



Barriers to enrollment in secondary school in Ethiopia: A formative qualitative investigation

Evidence from SPIR II

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Overview and study objectives

Since its inception in 2005, the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) has been a cornerstone of the Ethiopian government's strategy for poverty alleviation, disaster risk management, and rural development. The PSNP provides food or cash transfers targeted to poor households in the form of payments for seasonal labor on public works or as direct support to households. It has played an important role in improving the lives of poor Ethiopian households by reducing household food insecurity, increasing asset holdings, and improving agricultural productivity (Berhane et al. 2014; Hoddinott et al. 2012).

The Strengthen PSNP5 Institutions and Resilience (SPIR II) Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) in Ethiopia is a five-year project (2021–2026) that supports implementation of the fifth phase of the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP5) in the Amhara and Oromia regions and provides complementary livelihood, nutrition, gender, and climate resilience activities. Activities under SPIR II are organized into three purpose areas: 1) sustained nutrition security, 2) reduced livelihood risk, and 3) strengthened social safety nets. World Vision, with funding from USAID's Food for Peace (FFP) Initiative and in close collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia, leads implementation of the SPIR RFSA in partnership with the Organization for Rehabilitation and Development in Amhara (ORDA) and CARE.

IFPRI is leading the SPIR II learning agenda in close collaboration with the implementation partners, and as part of this learning agenda, conducted a series of formative studies in the first year of program implementation. The objective of this formative qualitative investigation was to learn more about the challenges linked to youth education in the secondary school period, given the evidence that there is a dramatic drop-off in enrollment in this stage of education. Ministry of Education statistics show that

gross enrollment rates plummet from 88 percent to 53 percent (Amhara) and from 102 percent to 35 percent (Oromia) between primary (grades 1 through 8) and secondary (grades 9 to 12). There is also evidence of a gender gap in secondary school enrollment, though the gap is not large: nationwide, the gross enrollment rate of boys in secondary school is 44%, compared with 40% for girls (Ministry of Education 2021).

IFPRI’s investigation focused on the following research questions:

- 1) What are the primary obstacles to enrollment in secondary school for youth in rural communities, as perceived by youth themselves and their parents and teachers?
- 2) Are there differential barriers to enrollment that are particularly salient for female youth?
- 3) Do parents of youth and youth who are enrolled in school perceive that this education is high-quality and conducive to their future educational or professional goals for their child (if parents) or themselves?
- 4) What interventions might shift households’ and youths’ decisions around secondary school enrollment?

Methods

The qualitative study was conducted in East Hararghe and West Hararghe Zones in the Oromia region (Milkaye, Sakina, Arella Guda, and Goro Gerbi kebeles). Data collection was not conducted in Amhara because the study regions in Amhara were largely inaccessible due to conflict during the data collection stage of the study. The primary methodology was focus groups, and the target participants included parents of youth enrolled in secondary school (grades 9–12); adults who are beneficiaries of PSNP and parents of adolescents (independent of their enrollment status); youth enrolled in secondary school (grades 9–12); youth who are resident in households that are beneficiaries of the PSNP (again, independent of their enrollment status); youth enrolled in grade 8 (the final year prior to primary school); and teachers of students in grade 8.

The goal was to conduct four focus groups in each category, with each group including six participants (three men and three women). Table 1 summarizes the focus groups as conducted.

Table 1: Summary of focus groups

	Number of focus groups	Number of participants	Number of men	Number of women
Parents of youth enrolled in secondary school	4	22	12	10
Parents of youth who are PSNP recipients	4	23	12	11
Youth enrolled in secondary school	4	23	12	11
Youth from PSNP households	4	23	12	11
Youth enrolled in grade 8	4	24	12	12
Teachers	4	24	12	12

Qualitative data collection was led by Ayantu Nemera, a social anthropologist from Addis Ababa University. Ms. Nemera supervised the focus groups and analyzed the collected data using thematic methods.

Primary findings

Financial barriers to secondary school enrollment

The primary finding from the formative work is that financial barriers are the main impediment preventing youth from rural PSNP households from enrolling in secondary school. The majority of rural households in the study area live too far from secondary schools for their children to travel daily to school; secondary schools are generally located in more central kebeles that include a larger town, a pattern that reflects the limited supply of secondary schools in rural areas. Accordingly, for children to attend, parents must pay the costs of their accommodation in the school locality. These costs are often estimated to be 600 to 1000 birr monthly for basic accommodation. The high cost of school uniforms and materials was also noted as a challenge. These financial burdens are particularly acute for households that are PSNP recipients, for female-headed households, and for households experiencing other adverse shocks such as an illness affecting the household head that would require youth to engage in economic activities to support their families' subsistence needs.

Consistent with the stated salience of financial constraints, a number of individuals within the focus groups of youth from PSNP households reported that they had already dropped out of school, largely because of financial challenges. These youth stated a desire to return to school when possible, and many reported that they are actively saving funds and negotiating with their parents for a return to school when it is financially feasible.

Perceptions of the value of secondary school education

Parents and youth alike, including female youth, generally reported that they placed a high value on secondary education. Youth participants in focus groups expressed an interest in education potentially up to the postgraduate level, and highlighted that education is the foundation for both individual advancement — obtaining higher-quality employment and a greater level of personal success — and also a tool to contribute to collective goals, including eradicating poverty and transforming the community. Many youth, including youth from PSNP households, readily identified higher-level professional ambitions (becoming a doctor, engineer, journalist, or accountant).

Challenges for female youth

When households do face financial constraints, parents and youth generally report that first-born children and/or sons may have priority in enrollment over younger children or daughters. Some youth report dropping out to facilitate the continued schooling of an older sibling, with the expectation that they will return to school once the sibling has graduated. As noted above, however, nationwide data on school enrollment suggests that the gender gap in school enrollment is not large.

Some households also report apprehension about the potential for enrollment of their daughters in secondary school, and the associated requirement that girls live away from home, to expose them to increased risk of

Box 1: Key findings from the formative work

- ▶ Secondary school education is highly valued by both youth and parents in rural communities, including both PSNP and non-PSNP households.
- ▶ However, given that secondary schools are generally located at a considerable distance from rural households (often in mid-sized towns), enrollment entails substantial costs for transportation or accommodation of youth near the school.
- ▶ As a result, financial constraints are the most important barrier for secondary school enrollment for youths from PSNP households.
- ▶ These constraints may be particularly salient for female youth and younger siblings.

harassment or greater insecurity. These households may prefer to have their daughters commute daily to school if possible (even if the commute is lengthy), or otherwise decline to enroll them. Another challenge for both female and male youth is parents' perception that the larger towns in which secondary schools are located are an unfriendly environment for their children, possibly reflecting the complex relationships that arise when a community is hosting youth living independently and largely without parental supervision.

School quality

In terms of the perception of school facilities, the majority of households and youth highlight serious concerns about educational quality at school facilities, including outdated buildings, limited equipment, shortages of textbooks that require students to share textbooks, and perhaps most importantly, shortages of teachers (especially for English and mathematics). Despite these concerns about school quality, parents and youth still indicate a strong preference to actively pursue secondary education.

Implications for future work

The next step in the SPIR II learning agenda is the implementation of a larger-scale randomized controlled trial to evaluate the effects of a scholarship targeting secondary school enrollment among youth in PSNP households. This scholarship will be rolled out by the consortium members in 2023 and is designed to target exactly the financial barriers that are identified as a key constraint for secondary school enrollment. The primary questions of interest for the trial will include the following: What is the impact of a scholarship for secondary school attendance on outcome variables including enrollment and performance in secondary schools and other youth-related outcomes? What is the impact of the scholarship for youth who have already dropped out? This will allow us to assess whether the scholarship is an effective tool to enhance youth educational attainment and improve outcomes.

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