

Project Summary

HIGH IMPACTS AND RETURNS

From investing in adolescents at scale in Kenya



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key findings

Investing US\$46.1 million to scale proven cash 'plus' programming across would:

- Reach 140,000 adolescents over four years.
- Generate 74,900 additional years of schooling for adolescents.
- Avert over 1420 adolescent pregnancies and 1500 girl child marriages.
- Deliver economic returns of more than seven-to-one from higher labour productivity, rising further if associated health benefits were monetised.

Background

In Kenya, school absenteeism and dropout among adolescents contribute to early entry into informal, low-paying employment, reinforcing cycles of poverty. For adolescent girls in particular, these patterns are associated with increased vulnerability to child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and gender-based violence, as well as more limited opportunities to build agency and human capital.

This study uses integrated health and economic modelling to estimate the impact of scaling up an evidence-based cash 'plus' programme for adolescents nationally. The programme, which combines conditional cash transfers with community engagement, safe spaces, and parenting support, would reach 148,684 adolescents over four years. Results indicate that expanding investment in adolescents would deliver transformative, multi-sectoral benefits with high economic returns.

Policy Recommendations

The modelling results support the following policy actions:

1. Invest in adolescent cash 'plus' programmes for multisectoral impacts. Combining cash transfers with complementary interventions could deliver substantial gains in adolescent schooling, reductions in adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and violence, and increased labour productivity in adulthood.

2. Embed adolescent cash 'plus' in Kenya's social protection system as a high-return economic investment. An adolescent-focused cash 'plus' programme supporting adolescent girls and boys could deliver seven-to-one returns on investment and strengthen sustainability through national ownership.

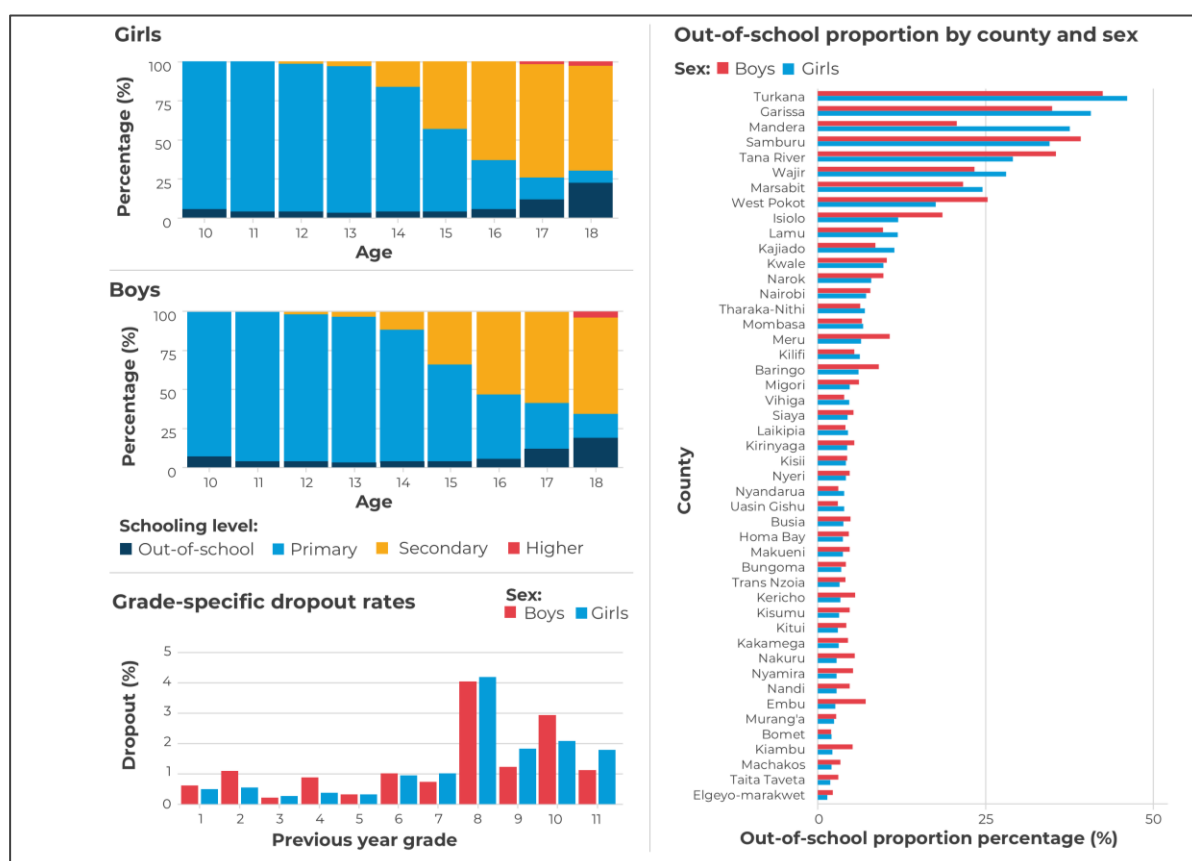
3. Use cross-sectoral leadership and decision modelling to guide adolescent investments. Leveraging existing data to forecast outcomes can help target resources to interventions with the greatest human development and economic returns, while ensuring relevance to Kenya's implementation context.

INVESTING IN ADOLESCENTS FOR KENYA'S DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

Adolescents in Kenya represent a crucial demographic group, accounting for more than a fifth of the total population.^{1,2} Although considerable progress has been made to promote adolescent-focused policies, standards, and guidelines, many continue to face significant social and economic constraints.³⁻⁵ Low transition to secondary school, late school entry, and dropout contribute to early entry into informal, low-paying jobs that perpetuate cycles of poverty (Figure 1).⁶ Adolescent girls face additional risks with HIV acquisition rates six times higher than those of boys, and lower rates of secondary school completion.⁷⁻⁹ Furthermore, 23% of girls are also married before 18, and the rate of adolescent pregnancy is 15%, with even higher rates observed in marginalised counties such as those in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs). Food insecurity, limited parental monitoring, and inequitable gender norms play an important role in elevating these risks.¹⁰

Adolescence is a pivotal period for shaping life trajectories, and investments in effective interventions during this stage offer strong potential for long-term and cross-sectoral impacts.^{11,12} By improving the broader economic conditions that influence families' and adolescents' capacity to engage in healthy behaviours, social protection initiatives, and particularly cash transfers, have been shown to improve school enrolment and attendance, reduce child labour, and delay sexual debut, with emerging evidence of longer-term gains in labour market outcomes.¹³⁻¹⁹ However, the evidence that cash transfers alone can consistently support other dimensions of adolescent development and in particular, adolescent pregnancy, child marriage, and experiences of violence remains mixed and context-specific.^{14,20-22}

Figure 1. Education pathways for adolescent girls and boys aged 10-18 in Kenya.



In response, there is growing interest in cash ‘plus’ approaches that combine cash transfers with complementary interventions designed to address the structural, social, and behavioural drivers of adolescent vulnerability.^{23–28} In Kenya, the most robust evidence for this approach comes from the Adolescent Girls Initiative Kenya (AGI-K) programme. AGI-K demonstrated that integrating conditional cash transfers with safe spaces, and community engagement can shift harmful gender norms, reduce adolescent pregnancy and child marriage, and improve adolescent girls’ self-efficacy, savings behaviour, and financial literacy.^{26–29}

While Kenya has expanded social protection through the *Inua Jamii* National Safety Net Programme (NSNP), existing interventions are not designed to address adolescents’ specific developmental risks. A targeted cash ‘plus’ programme integrated within the national social protection system offers a promising opportunity to strengthen adolescent outcomes and increase the returns on social investment.

DESIGNING AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED ADOLESCENT CASH PLUS PROGRAMME IN KENYA

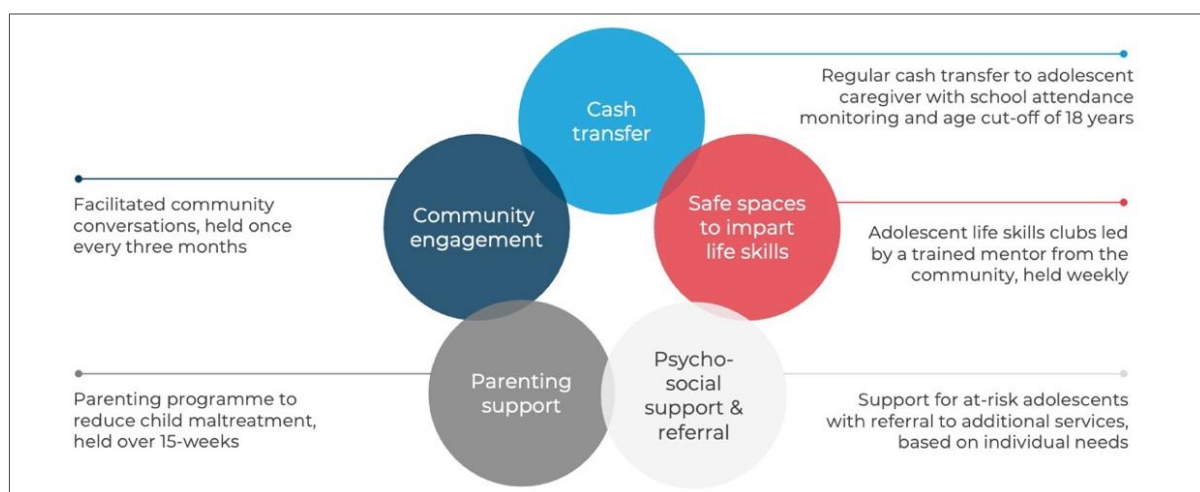
Promising, rigorously tested approaches to support adolescent education and wellbeing have been implemented in Kenya. A leading example is AGI-K, a large-scale randomised evaluation conducted in both urban informal settlements (Kibera, Nairobi County) and rural, marginalised settings (Wajir County). AGI-K tested an integrated cash ‘plus’ package combining community engagement, conditional cash transfers linked to school enrolment, and life skills training delivered through girl-only safe spaces. Financial literacy and savings education were also delivered through these safe spaces, particularly for older adolescent girls. With six years of follow-up, the evaluation found that AGI-K increased school enrolment and reduced early marriage and adolescent childbearing in rural Wajir, while impacts in urban Kibera were smaller, reflecting higher baseline enrolment and lower prevalence of early marriage.^{26–29}

Building on this evidence, between June 2024 and March 2025, the Government of Kenya convened a multi-sectoral technical working group, including representatives from the World Bank, the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, UNICEF, Population Council and the Accelerate Research Hub to appraise this evidence and translate it into an implementable national programme for adolescents of both sexes. In addition to improving education outcomes, the programme was designed with a specific objective of reducing adolescents’ exposure to sexual, physical, and emotional violence. Evidence from well-evaluated parenting support interventions, including Parenting for Lifelong Health programmes, informed the inclusion of a parenting component aimed at strengthening caregiver–adolescent relationships and non-violent discipline.^{30–32}

The proposed adolescent cash ‘plus’ programme would target both girls and boys aged 10–18 in poor households enrolled in the NSNP. Eligible and selected households would receive conditional cash transfers of KSh 1,000, paid to caregivers of adolescents enrolled in school or who want to return to school. Transfers would be provided during the school year, with school attendance monitored to support continued enrolment. The cash transfer component would be complemented by a set of interventions designed to create supportive family and community environments (Figure 2). These include community engagement to promote positive social norms around education and adolescent wellbeing; a 14-week parenting support programme adapted from the WHO Parenting for Lifelong Health Teen model to improve caregiver–adolescent relationships; and safe space clubs led

by trained mentors to build adolescents' life skills, confidence, and peer support.³⁰ Together with strengthened linkages to existing psychosocial support and child protection services, these components aim to provide comprehensive support to adolescents.

Figure 2. Cash 'plus' intervention components



SIMULATING THE IMPACTS AND RETURNS OF SCALING UP CASH PLUS SUPPORT FOR ADOLESCENTS IN KENYA

The aim of this research was to use health impact and economic modelling to estimate the potential health, education, and economic impacts and returns of scaling up the evidence-based cash 'plus' programme to support adolescents across Kenya. The modelling focused on nine counties in Kenya: Bungoma, Homa Bay, Kilifi, Mandera, Marsabit, Migori, Nairobi, Samburu, and Wajir, which were selected by the multi-sectoral technical working group based on high poverty levels, adolescent out-of-school and pregnancy rates, existing social protection programming, and regional representation.

Purpose-built simulation models were developed to project programme impacts from 2026 to 2030 and track long-term outcomes over beneficiaries' lifetimes. Gains in years of schooling were projected using an education-transition model, while reductions in child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and related health outcomes were estimated using Lexis-based age-cohort models. Economic returns were calculated using Mincerian earnings functions.

The models were calibrated using representative data from Kenya on schooling, marriage, fertility, and socioeconomic conditions from the 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and the 2019 Kenya Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (VACS).^{6,33} National social registry data provided by the Kenya State Department of Social Protection was used to inform beneficiary numbers. Effect estimates were informed by comprehensive reviews of available randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies on cash-plus programmes from the region, including the AGI-K programme and Kenya's Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children.^{26–29,34}

Costing followed a provider perspective and used an ingredients-based approach informed by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) Costing Template.³⁵ Estimates were developed through consultation with the technical working group and informed by a review of existing evidence, unit cost data from the AGI-K evaluation team, and Global Parenting Initiative.^{36–38} All costs and economic benefits were discounted at an annual rate of 3%.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

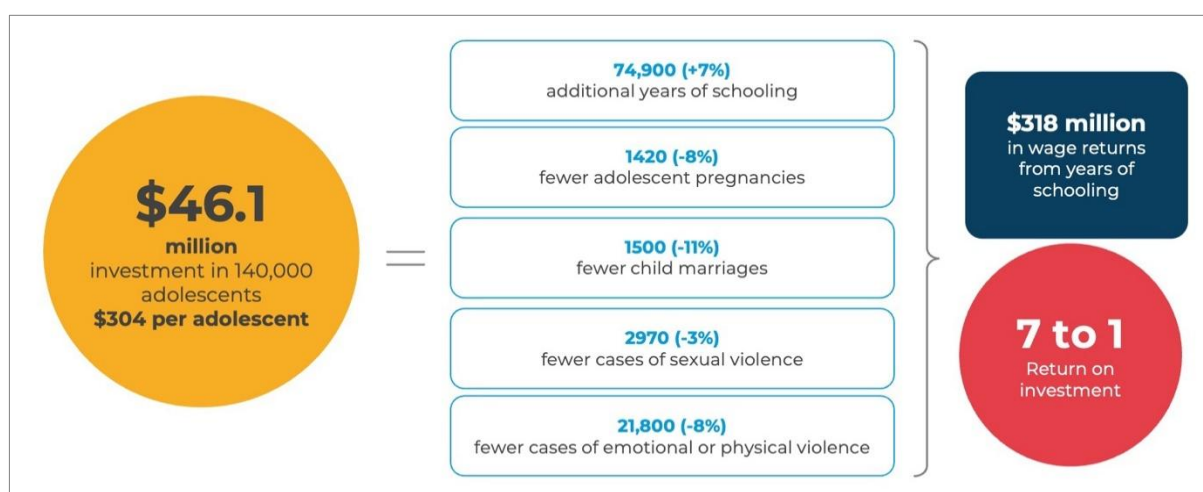
The expected impact of the adolescent cash ‘plus’ programme (Figure 3) extends beyond education retention to broader social and economic outcomes. Collectively, these interventions are expected to contribute to greater educational attainment, lower rates of early pregnancy and child marriage, improved adolescent wellbeing, and higher labour productivity in adulthood.

The target population comprises **140,000 adolescents** living in NSNP households across 18 subcounties in nine counties (two subcounties per county). To reach this population, we estimated total programme costs of **\$46.1 million** over four years, with conditional cash transfers (\$28.2 million) as the main cost driver, followed by community-based interventions, administrative expenses, psychosocial support, and schooling-related costs.

The impact modelling estimated that this investment, equivalent to approximately \$304 per adolescent, would deliver substantial gains in education, health, and socio-economic outcomes during the implementation period and over beneficiaries’ lifetimes. Projected impacts include **74,900 years of additional schooling (a 7% increase), and the prevention of 1420 adolescent pregnancies (-8%) and 1500 child marriages (-11%)**. The parenting support programme is also estimated to **avert around 2970 experiences of sexual violence (-3%) and 21,800 experiences of emotional or physical violence (-8%)**.

The additional years of schooling are projected to generate approximately **\$318 million in lifetime economic returns** through increased labour market productivity, equivalent to a **seven-to-one return on investment**. If associated health benefits were quantified, the returns would be even higher. Additional benefits, such as improvements in adolescent mental health and gains in agency and resilience, cannot be fully quantified and would also be expected to expand programme impacts. Overall, these findings highlight the potential of the adolescent cash ‘plus’ programme to deliver meaningful and cost-effective improvements in adolescent outcomes, at an estimated cost of \$567 per additional year of schooling gained.

Figure 3. Summary of impacts, returns, and costs of supporting 140,000 adolescents over four years



While this study applies rigorous methods in decision-analytic and economic modelling, several limitations should be considered when assessing the implications of taking the programme to scale. While the model considered the costs required to maintain pupil–teacher ratios, it assumes that increased school enrolment can be absorbed without other investments, such as classroom infrastructure or learning materials. In addition, because

AGI-K only evaluated interventions for girls, the model assumes that the education impacts of the cash transfer component generalise to boys. This assumption is supported by a robust global evidence base indicating that cash transfers improve school enrolment and attendance to a similar extent for girls and boys.^{39,40} Finally, broader socio-economic and environmental changes, including climate-related shocks, may influence outcomes over time, highlighting the importance of periodic reassessment as the programme expands.

POLICY PRIORITIES

As the Government of Kenya considers the design and implementation of this programme, the research findings highlight several priorities for the Government, donors, and development partners:

- 1. Invest in adolescent cash ‘plus’ programmes for multisectoral impacts, including improving education, delaying adolescent pregnancy, and supporting broader wellbeing.** Evidence from simulation modelling indicates that combining cash transfers with complementary interventions, including safe spaces, parenting programmes, and community dialogues, could deliver substantial impacts in schooling, delaying adolescent pregnancy, preventing child marriage and violence, and increasing labour force productivity in adulthood. Cash ‘plus’ that respond to the different challenges faced by adolescent girls and boys can improve wellbeing while supporting national development. These combined approaches strengthen adolescents’ agency and decision-making, expanding opportunities and reducing inequalities. Programme design should also consider other barriers to education and employment, including safety concerns, care responsibilities, limited job opportunities, and legal constraints.
- 2. Embed adolescent cash ‘plus’ within Kenya’s social protection system as a high-return economic investment.** A multi-component cash ‘plus’ programme to support adolescents’ schooling and health has the potential to deliver a seven-to-one return on the initial investment. This integration can also improve national ownership, build institutional capacity, and strengthen accountability over programmes for adolescents. Delivering adolescent-focused social protection and education support programmes through existing systems enables countries to more easily scale interventions while maintaining alignment with national priorities.
- 3. Use cross-sectoral leadership and decision modelling to guide and prioritise adolescent investment decisions.** Considering decreasing global investment in adolescent health, decision analytic modelling can inform strategic and effective resource allocation by estimating interventions’ cost-effectiveness and returns to investment. Leveraging existing data to forecast outcomes enables policymakers to target resources toward interventions with the greatest human development and economic returns, while multi-stakeholder leadership ensures relevance to Kenya’s implementation context. This collaboration can enhance transparency, strengthen alignment across sectors, and support iterative learning as programme designs evolve.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this modelling analysis show that scaling evidence-based programmes for adolescents in Kenya would generate substantial improvements in education, health, and wellbeing, alongside strong economic returns.

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