 2018). This culminated in disputed elections and accusations of human rights abuses (Mwonzora & Hellicker 2018). The neo-liberal economic policies that were adopted over the course of two decades, along with the country's involvement in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, unbudgeted payments to veterans of the war, and the implementation of an unprecedented land reform programme, all contributed to the spectacular collapse of the Zimbabwean economy in the 2000s and had a negative impact on education (Maunganidze et al. 2021).

Due to ESAP and the above-noted economic factors, funding to education declined from the mid-1990s and the downward trend has continued to date. While funding for education declined, it is worth noting that the percentage of GDP on education peaked, especially in 1994, when it reached 44.3%. Compared to its peers in the region, the country demonstrated remarkable investments in the education sector. Unfortunately, since then the country began witnessing a decline in education funding and this has continued to date. (Figure 1; World Bank 2023; USAID 2023; UNICEF 2023). The result was a reversing some of the remarkable achievements made during the first decade and a half of independence. During the government of national unity period (which is explained below), there was a slight increase in expenditure which was maintained, but since 2016 there has been a steady decline. When compared to suggested worldwide targets, education spending in Zimbabwe has therefore continued to decline. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education received a 2022 budget that amounted to 2.4% of GDP, which was less than the 5.4% objective set for the Education for All target. At 13% of the total budget, it was less than the 20% criterion specified by the Dakar Declaration (UNICEF 2023; Education Coalition for Zimbabwe & Zimbabwe Network of Early Childhood Development Actors 2021).

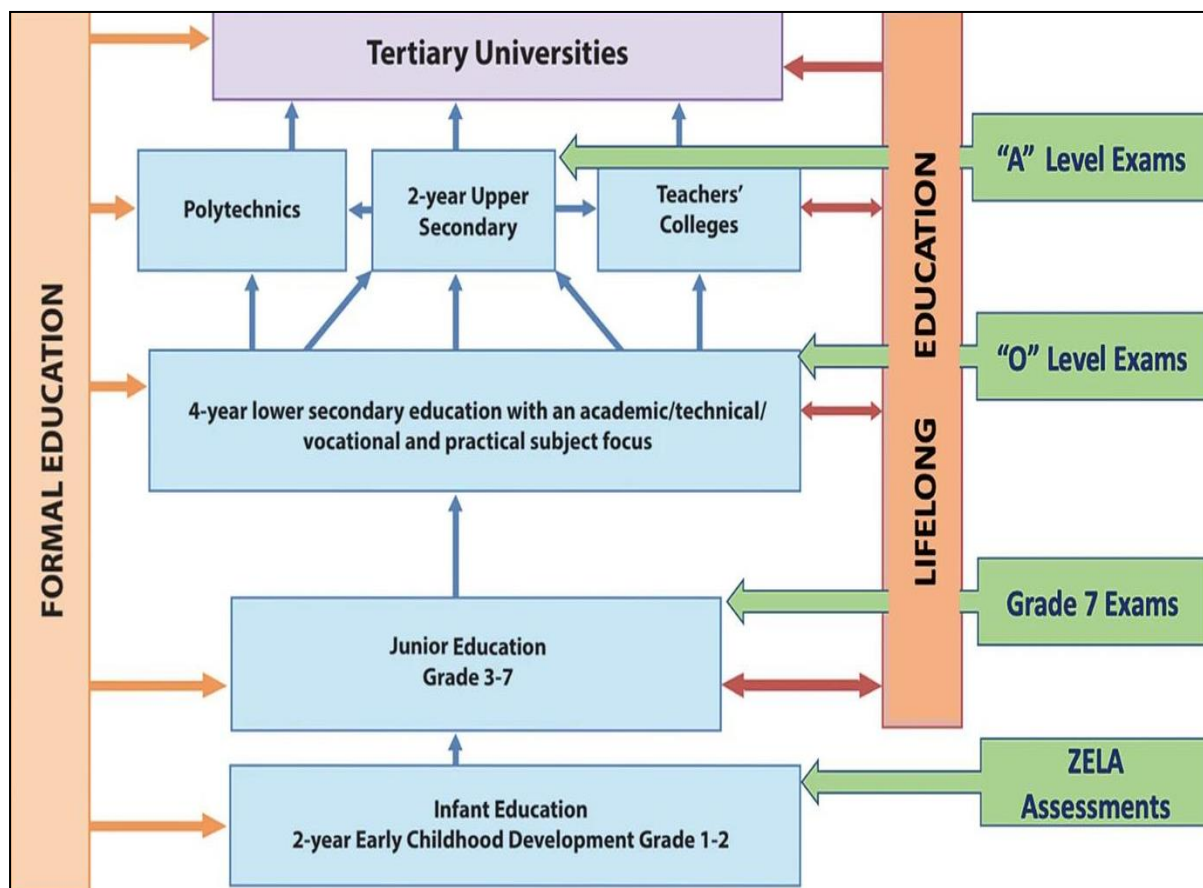
Figure 1: Government expenditure on education (% of GDP) – Zimbabwe and other countries



Source: World Bank (2023); USAID (2023) and UNICEF (2023) – modified by authors

Despite the challenges experienced, the 2000s were an important period in Zimbabwe's education history as these years witnessed transformation. As a result of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training OF 1999 (CIET) recommendations, the nation implemented a formal and non-formal education system in 2005. The CIET shaped the contemporary educational structure of the country, and it currently comprises of a tiered education system (Figure 2). Primary education lasts for 9 years; comprising infant education (four years of schooling which is ECDA, ECDB and Grades 1 and 2). This is followed by junior education, comprising of five years of education from Grades 3 to 7. After completion of primary education, learners proceed to secondary education which lasts for 6 years (secondary education is broken into a lower secondary level of forms 1-4 which upon completion leads to the awarding of the ordinary level certificate and the upper secondary level which offers advanced level studies and prepares students for tertiary level education). At this level there is the awarding of the advanced level certificate with grades based on performance. The last level is tertiary education, which is offered by institutions of higher learning and includes technical and vocational education colleges, teachers' colleges, and universities (Figure 2; MoPSE 2020; ZimStat 2021).

Figure 2: Zimbabwe's Education Structure



Source: MoPSE (2023)

The financial trajectory changed in 2009 with the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) by ZANU-PF and rival factions of the MDC. The then Minister of Finance in the GNU claimed that education access had significantly improved, high staff turnover was reduced, schools were reopened, school infrastructure was repaired and constructed, there were improvements in the supply of learning materials especially textbooks, educational support especially through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) became functional with parents being helped to pay school fees among other interventions (Biti 2014). After the GNU ended in 2013, the government led by the Zimbabwe National Party (ZANU-PF) created a new

economic plan known as the Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio-economic Transformation (ZimAsset; 2013-2018), which was in line with the goals of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Explicitly spelt out by ZimAsset was ‘... achieving universal primary education, improved quality of education from ECD, to vocational and tertiary institutions as well as efforts to enhance literacy skills, with clear targets for each year in the plan’ (GoZ 2013:28). The strategy, which was based on an agenda for indigenisation, empowerment, and job creation powered by the nation's natural resource extraction, sought to promote social fairness and sustainable development. In the economic plan, education was considered an area of priority. It was argued that education had been compromised due to adverse socio-economic conditions which were a consequence of sanctions imposed by Western countries, which negatively impacted government revenue collection, investment, trade, and capacity to provide services to citizens (GoZ 2013). This was evidenced by the high dropout and low pass rates at both primary and secondary levels (GoZ 2013: 17-18). ZimAsset was to lay a foundation for future trajectories in the education sector and mark a shift in education policy trajectories.

Political Transition and Contemporary Policy Trajectories

ZimAsset was disrupted in September 2017 following the country's unexpected political transition, which saw the country's long serving President Robert Mugabe being forcibly removed from power by a military backed coup that was camouflaged as a party and parliamentary process and enjoyed massive public support (Dzirutwe et al. 2017). Robert Mugabe was replaced by his long serving comrade and former deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa, under an administration which called itself ‘new dispensation’ and later the second republic. From the onset the new dispensation has presented itself as conciliatory and committed to a global re-engagement agenda with nations that had become estranged with the Mugabe administration (Mkodzongi 2022). Breaking with the policies of the Mugabe period, the new

administration pledged to combat corruption, revive the economy, and adopt a neo-liberal economic trajectory. Since then, contemporary policies have come to be associated with neo-liberal orthodoxy, gradually marginalising the redistributive and indigenisation policies that Mugabe supported (Mkodzongi 2022). Public service delivery and policy trajectories have been impacted by macroeconomic interventions and policies that are increasingly in line with the demands of global capital (Mkodzongi 2022). In this context, the country's education system has also been affected.

For Zimbabwe in the Second Republic, policy trajectories across all sectors were initially expressed in the Transitional Stabilisation Programme (TRSP), a five-year economic plan aimed at transforming the economy, facilitating the realisation of Vision 2030, the UN SDGs, and the African Unions Agenda 2063. The TRSP reflected Zimbabwe's ambitions to become an empowered and affluent upper middle-class society by 2030, with a focus on employment creation, growth stimulation, and budgetary consolidation (GoZ 2018). In the TRSP plan, the country's education policy was highlighted as needing attention with a commitment to ensure access to education by all, the provision of adequate infrastructure, the early detection of children who might not enrol in school, drop out, or fall behind in the education system. Commitment was made to develop strategies to support these children and to meet their school fees and levy needs (GoZ 2018: xxii, 254). In the TRSP plan, the government also committed to rehabilitate and expand existing tertiary institutions and make the education system relevant to the skills and demands of the economy and markets. Priority was made to cater for the needs of '...a disproportionate number of learners who are out of school, inclusive of those living with disabilities, on account of inability to pay fees and absence of nearby learning facilities with inclusive and appropriate learning environments' (GoZ 2018:271). Some of the provisions of the TRSP were the basis for the Education Sector

Strategic Plan of 2020 whose emphasis was on addressing inequities and ensuring inclusivity, equity, quality, and socio-economic development in the education sector in line with SDG 4.

The TRSP has since been replaced by the National Development Strategy (NDS1-2021-2025). Similar to the TRSP, this five-year medium-term plan aims to achieve both the AU Agenda 2063 and the SDGs simultaneously to actualise the nation's Vision 2030. Critically underlying NDS1 is a vision for ‘...broad based transformation, wealth creation and expansion of economic opportunities to make sure no one is left behind’ (GoZ 2020: iv). The overarching goal of NDS1 is ‘... to ensure high, accelerated, inclusive and sustainable economic growth as well as socio-economic transformation and a move towards a middle middle-income society by 2030’ (GoZ 2020a:vii). Just like TRSP, NDS1 also acknowledges education as a key pillar and requirement for attaining set socio-economic goals. It notes that while some achievements have been made in the education sector, persistent challenges remain. An example of this is that 17.8% of learners who would have completed primary education are not managing to continue with secondary education due to an inability to pay fees (GoZ 2020). It observes a drop in the standard of instruction and fundamental practical abilities like reading and numeracy. Children with disabilities and the disadvantaged (particularly those in remote areas) have exhibited low attendance levels and do not complete the full cycle of education. Schools are under resourced, there are discrepancies and gaps between rural and urban schools, and this is due to heavy reliance on parental support, high teacher-pupil ratios and unsustainable class rotations, hot sitting, and double shifts. High school dropouts particularly at secondary level and an increase in the incidence child marriages, adolescent pregnancy, and the high burden of fees (GoZ 2020a). The situation affects girls mostly with 30% dropping out in forms three and four (GoZ 2020a:148-149).

Through NDS1 the government has proposed a cocktail of measures to ensure an education system that ensures quality, equity, and inclusivity. For NDS1, education is key for

human capital development and innovation. It is viewed as a catalyst for continuous growth, technological advancement, and an essential pre-requisite for a knowledge-driven economy. Emphasis is made on infrastructural development and broadening access to education especially for the disenfranchised, those in remote areas and those in overcrowded urban areas. Improving the calibre of learning and learning outcomes is the main goal of interventions. It is suggested that NDS1 be implemented in the school sector in tandem with the school Strategic Plan of 2020, the Zimbabwe School Health Policy, the School Financing Policy, and the Inclusive Education Policy (GoZ 2020a: 154–155). The strategy has national key result areas with improved access to quality, equitable and inclusive education singled out as an area of priority. The aim is to increase the ECD Net Enrolment Rate (NER) from 15.3% in 2020 to 20% in 2025; Junior school NER from 81.2% in 2020 to 86% in 2025 and Secondary School Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 58.2% in 2020 to 63% in 2025 (GoZ 2020a:271).

The NDS1 seeks to operationalize the country's 2013 constitution, which views education as a basic human right and makes provision in Section 19(d) and Section 20(a) for children and the youth to 'have access to appropriate education and training' (GoZ 2013:21). Section 27 obligates the State '... to put in place practical measures to promote free and compulsory basic as well as higher and tertiary education.' It must also '...take measures to ensure that girls are afforded the same opportunities as boys to obtain education at all levels' (Ibid:23). Section 75 (1) (a)(b) is emphatic on the rights to education. It explicitly states that '...every citizen and permanent resident in the country has a right to a basic State-funded education' and this includes adult basic education. The state through legislative and other measures is expected to make further education '...progressively available and accessible' (Ibid:36). In providing for education, the Constitution in Section 83 also obligates the State to provide special educational facilities and State funded education and training for the for the disabled (Ibid:38).

In addition to the constitution, the legislative framework for education in Zimbabwe is guided by the Education Act, Chapter 25:04 of 1987 which has been amended over the years with the most recent being the Education Amendment Act, 2020 aimed at aligning it with the Constitution. The Act like the constitution in Part II, Section 4 states that ‘...every child in Zimbabwe has a right to education,’ and ‘...will not be refused admission or be discriminated against on the basis of race, tribe, place of origin, national or ethnic origin, political opinions, colour, creed or gender’ (GoZ 1987:4). Part II, Section 5, states that the goal of the nation is to make primary education mandatory for all children who are old enough to attend school, and it is the responsibility of parents to make sure their children attend. The act also makes provision for tuition fees to be kept low and affordable by the Minister, to ensure entitlement by children to enroll at nearest primary and secondary schools, entitle children to compulsory basic state funded education and it makes it a criminal offence for any parent to deprive children of this basic state funded education. In addition, no exclusion of children is to be made due to pregnancy or failure to pay fees; all schools must, if resources permit provide infrastructure for children with disabilities (GoZ 1987, 2020b). This legislative framework has provided the foundation upon which education policy is formulated and it is worth noting that at its core is the motivation to ensure the provision of basic education, eradicate discrimination and ensure there are no school dropouts.

The discussion in this section is important for several reasons, it has set the groundwork of understanding the country’s educational policy trajectory in the colonial and post-colonial era. Critical in the discussion has been successes and challenges witnessed in the education system which has in different ways implicated on educational outcomes. The discussion has also outlined a number of policies and legislation in place which guides contemporary policies in education. The question which then arises is the prevalence of OOSC, a thorny and critical

issue which is highlighted in the strategic plans and policies of government. This issue is looked at in the next section.

Out-of-School Children in Zimbabwe: Prevalence and Geographical Context

On 27 April 2022, a headline on VOA News read '*UNICEF: Nearly 50% of Zimbabwean youth not in school*' (Mavhunga 2022). The news report had gone on to explain that a report by UNICEF had indicated that nearly half of the country's youth were not in school and this was attributed to poverty and had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, it was reported that 21% of Zimbabwean youth were not in school and in 2022 it had risen to 47% (ibid). Equally worrying was a headline in the NewsDay of 15 April 2022 which had a headline that said '*840 000 children drop out of school*'. Quoting a United States embassy report on the 2021 state of human rights in Zimbabwe, the newspaper had reported that '... an estimated 840,000 schoolchildren have quit school since 2020 following the outbreak of COVID-19.' This figure and report were disputed by the Government of Zimbabwe, which said the figures were 'highly inflated' and 'the report fed into the hostile US agenda against Zimbabwe' (Mangwaya 2022). However, another news report by the NewsDay on 14 October 2023 had an equally worrying headline that '*60% learners drop out of school due to drugs*'. A collaborative research study undertaken by UNICEF, the government, and certain local civil society organisations revealed that drug use was causing students to drop out of school, which in turn was creating a vicious cycle of poverty and crime. (Buweringwe 2023). It is worth noting that while the three stories presented alarming statistics on the prevalence of school dropouts, the proposed underlying causes differ, and the data disputed.

The high number of OOSC reported in the media and by development organisations operating in Zimbabwe raises serious questions on the prevalence of OOSC and the underlying

dynamics causing it. The finding that just 15% of children finish upper secondary education after 89% complete primary school has become a serious source of concern (UNICEF 2022). The education sector faces a number of challenges, including high rates of dropouts and repetition or delayed completion in the lower and secondary levels compared to the primary level, which has resulted in lower completion rates at those levels (UNICEF 2022). These challenges are highlighted in some instances despite denials from authorities.

The lack of data availability contributes to the divergent narratives. This is not only a challenge for Zimbabwe but a global challenge as there is over reliance on administrative data produced by government ministries of education. The data can at times be incomplete, inaccurate and has mismatches (UNESCO 2022, UNICEF 2022). In most countries, there is the utilisation of administrative and population data on OOSC, which can be problematic and can appear contradictory as it is sourced differently. Cognisant of these challenges, the UN has (since 2015) advocated for the utilisation of multiple sources of data with a combination of administrative data, population data and household surveys. This programme was first put in place to support various data sources for the estimation of headline health indicators like maternal and infant mortality. It has now been expanded to include education (UNESCO 2022). Zimbabwe also faces this challenge of data which at times appears contradictory. This does not mean it is not invalid, it is valid and accurate with the differences being due to differences on targets and methodology used. This paper utilises different sources of data to provide a wholesome picture on OOSC prevalence in the country.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the most recent data which provides useful information on OOSC is data provided by UNICEF through its Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)². To develop policies that may be implemented to guarantee that people in the prescribed range of a certain

² The goal of the UN-led initiative MICS-EAGLE (Education Analysis for Global Learning and Equity) is to address two critical issues with education data: gaps in education indicators and ineffective use of data by governments and education stakeholders. This is expected improve learning outcomes and equity issues in education (UNICEF 2022:1).

level of education have access to education, UNICEF considers the collection of OOSC data to be of utmost importance. In Zimbabwe, the cumulative OOSC estimated headcount is 895,000 (Table 1). It comprises 134,000 (15%) children at primary level, 326,000 (36.4%) at lower secondary level and 435,000 (48.6%) at upper secondary level (UNICEF 2022). Table 1 shows rates and headcounts of OOSC and their disaggregation according to various socio-economic and geographic characteristics. Some of the major issues of note in Table 1 are that at primary and secondary levels, males dominate OOSC rates, but this dramatically changes in upper secondary school where the rates become 76% compared to 65%. Nationally it is observed that the number of OOSC at the primary level is low, in this instance it was 5% and as children progress, there are high chances of them dropping out of school. Children from the rural areas have the poorest completion rates which is below the national average compared to children from urban areas who have completion rates above the national average. At lower secondary school, Bulawayo has the lowest rates at 8% with Matabeleland North having 44%. At secondary school levels the western part of the country is shown as having highest prevalence rates of OOSC. When compared to the Matabeleland Provinces, the Mashonaland provinces—aside from Mashonaland East—have the highest rates of OOSC at all three levels. The Matabeleland North Province has the highest out-of-school percentage at both the lower and upper secondary levels, with 44% of pupils in lower secondary school and 83% of those in upper secondary school. The rate of education in the Bulawayo Province is significantly lower, rising from 3% in basic school to 56% in upper secondary education. The majority of OOSC, which ranges from 72% in upper secondary to 89% in lower secondary, is seen to live in rural regions (ibid:23).

Table 1: OOSC Rates and Headcounts

Rates and headcounts by various socio-economic characteristics		Out of school rates (%)			Headcount of children out of school		
		Primary (%)	Lower secondary (%)	Upper secondary (%)	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
Total		5	24	70	134000	326000	435000
Sex	Male	5	26	65	77000	184000	208000
	Female	4	21	76	57000	142000	227000
Area	Urban	5	11	62	29000	37000	119000
	Rural	5	27	74	105000	289000	316000
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Wealth quintile	Poorest	8	37	78	57000	111000	81000
	Second	4	29	76	26000	96000	88000
	Middle	4	21	73	22000	63000	108000
	Fourth	1	18	69	20000	41000	91000
	Richest	2	7	55	10000	16000	68000
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Religion	Roman Catholic	3	17	58	5000	14000	29000
	Protestant	2	17	66	9000	39000	73000
	Pentecostal	4	18	64	16000	34000	61000
	Apostolic Sect	6	26	75	58000	119000	138000
	Zion	5	26	75	13000	36000	38000
	Other Christian	5	21	72	4000	8000	12000
	Traditional	4	36	78	5000	19000	20000
	No religion	6	30	74	24000	54000	57000
Other religion	5	25	78	2000	4000	5000	
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	Bulawayo	3	8	56	3000	4000	20000
	Manicaland	3	12	59	15000	27000	45000

Province	Mashonaland Central	7	34	78	18000	41000	50000
	Mashonaland East	5	20	78	14000	30000	51000
	Mashonaland West	7	35	69	23000	64000	58000
	Matabeleland North	4	44	83	8000	37000	31000
	Matabeleland South	5	36	82	10000	31000	30000
	Midlands	4	25	62	12000	38000	45000
	Masvingo	5	21	70	17000	37000	49000
	Harare	4	11	74	14000	15000	56000

Source: UNICEF MICS (2022:24)

As children advance through the educational system at every level, there is a growing disparity between the wealth quintiles. The incidence of OOS rates in children from the lowest quintiles are significantly greater than the national average. The number of OOSC rises in the lower secondary age group, especially for the poorest (37%) and rural residents at (27%). The situation of OOSC worsens at the upper secondary level where 80% of children in the poorest quintile and over half of the children from the richest quintile are out of school (UNICEF 2022:18). Worth noting is that despite being 20% of the population, children who are coming from the bottom wealth quintile are overrepresented in OOSC at both primary and secondary levels. When it is expressed in ratios to get a more clearer picture on the influence of wealth dynamics, ‘... 1.3 times more children from the richest quintile complete primary education compared to children from the poorest quintile, 5 times more children from the richest quintile complete lower secondary education compared to children from the poorest quintile, and 37 times more children from the richest quintile complete upper secondary education compared to children from the poorest quintile’ (UNICEF 2022:3). Worth noting from the discussion above is the overlap in vulnerabilities in the context of rural, poor, province and gender, which create overlapping vulnerabilities that are made invisible when presented as independent variables, more attention is needed to how these variables overlap (e.g., Cochrane & Rao 2019).

As we look at the prevalence of OOSC and some of the factors which contribute to it, it is important to consider administrative and population data which also shows OOSC trajectories and causes. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) produces annual education reports which contain rich empirical data that highlights several variables on the provision of education and are useful for assessing, measuring, and evaluating teaching and learning efficiency and effectiveness. They also provide evidence-based information which is critical for planning purposes. While the data presented above is useful in getting an overall picture of OOSC, we validate this in conjunction with the

administrative data from the MoPSE to get a detailed understanding of school dropouts at the source, which are the schools and the reasons for these.

Out of School Rates and Causes: Evidence from Administrative and Census Data

In its 2021 and 2022 annual reports, the MoPSE provides data on OOSC with a specific focus on school dropouts. They are defined as learners from a cohort who enter in a certain grade at a particular school during a calendar year and no longer enrol the following year. Between 2018-2022, it was reported that the number of primary and secondary school dropouts was at 0.44% and 4.44% respectively. The proportion of primary school dropouts was said to have decreased annually from 0.61% in 2018 to 0.53% in 2020 and 0.44% in 2022. For secondary schools, the percentage of dropouts was 3.41% in 2018 dropping to 3.28% in 2020, increasing slightly to 4.67% in 2021 and dropping slightly to 4.44% in 2022. The slight increase in dropouts in secondary dropouts in 2021 is attributed to Covid-19 (MoPSE 2023:127). Tables 2 and 3 provide information on school dropouts by level of education, their number and percentage as well as reasons for dropping out.

Table 2: Primary School Dropouts 2021 and 2022

Reason for dropping out	Year 2021				Year 2022			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Absconded	4796	48.16	3792	42.33	3924	45.34	2735	37.92
Death	399	4.01	310	3.46	347	4.01	253	3.51
Expulsion	12	0.12	13	0.15	11	0.13	7	0.10
Illness	207	2.08	183	2.04	227	2.62	235	3.26
Marriage	2	0.02	389	4.34	11	0.13	220	3.05
Pregnancy	27	0.27	238	2.66	9	0.10	156	2.16

Financial	3006	30.19	2816	31.44	3087	35.67	2759	38.25
Learners with Special Needs	477	4.79	412	4.60	341	3.94	319	4.42
Child labour	376	3.78	230	2.57	210	2.43	136	1.89
Other	656	6.59	575	6.42	487	5.63	393	5.45
Total	9958	100	8958	100	8654	100	7213	100

Source: MoPSE Annual Reports 2022 and 2023, modified by the authors

Table 3: Secondary School Dropouts 2021 and 2022

Reason for dropping out	Year 2021				Year 2022			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Absconded	7812	36.93	5276	17.83	6581	42.70	4176	12.13
Death	240	1.13	191	0.65	195	1.27	131	0.38
Expulsion	85	0.40	72	0.24	77	0.50	67	0.19
Illness	214	1.01	163	0.55	128	0.83	227	0.66
Marriage	633	2.99	8063	27.25	305	1.98	5395	15.67
Pregnancy	157	0.74	5747	19.42	78	0.51	4463	12.96
Financial	9643	45.59	7987	26.99	6045	39.22	18465	53.63
Learners with Special Needs	283	1.34	284	0.96	205	1.33	178	0.52
Child labour	775	3.66	590	1.99	624	4.05	408	1.19
Other	1309	6.19	1220	4.12	1174	7.62	920	2.67
Total	21151	100	29593	100	15412	100	34430	100

Source: MoPSE Annual Reports 2022 and 2023, modified by the authors

The main conclusions from Tables 2 and 3 are that students are more likely to drop out of school as they advance through higher educational levels. This confirms the observations made by UNICEF (2022). In primary school, more boys drop out of school compared to girls, this however changes in secondary school where more girls drop out. In 2021 for example, a total of 29,593 girls dropped out compared to 21,151 boys, in 2022 it was even worse with 34,430 girls dropping out compared to 15,412 boys. This indicates a 16.35% increase in the number of girls dropping out of school in 2021 and 2022. Not much empirical evidence exists on the reasons why at primary level more boys drop out compared to girls, and the MoPSE has encouraged more research on this dynamic. Child labour³, religion and failure to pay fees are however flagged as being major contributing factors to the high incidence of boys dropping out at primary level compared to girls (ZimStats 2021; MoPSE 2022, 2023). The high number of girl child dropouts is attributed to the challenges of early pregnancy and child marriages especially at the secondary level and this has been observed in different contexts and geographical locations across the country (Iritani et al. 2016; Chamberlaine et al. 2023). In addition to early child marriages and pregnancies, it is worth noting that there are also other reasons which contribute to school dropouts. Financial challenges, which are understandable given the high levels of poverty and precarious livelihoods in the country contribute a lot to school dropouts as does absconding, child labour, expulsion, illness, death, and special needs at schools. Interestingly the high prevalence of drug and substance abuse witnessed in the country in recent years which the media and non-state actors have indicated as being one of the major contributors to school dropouts is not listed (Lupande 2018, Buwerimwe 2023; UNICEF 2023). This highlights the complexity of the OOSC problem in Zimbabwe. The MoPSE data

³ This is a common occurrence, particularly in rural Zimbabwe, where the national rate is estimated to be 28%, accounting for 40% of primary school dropouts (ZimStat 2021).

presents similar observations to UNICEF (2022), identifying financial challenges, pregnancy, and early marriage as major contributors to OOSC.

Zimbabwe's population and household census of 2022 (PHC) is also another important data source on OOSC in Zimbabwe. If the data from the PHC is read in conjunction with administrative and survey data, it provides additional validation for available data and causes of the OOSC issue. For school going children and young people, the PHC focused on the ages 4-24 whom it categorised as being of school going age. In the country, it was noted that '... there are 6,886,403 people in the school going age and of these, 71.4% are attending school. Disaggregated data from the PHC showed that out of 3,887,501 males, 72.7% are attending school while 27.3% are not. Out of 3,948,902 females, 70.2% are attending school while 29.8% are not' (ZimStat 2022:5). These findings reflected what has been noted in the UNICEF MICS survey and administrative data from the MoPSE. The PHC also highlighted the geographical dynamics of OOSC, and it again echoes some observations made in the survey and administrative data, while presenting some slightly different narratives especially in relation to rural and urban areas and the geographic dimensions. In rural areas the PHC noted that there were 4,297,021 persons of school going age of which 72% are attending school while 28% are not in school. In urban areas there were 2,589,382 persons of school going age of which 70% are attending school while 30% are not. This narrative shows OOSC prevalence being higher in urban compared to rural areas. In the PHC there is the presentation of specific data on primary and lower secondary ages who are out of school, and it showed that at primary level 9.6% are out of school and they comprise of 10.3% males and 8.9% females. In the lower secondary ages, it is reported that 16.6% are out of school and they comprise of 17.2% males and 16.1% females (ZimStat 2022). Once more, this tells a slightly different story from the other data sets, which demonstrate that females drop out of school at a higher rate than boys at the secondary level (both lower and upper).

PHC provides information on some of the major reasons of school dropouts. Table 4 provides a summary of the reasons for school dropouts with financial constraints the stated cause for nearly half of all cases. Findings on the causes of school dropouts have striking similarities with findings presented by the MoPSE in its annual statistical reports, but they also present alternative insight and narratives on the different dynamics of OOSC in Zimbabwe. Information from the PHC is critical in providing us with wider lenses of understanding the OOSC phenomenon.

Table 4: Causes of School Dropouts

Reason for Leaving School	Percentage (%)
Financial constraints	44.9
Marriage or pregnancy related	18.2
Completed/Satisfied	11.1
Waiting to proceed to next level	9.2
Refusal	5.1
Failed exams	4.1
Ill health	1.1
Other	0.7
School too far	0.7
No appropriate facilities	0.4
Expulsion	0.1
Caring for the sick	0.1

Source: ZimStat (2022)

From a TSP perspective, it can be noted that the discussion above and information contained in Table 4 provides us with intervention points that can be targeted to address the challenge of OOSC. These intervention points are critical as a point of reference which policy makers, government authorities and civil society organisations can use in attempts to mitigate the scourge of OOSC. Financial challenges, early marriages and pregnancy related issues are

shown as contributing to high levels of school dropouts and these need to be targeted. Geographical disparities are noted with each area having its unique challenges and dynamics which contribute to OOSC prevalence. These are intervention points worth targeting.

As was mentioned in the preceding discussion, the three data sources offer significant information about the prevalence of OOSC in Zimbabwe. The UNICEF MICS, the MoPSE administrative data and the PHC provide us with information on OOSC prevalence in the country. The UNICEF MICS data is particularly important in this regard as it estimates that the number is 895 000. From the data sets there are a lot of similarities and overlaps in the data provided with trajectories showing how OOSC prevalence changes with level of education, gender disparities and the contribution of wealth, geography, religion, societal as well as cultural dynamics, among others. The data portrays similar dynamics although differences exist in relation to interpretation, prevalence, and factors which fuel school dropouts. Major takeaways of the data are that OOSC prevalence in the country is high and it is influenced by numerous factors. Gender, geography, and wealth implicate in different ways on OOSC prevalence and these need to be taken into consideration when putting in place mitigatory interventions.

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Discussion

Drawing upon three different data sources, this paper identifies the extent and causes of OOSC in Zimbabwe. For a country which has a history of excellence in education, especially if one considers strides made in the first decade after independence and the way in which the country was considered as a model on education in a developing context, current trends of OOSC are a major source of concern. Amidst a constantly shifting socio-economic and political landscape, the situation has led to tensions and contradictions among pertinent stakeholders. While there is a commitment to support, provide for, and fund education in accordance with the Constitution, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the nation's Education Act, the SDGs, and Agenda 2063, progress is constrained due to the magnitude of the challenges.

The political transition witnessed in the country has reignited renewed commitment to insure inclusive, quality education and a step in this direction has been in policy commitments made through the TRSP and now reinforced through NDS1. Despite this commitment, funding for education remains an impediment to the set goals. This underscores a critical concern if viewed from a transformative social policy perspective where there is poor synergy between social and economic policy with welfare-oriented policies like education not being prioritised in a 'segmented, stratified and segregated system' of social provisioning. The former Permanent Secretary in the MoPSE had highlighted the funding challenge with the Government of Zimbabwe committing in the long term to allocate 20% of the national budget on education by 2025 as has been agreed internationally. In 2023, the education sector had been allocated 15% of the total national budget and this represents 2.3% of GDP and slight increase compared to 2.1% in 2021 (UNICEF 2023). The increase was however, seen as lower in absolute value compared both to previous years and the sector requirements (UNICEF 2023). A major challenge when it comes to fiscal support was that most of the funding was being consumed for human resources and administration purposes with little remaining for the core education activities according to the mandate of the MoPSE. This challenge raises concerns on redistribution issues, governance, and structural weaknesses from a transformative social policy perspective. While the funding challenges remain, they exist in a context where the State emphasises neoliberal trajectories in policy making. It is unclear how the current administration would balance and accommodate its policy goals in the field of education, as demonstrated by its pledge to provide subsidies and free basic primary education as part of a larger policy trajectory with neo-liberal ideological foundations. In a context where financial challenges and lack of fees contribute to OOSC, it remains to be seen how the government will take practical steps and ensure the provision of inclusive equitable education for all. In many respects, this can be a challenging proposition for neo-liberal oriented administrations.

While the Zimbabwean government runs the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), an initiative to support approximately 1.8 million poor children and orphans with exam fees and school tuition (UNICEF 2023), it faces a myriad of challenges with underfunding, delayed payments and contestations over selection processes being the major ones (Maushe 2019:3-4). It is therefore not surprising that as the cost of education increases, without adequate support the number of children and the youth who face financial constraints end up dropping out of school. Inadequate fiscal support and robust social protection initiatives, raises concerns and support the suggestions by the TSP framework for the need of a mutually beneficial alliance between economic and social policy . The redistribution of economic resources to social service provision including education to ensure fair fiscal compact, social justice and equity thus becomes a policy imperative, which is recommended for adoption in Zimbabwe’s education landscape. It can play a part in the building of mitigatory measures to address the challenge of OOSC. This must be done concurrently with initiatives in other sectors and policy instruments to ensure there is synergy and equity in the distribution of resources.

Macro-economic challenges remain a key contributor to the broader causes of OOSC in the country, as drivers of poverty, vulnerability and precarity. The challenges facing the country in contemporary times are put into perspective by the World Food Programme (WFP) which notes that the country is a low-income, food-deficit country ravaged by high inflation and the debilitating impact of climate change. It states that extreme poverty affects 42% of the population. 3.8 million people were expected to experience food insecurity in 2022–2023, while 1.5 million urbanites (or 29% of the urban population) were expected to have cereal insecurity (WFP 2023). In the 2022 Global Hunger Index classification, the situation in Zimbabwe was deemed to be ‘serious’ standing at 13th of the worst globally (von Grebmer et al. 2022). In the 2021/22 Human Development Index, Zimbabwe was ranked 146 out of 191 countries (UNDP 2022). These realities highlight the situation which the country has been in

for decades, negatively impacting on education provision (WFP 2023). As shown in the data, issues of financial challenges, poverty and related social ills which are a consequence of a turbulent economic environment are a major contributor to OOSC. High levels of poverty, food insecurity, economic challenges and precarity which are a common feature in rural and urban Zimbabwe contribute to OOSC, and this has been shown in the different data sets presented in this paper. This challenge negatively affects the education sector and from a TSP perspective it highlights several issues which cumulatively motivates a critical reflection on the social policy architecture in a development context especially in relation to education. Firstly, in relation to objectives of TSP, it stimulates a reflection on the utility of having a synergistic relationship between economic and social policy and the need to have policies in place with an underlying objective of enhancing the productive and reproductive capacities of citizens to ensure their wellbeing. Critical for this is a multi-sectoral approach that addresses issues identified in relation to fuelling OOSC. This presents a different approach to the current approaches which in many respects are siloed. This is useful and can help in overcoming the prevalence of OOSC, addressing some of the root causes of OOSC and redressing geographical factors and imbalances which have caused regional disparities in the distribution of OOSC with some regions having numbers that are too high. Having in place

Equally important and deriving from lessons learnt during the pandemic is the need for enhanced social protection mechanisms which provide protection against negative life risks *ex-ante* rather than *ex-poste*. Interventions premised on the TSP logic need to be put in place which anticipate and are responsive to life cycle risks as well as idiosyncratic and systemic shocks which as have been shown negatively impact on education provision and by extension the prevalence of OOSC. Critical is introducing these issues in policy development and implementation. The information on OOSC presented in this paper suggests that while the requisite educational policies and legislation are in place buttressed by a commitment to

international conventions and global goals; socio-cultural practices and religions continue playing important roles in the education sector. Unfortunately, some aspects are negative and contribute to an increase in the prevalence of OOSC. Early marriages and pregnancies as shown in the data are a major contributor to OOSC especially at the secondary school level. The government enacted the Education Amendment Act of 2020, which includes rules on pregnant girls' and adolescent mother's re-entry into school, to protect girl children. So far, this has been viewed as a success and a start in the right direction towards enhancing the female child's life, granting her access to education, and lowering OOSC.

From a TSP perspective, these challenges of early marriage and pregnancy bring to the fore serious issues and concerns in relation to issues of social justice, social cohesion/nation building and social reproduction. The continued rise in the number of OOSC due to early marriage and pregnancies is symptomatic of some deficiencies in the policy and legislative framework as well as community involvement to effectively address this challenge. This motivates the urgency to revisit preventative and mitigatory interventions and ensure synergy between various policies and the legislative framework. Equally important is stakeholder participation to deal with cross cutting socio-cultural, traditional, and religious dynamics which contribute to high out-of-school levels.

The high incidence of OOSC in the country motivates a serious introspection on the efficacy of the policy and legislative framework and a rethinking on how these need to be made more effective. It can be argued that the policy and legislative framework on education, premised on empirical data can provide a foundation upon which a social contract is forged to deal with OOSC. In order to promote a relationship between the state, citizens, and other stakeholders that prioritises the fulfilment of rights and obligations as well as social justice in respect to the right to education, a contract of this kind that is based on negotiation is required. The focus of such a contract is the reform and transformation of institutions and structures that

can be used to combat the plague of OOSC and that define the vertical and horizontal relationships between citizens and the State. Unlike the current scenario where interventions to address the challenges of OOSC are fragmented, having a social contract in place will foster a united approach to addressing the challenge underpinned by the TSP which places premium on human rights, a fiscal contract that fairly distributes the financial burden and interventions aimed at transformation of the economy and society. These can be expected to cumulatively ensure that there is the promotion of social inclusion and equality, there is transformation and reconfiguration of relations between the state and citizens, thus effectively addressing the issue of OOSC. Critical for the success of the interventions in the Zimbabwe context will be buy in by all stakeholders and more importantly political will.

Conclusion

OOSC in Zimbabwe is symptomatic of the result of a greater crisis which is a consequence of the interlinked challenges of poverty, inequality, economic collapse, climate stress, and ecological challenges, among others. These challenges have in different ways negatively affected basic service provision while also disrupting developmental milestones. When it comes to the issue of OOSC, available data suggests that there are discernible challenges which are contributing to the high number of school dropouts. Financial constraints, poverty, geographical dynamics, the scourge of early marriages and pregnancy as well as to a limited extent religion and child labour particularly stand out. This necessitates a policy and legal framework geared towards addressing the scourge of OOSC and its deleterious impact. To the credit of Zimbabwe, there is hope as exemplified by formulation of the Transitional Stabilisation Programme and its successor NDS1 as well as the numerous policies on education and the legislative framework, which have been clear on the need to address the challenge of OOSC and proffer a roadmap on how this can be achieved. These have laid the groundwork

that will be essential in the near future to combat the OOSC scourge and guarantee that the nation stays on course to meet the Agenda 2030 targets. However, despite this optimism the challenge of implementation and funding remains a major cause for concern.

From lessons learnt in the Zimbabwe context it is quite clear that there are discernible deep seated structural issues which need to be addressed as a way of dealing with the challenge of OOSC. Data on OOSC in the country is clear that wealth disparities, poverty, gender issues, the influence of religion, geographical disparities, socio-cultural issues, the scourge of early marriages, teenage pregnancies, child labour among other issues contribute to the high number of school dropouts. These need to be taken into consideration when developing policies plans and strategies aimed at dealing with the crisis of OOSC. While policies have emerged in the past few years in the context of a robust legal framework targeting the education sector, they still need to be reconfigured under a social contract geared towards transformative change. From a TSP perspective, discriminatory social institutions, and practices as well as unequal power relations which fuel high OOS rates need to be confronted and changed. Social institutions as noted elsewhere and applicable in the Zimbabwe context produce and reproduce unequal social relations with formal and informal rules that organise socio-economic and political relations (Cerise & Francavilla 2012). These have an influence on OOSC prevalence. Transformation of these social institutions (which have been shown in the data as partly contributing to OOSC) under a new social contract becomes an imperative. At its core should be the goal of fostering equality and co-operative forms of power relations and the affirmation of people's capabilities, aspirations, dignity, critical awareness, and collective agency which are an imperative for individual and collective empowerment (van Eerdewijk et al. 2017). Having an approach that emphasises a process of transformative change in the key dimensions of social institutions, power relations and agency can potentially reduce the incidence of OOSC.

From a TSP perspective, it can also be argued that for the OOSC challenge to be overcome there is need to lay emphasis on transition trajectories underpinned by a fair fiscal contract and adequate financial support that is motivated by the desire to redistribute from the economic to the social. In the Zimbabwe case, this can be exemplified by increased financial investment in the education sector with concurrent initiatives like the adoption of pro-poor poverty mitigation-oriented policies, support to poor families and initiatives that discourage early marriages and pregnancies while also supporting victims and enabling them to continue with their schooling. Interventions need not be reduced to education policy only as a social policy instrument but other policies as well that prevent and mitigate financial hardships; that enhance the productive capacities of individuals and communities as they build capabilities; that tackle inequalities; that are gender sensitive and most importantly that are premised on rights-based approaches. Policy interventions must be evidence based and utilise the different sources of data and at their core must the motivation to foster solidarity, sustainability, and inclusivity. The Zimbabwe case from a TSP perspective can be summed up as necessitating the need for a social policy-oriented approach in the education sector that is evidenced based and prioritises strategic development interventions and transformation. Addressing the problem of OOSC in Zimbabwe necessitates interventions premised on the root causes that takes into consideration local realities, needs and priorities. Broader developmental concerns, strategies to reduce poverty, the challenge of early marriage and pregnancies, harmful social and gender norms, rural and urban inequalities among others need to be put at the centre in the crafting of mitigatory interventions.

Declarations Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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