



ICAN-ICAR Report

Tanzania, 2026

The State of Reading and Numeracy among Children Aged 5–16



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ACRONYMS

ABBREVIATION	MEANING
CLA	Citizen-Led Assessment
Dira 2050	Tanzania Development Vision 2050
EA	Enumeration Area
FLN	Foundational Literacy and Numeracy
GPF	Global Proficiency Framework
ICAN	International Common Assessment of Numeracy
ICAR	International Common Assessment of Reading
KKK	Kusoma, Kuandika na Kuhesabu (the 3Rs)
MMK-KKK	Scientific Strategic Plan for the 3Rs (2026–2030)
MPL	Minimum Proficiency Level
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
PAL Network	People's Action for Learning Network
PCA	Principal Components Analysis
PCM	Pairwise Comparison Method
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SES	Socio-Economic Status
TaRL	Teaching at the Right Level
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
URT	United Republic of Tanzania
UWaWa	Teacher-Parent Partnership (Ushirikiano wa Walimu na Wazazi)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025 ICAN-ICAR assessment provides the first post-pandemic, nationally representative and internationally comparable baseline on foundational literacy and numeracy for children aged 5–16, with results reported at two global benchmarks: ten-year-olds and Grade 4 pupils. Building on Uwezo’s earlier citizen-led assessments, it offers renewed, actionable evidence on where children stand in reading and numeracy. Using a two-stage, stratified probability sampling design, Uwezo Tanzania sampled 372 enumeration areas and 7,220 households, and directly assessed 13,167 children in their homes through one-to-one tasks in Kiswahili. The tools are aligned with the Global Proficiency Framework (GPF); Minimum Proficiency Levels (MPLs) were set through an international Pairwise Comparison Method (PCM) process. The ICAN-ICAR tools, sampling and field processes have been vetted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) under the “SDG 4.1.1 Data Readiness Review and Support Mechanism” initiative and concluded to be suitable for SDG 4.1.1(a) reporting.

At the national level, Tanzania faces a serious foundational learning crisis. Among ten-year-olds, 54.9% reach MPL in mathematics, 39.8% in reading, and only 34.5% in both subjects simultaneously — placing the country in the “Low” band for combined proficiency and well-off-track for achieving the SDG 4.1.1(a) goal. Only about one in three ten-year-olds has the minimum skills to progress successfully, despite near-universal primary enrolment. Reading lags mathematics in virtually every region and subgroup, signalling a foundational reading emergency even though most children speak Kiswahili — the language of instruction and assessment — at home.

The regional distribution reveals a highly unequal, multi-speed system. For ten-year-olds, combined MPL ranges from 67.6% in Dar es Salaam to just 6.4% in Rukwa — a gap of more than 60 percentage points. Only 9 of 26 regions reach the 40% combined-MPL reference threshold, while 11 have fewer than one in four children reaching combined proficiency. High-performing regions are typically urbanised or historically advantaged;

low- and critical-performing regions are predominantly rural, poorer and more remote.

Household and contextual data show who is being left behind. Among adolescents aged 10–14, 88.9% attend government schools and 3.9% private schools, leaving 7.2% out of school; rural adolescents are more than three times as likely to be out of school as urban peers (10.4% vs 2.9%). Out-of-school adolescents are almost entirely excluded from mastery: only 11.5% reach combined MPL versus 49.3% of enrolled peers. Basic-service coverage is high (95.7% have a toilet, 87.4% a mobile phone), but learning resources are scarce: only 31.9% of children have age-appropriate books, 35.8% have the required textbooks, and just 9.4% of households have a computer or tablet. Poverty, rural residence, agricultural livelihoods and low parental education are the strongest correlates of low proficiency; having at least one parent who completed primary school is a powerful protective factor.

Gender patterns are relatively balanced. At age 10, girls hold a small, consistent edge — 36.3% reach combined MPL versus 32.5% of boys — with similar patterns in Grade 4. The sharper inequalities emerge where gender intersects with poverty, rurality and low parental education. The assessment also establishes a national baseline on functional difficulties, pointing to the need for early identification so these children are not left invisible.

The report translates this evidence into a tiered policy agenda: emergency, equity-driven investment in low- and critical-performing regions; acceleration in middle-tier regions; and consolidation and scaling of effective practice from high performers. It calls for early-grade reading to be treated as an educational emergency, for combined proficiency to become the central national learning indicator, for the home learning environment to be strengthened through teacher–parent partnerships, and for out-of-school adolescents and children with functional difficulties to be brought to the centre of reform and monitoring.

KEY MESSAGE

Only one in three ten-year-olds in Tanzania (34.5%) has minimum proficiency in BOTH reading and mathematics. Reading — not numeracy — is the binding constraint, and where a child lives matters more than their sex.



1. INTRODUCTION: WHY FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING MATTERS IN TANZANIA



Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) — the ability to read for meaning and perform basic mathematical operations — is the bedrock of all subsequent learning and of national prosperity. Globally, an estimated six in ten children are not achieving minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics (UIS, 2017), and in low- and middle-income countries nearly 70% of ten-year-olds cannot read a simple text with comprehension (World Bank, 2022). Tanzania’s ambition of a knowledge-based, upper-middle-income society under Tanzania Development Vision 2050 (Dira 2050) depends on ensuring every child acquires these competencies early and breaks the cycle of learning poverty.

1.1 NATIONAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

The Tanzanian education system is guided by the Education and Training Policy (2014, 2023 Edition) and the National Curriculum Framework for Basic and Teacher Education (2019). The government has moved to a restructured model that includes one year of pre-primary and six years of primary education, with ten years of compulsory basic education spanning primary through lower secondary. The Mpango Mkakati wa Kisayansi wa KKK (2026–2030) responds to

the fact that more than a third of pupils do not meet national proficiency standards, emphasising evidence-based decision-making and Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). Yet while primary enrolment has reached about 98%, a learning-data gap persists, and resource constraints remain significant — the primary pupil-to-classroom ratio averages about 1:70.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT AND RELEVANCE TO SDG 4.1.1(A)

SDG indicator 4.1.1(a) measures the proportion of children in the early grades achieving at least a Minimum Proficiency Level (MPL) in reading and mathematics. This report provides Tanzania’s directly reportable evidence against that indicator and pursues four objectives: to establish the first post-pandemic national baseline for SDG 4.1.1(a) and Dira 2050, to inform evidence-based policy by revealing disparities across gender, location and socio-economic status; to strengthen accountability by measuring learning rather than enrolment alone; and to catalyse remedial action in support of the KKK strategy. By bringing measurement into households rather than relying solely on school-based data, ICAN-ICAR makes “invisible” learners — out-of-school children and those lagging within the system — visible.

2. ABOUT THE ICAN-ICAR ASSESSMENT

The International Common Assessments of Numeracy (ICAN) and Reading (ICAR) is the PAL Network's flagship assessment program, offering globally comparable measures of foundational numeracy and reading. These are second-generation, household-based, citizen-led assessment tools, designed for oral, one-on-one administration of all 5–16-year-old children and full aligned with the Global Proficiency Framework. Implemented across multiple countries, the program supports learning monitoring, policy dialogue, and cross-country comparisons.

2.1 WHAT IS ICAN-ICAR?

ICAN comprises 36 items across five numeracy domains, weighted heavily (about 64%) toward Number and Operations; to meet the MPL a child must count, compare and order whole numbers up to 100 and solve basic addition and subtraction within 20. ICAR comprises 30 items spanning oral language, decoding and reading comprehension; the MPL requires recognising common grade-level words and retrieving explicit information from a short (≈40-word) Grade-2-level text. Both are administered orally, one-to-one, with adaptive “stop rules” that keep tasks within each child's range, and are captured digitally in SurveyCTO — on average about six minutes for reading and eight for numeracy, within a household visit of roughly 35 minutes. The tools cover the 5–16 age range and are calibrated to internationally agreed Minimum Proficiency Levels: MPLs were set for Tanzania through an international Pairwise Comparison Method (PCM) process; the ICAN-ICAR tools, sampling and field processes were vetted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) under its “SDG 4.1.1 Data Readiness Review and Support Mechanism” and concluded to be suitable for SDG 4.1.1(a) reporting. Alongside the child assessments, contextual questionnaires collected community-, household-, parent- and child-level information, including the Washington Group Child Functioning Module, which underpins the disaggregated analysis presented later in this report.

2.2 WHY HOUSEHOLD-BASED ASSESSMENT?

Unlike school-based tests, household assessment reaches every child regardless of enrolment status — including those who have dropped out, attend irregularly, or never enrolled. This grade-neutral approach is essential for identifying children who are lagging behind their expected level and for capturing the full picture of learning in Tanzania. It is conducted in a one-on-one format in the child's home; in this cycle the assessment was administered entirely in Kiswahili, consistent with the medium of instruction under the Education and Training Policy (2023 Edition), so that results reflect learning rather than language barriers.





3. SAMPLING DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION IN TANZANIA

3.1 SAMPLING STRATEGY

The assessment used a two-stage, stratified probability design that makes the results nationally and regionally representative. Enumeration Areas were selected with Probability Proportional to Population Size, stratified by region and urban/rural classification, in partnership with the National Bureau of Statistics. Within each of 372 EAs, 20 households were selected using the Household Listing Method, and only households with at least one child aged 5–16 were surveyed.

3.2 FIELD IMPLEMENTATION

Fieldwork took place in the last week of August 2025, midway through an academic year that began in the first week of January — relevant context for interpreting where children were in their learning year. The assessment was conducted in Kiswahili. Data quality was assured through a tiered training cascade (two Training-of-Trainers rounds and 10 enumerator trainings) and a multi-layer Monitoring and Recheck protocol — Inter-Rater Reliability checks against an 80% consistency threshold, near-universal desk rechecks of SurveyCTO submissions, and field rechecks in selected communities. The assessment mobilised 639 citizen volunteers (42% female, average age 27).

3.3 SAMPLE OVERVIEW

The achieved sample provides a robust basis for national and regional estimation. More than 92% of eligible children in surveyed households were directly assessed, with a broadly balanced age and gender distribution across the 5–16 range.

TABLE 1. TANZANIA ICAN-ICAR 2025 ACHIEVED SAMPLE.
Over 92% Of Eligible Children In Surveyed Households Were Assessed.

METRIC	ACHIEVEMENT (N)
Enumeration Areas (EAs) covered	372
Households surveyed	7,220
Children surveyed	14,796
Children directly assessed	13,167

Over 92% of eligible children in surveyed households were assessed.

4. UNDERSTANDING LEARNING BENCHMARKS

MPLs are globally agreed standards for what children should be able to do at the end of lower primary, established through a UIS-led technical process and calibrated for Tanzania at an international Pairwise Comparison Method workshop involving about 40 experts. Results are reported at two points. Grade 4 is a system-proficiency lens: it shows how effectively the school system is delivering the curriculum by the end of lower primary. Age 10 is a grade-neutral lens: it captures all ten-year-olds — including out-of-school, over-age and retained children — and is therefore a stricter test of whether the system is reaching every child. Reporting both gives a complete picture of who is learning and who is being excluded.

KEY MESSAGE

Combined proficiency — reaching MPL in BOTH reading and mathematics — is the most meaningful measure of foundational learning and is used throughout this report as the headline indicator.





5. WHO ARE THE CHILDREN? BACKGROUND AND HOUSEHOLD CONTEXT

This section describes the household conditions that shape learning in Tanzania. These contextual variables — assets and basic services, parental education and employment, the home learning environment, and school participation — recur throughout the report as the main axes along which learning outcomes diverge.

5.1 SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Tanzanian households show high coverage of basic services but a stark digital divide. According to the 2025 data, 95.7% of surveyed households have access to a toilet or latrine and 87.4% own a mobile phone, but only 9.4% have a computer, laptop or tablet, and 40.6% own a television. This resource profile is consistent with a Human Capital Index of 0.39, meaning children currently reach only 39% of their potential adult productivity, and poses a direct challenge to Dira 2050's digital-literacy ambitions.

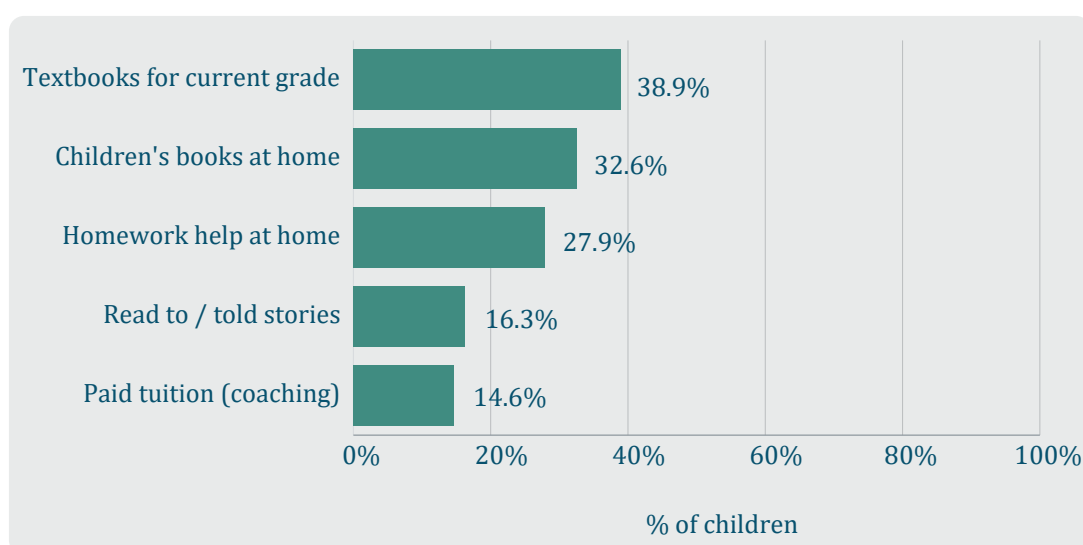
5.2 PARENTAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Parental education is one of the strongest descriptive correlates of learning: 62.6% of children live in households where at least one parent has completed primary education, and children with educated parents reach MPL at substantially higher rates (Section 7.3). Most employed parents work in family- or self-owned agriculture (about 65% of both mothers and fathers), with only small shares in non-agricultural wage work — a livelihood structure that is closely tied to the rural, agricultural learning penalty documented later. Household economic stability is further pressured by a high dependency ratio (national fertility of 4.8 births per woman), and although basic education is fee-free, families remain responsible for the enabling environment, including study materials.

5.3 LEARNING SUPPORT AT HOME

The home learning environment is characterised by critical gaps. Only 31.9% of children have age-appropriate children's books at home, and only 35.8% have the textbooks required for their current grade, short of the government's 1:1 textbook target. Just 30.3% of children receive homework help from a household member, about 14.8% take paid tuition, and being read to at home is rare. These material and engagement gaps constrain children's ability to consolidate what they learn in school and help explain the low national MPL levels (Section 7.4).

FIGURE 1: HOME-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT PROFILE, TANZANIA (AGES 10-14).



(Unweighted n=5,617)

5.4 GENDER

Gender disparities in foundational learning are small and not statistically significant at age 10, consistent with near-universal enrolment for both sexes. The assessment also establishes a national baseline on functional difficulties using the Washington Group Child Functioning Module: 0.51% of children report significant difficulty with remembering, 0.43% with self-care, and 0.38% with communication. The KKK strategy's emphasis on early identification is essential so that these children are supported rather than left invisible in future reforms and monitoring.



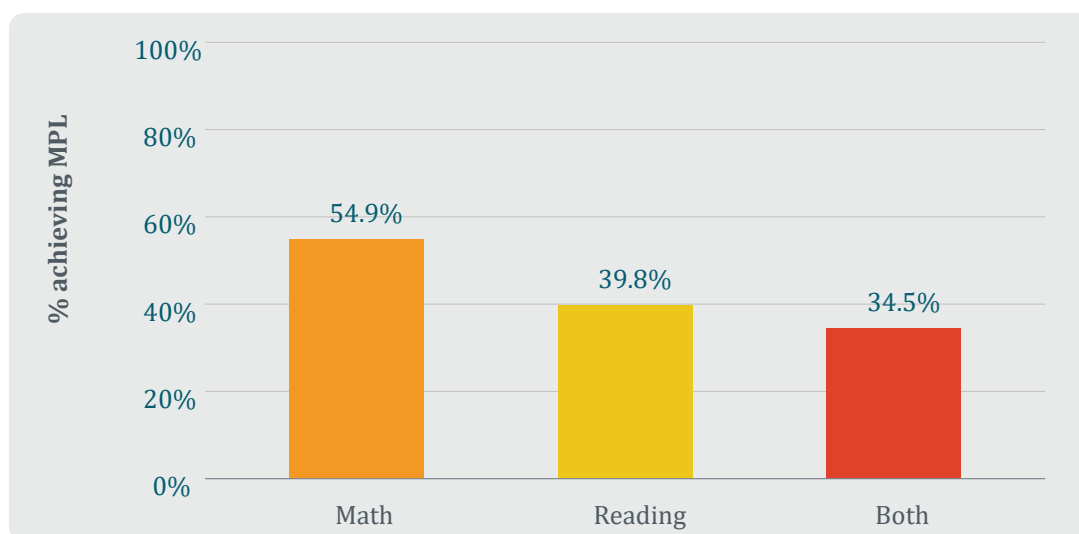


6. OVERALL LEARNING OUTCOMES IN TANZANIA

6.1 NATIONAL RESULTS

Fewer than half of Tanzania's ten-year-olds reach the expected minimum standard in either core domain, and only about a third do so in both. In 2025, 54.9% of ten-year-olds achieved the MPL in mathematics, 39.8% in reading, and 34.5% in both subjects simultaneously. Because a child must clear both benchmarks to count as combined-proficient, the low reading rate pulls down combined proficiency — leaving roughly two-thirds of ten-year-olds without the integrated foundation needed to progress through school.

FIGURE 2: NATIONAL MPL BY DOMAIN, AGE 10, TANZANIA (WEIGHTED).



Weighted n = 1,300

Interpretation

- Numeracy (54.9%) is the strongest metric, consistent with long-standing evidence of near-universal single-digit number recognition; but performance drops sharply once tasks require multi-step operations and problem-solving.
- Reading (39.8%) is the most critical finding: a majority of ten-year-olds do not read with comprehension at the international minimum, echoing earlier Early Grade Reading evidence.
- Combined proficiency (34.5%) is the most consequential indicator and sits below even the reading rate, reflecting the compounding of literacy and numeracy deficits.

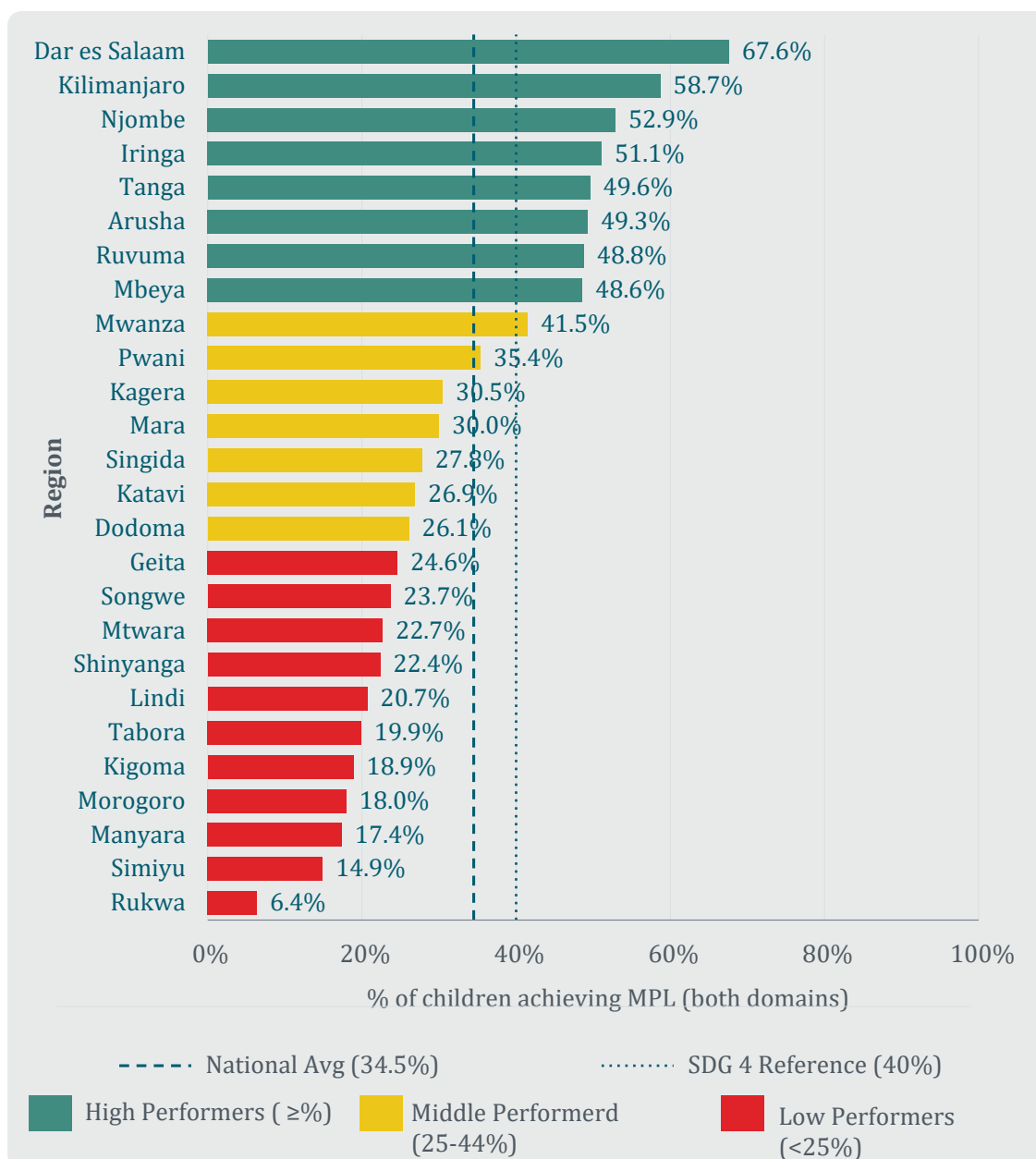
KEY MESSAGE

Only one in three ten-year-old children in Tanzania has the combined foundational competencies — basic literacy and numeracy — considered the minimum threshold for progressive learning. This 34.5% figure is Tanzania's official SDG 4.1.1(a) baseline.

6.2 REGIONAL RESULTS: A MULTI-SPEED SYSTEM

National averages conceal extreme geographic inequality. Combined MPL at age 10 ranges from 67.6% in Dar es Salaam to just 6.4% in Rukwa — a gap of more than 60 percentage points. Grouping regions by combined MPL produces three clear tiers: a small group of high performers, a middle tier near the 40% reference threshold, and a large cluster of low and critical performers requiring urgent support.

FIGURE 3: MPL (BOTH DOMAINS) BY REGION, AGE 10, RANKED



(unweighted n = 1,300)

TABLE 2. REGIONAL MPL PERFORMANCE, AGE 10 (AUTHORITATIVE).

PERFORMANCE BAND	REGION	BOTH MPL (%)	PERFORMANCE BAND
High (≥45%)	Dar es Salaam	67.6	High
	Kilimanjaro	58.7	High
	Njombe	52.9	High
	Iringa	51.1	High
	Tanga	49.6	High
	Arusha	49.3	High
	Ruvuma	48.8	High
	Mbeya	48.6	High
Medium (35–44%)	Mwanza	41.5	Medium
	Pwani	35.4	Medium
Low (20–34%)	Kagera	30.5	Low
	Mara	30.0	Low
	Singida	27.8	Low
	Katavi	26.9	Low
	Dodoma	26.1	Low
	Geita	24.6	Low
	Songwe	23.7	Low
	Mtwara	22.7	Low
	Shinyanga	22.4	Low
	Lindi	20.7	Low
Critical (<20%)	Tabora	19.9	Critical
	Kigoma	18.9	Critical
	Morogoro	18.0	Critical
	Manyara	17.4	Critical
	Simiyu	14.9	Critical
	Rukwa	6.4	Critical

Source: PAL Network ICAN–ICAR 2025.

Key structural patterns

In almost every region, mathematics MPL exceeds reading MPL — Kagera is the sole exception, where reading (44.9%) is higher than mathematics (38.3%) — confirming a broad, systemic literacy deficit even where numeracy is comparatively stronger.

Urbanised, better-resourced regions (especially Dar es Salaam) consistently outperform predominantly rural regions.

Outcomes are geographically clustered: stronger in parts of the east, north and southern highlands; weakest in the western, lake and deep-southern corridors.

Only 9 of 26 regions reach the 40% reference threshold, while 11 have fewer than one in four children reaching combined proficiency; low performance is widespread, not confined to outliers.



Performance tiers

High performers (Dar es Salaam, Kilimanjaro, Arusha, Tanga, Iringa, Mwanza, Njombe, Mara) combine denser school networks, better-qualified teachers, higher household incomes and strong local education cultures; Dar es Salaam (67.6%) is an outlier nearly double the national average, but Kilimanjaro, Njombe, Iringa and Arusha show that strong outcomes are achievable outside major cities too. Middle-tier regions (Ruvuma, Dodoma, Pwani, Mbeya) sit near the 40% threshold and are prime candidates for acceleration rather than emergency response — Dodoma is a notable underperformer given its political-capital status, depressed by a large rural hinterland. Low and critical performers in the western, lake and deep-southern corridors — Rukwa (6.4%), Simiyu, Lindi, Kigoma, Tabora, Morogoro and others — reflect geographic isolation, poverty, high pupil-teacher ratios and weak education supply, and require an emergency-level response.

The lowest-performing regions illustrate what an emergency response must address. Rukwa (6.4%) combines extreme remoteness, high poverty, sparse population and severe shortages of qualified teachers — conditions requiring comprehensive reconstruction of basic-education provision rather than incremental inputs. Kigoma and Lindi share dispersed settlements, high pupil-teacher ratios and weak infrastructure, with minimal private provision to compensate. Morogoro presents a distinct diagnostic challenge — relatively higher mathematics MPL alongside very low reading MPL — pointing to specific instructional and material barriers to literacy despite the region's central location. These profiles argue for tailored, diagnostic-led

strategies rather than uniform national programming.

6.3 A DIFFERENTIATED POLICY RESPONSE

The 60-point gap between the strongest and weakest regions means progress will depend on strategies tailored to each performance tier rather than uniform national programming. The operational framework for this differentiated response — the regional performance tiers and their recommended interventions — is set out in Section 11 (Policy Recommendations).

6.4 FROM AGE 10 TO GRADE 4

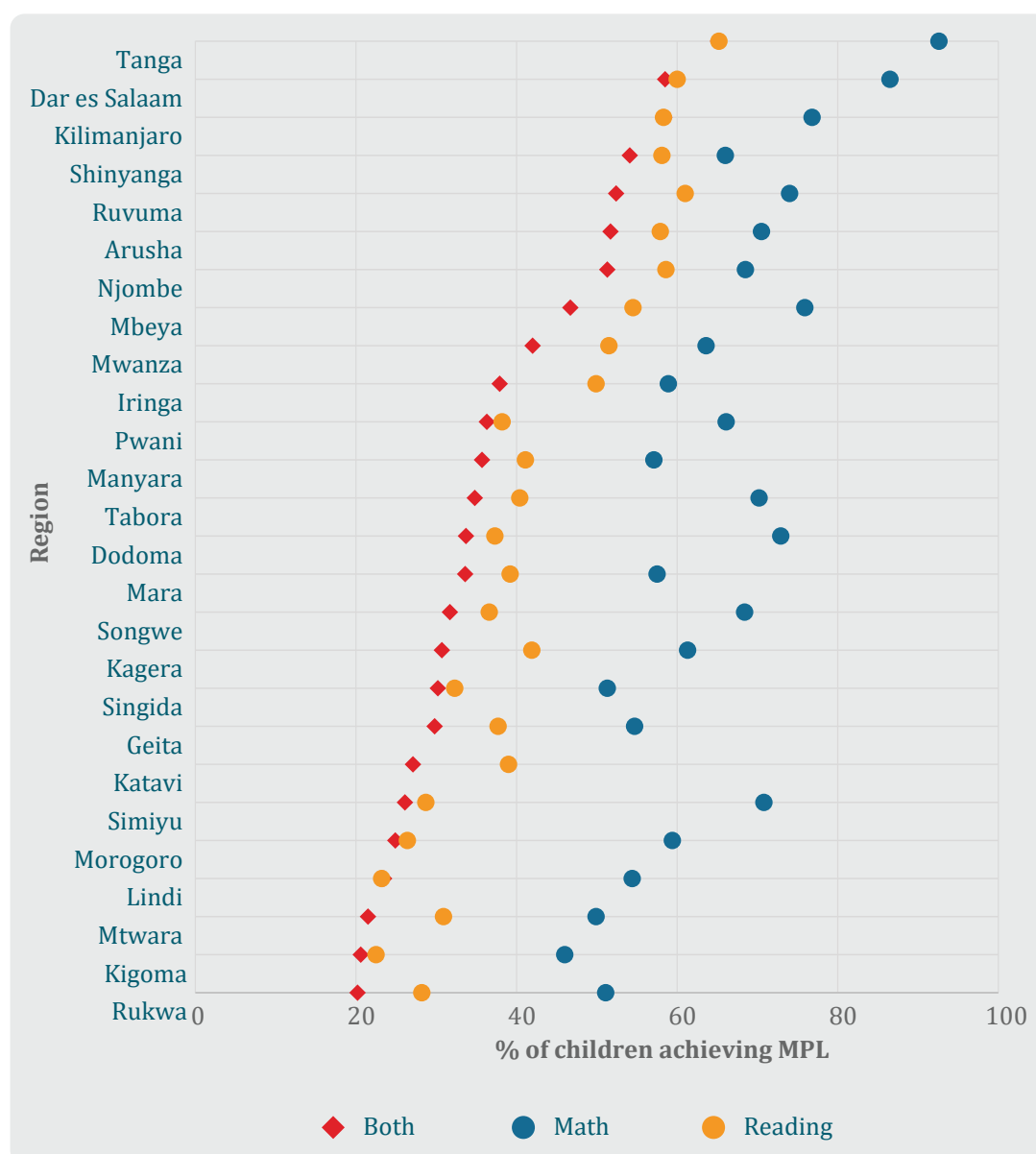
Comparing age-10 and Grade-4 results shows sizeable but uneven improvement. Several historically low-performing regions record large mathematics gains between age 10 and Grade 4 (for example Simiyu and Shinyanga rise by more than 20 points), whereas some better-performing regions are almost flat or lower in reading and combined proficiency at Grade 4. This partly reflects age-in-grade distortion — over-age and repeating pupils inflate Grade-4 averages beyond what a typical ten-year-old achieves. Even at Grade 4, combined MPL stays below 50% in more than half of regions, confirming that many pupils progress through primary school without the expected foundational competencies. The regional ordering is largely stable: high performers stay ahead and low performers stay behind, so the same nominal grade signifies very different mastery depending on where a child lives.

**TABLE 4. REGIONAL MPL AT AGE 10 AND GRADE 4, TANZANIA
(REGIONS ORDERED BY BOTH-DOMAINS MPL AT AGE 10).**

REGION	MATH A10	MATH G4	READ A10	READ G4	BOTH A10	BOTH G4
Dar es Salaam	89.9	85.9	69.0	57.9	67.6	56.5
Kilimanjaro	78.1	75.8	60.8	56.3	58.7	56.3
Arusha	61.4	66.9	55.7	56.5	52.9	48.8
Tanga	66.7	56.8	57.8	47.4	51.1	34.7
Iringa	63.3	92.4	54.9	63.4	49.6	63.4
Mwanza	64.3	69.1	60.5	55.8	49.3	49.2
Njombe	68.3	72.7	58.5	59.1	48.8	50.0
Mara	70.8	74.8	55.2	52.3	48.6	44.0
Ruvuma	59.2	61.8	49.4	49.1	41.5	39.1
Dodoma	61.7	64.4	41.7	35.0	35.4	33.1
Pwani	49.0	59.4	40.7	39.0	30.5	27.2
Mbeya	54.8	55.3	33.5	36.1	30.0	30.2
Geita	42.6	48.9	31.5	28.9	27.8	26.7
Kagera	38.3	35.9	44.9	35.9	26.9	23.3
Songwe	53.4	71.6	31.5	34.1	26.1	30.3
Singida	44.1	52.5	27.9	34.5	24.6	26.2
Manyara	53.5	66.9	34.8	33.4	23.7	28.2
Shinyanga	50.2	47.4	30.2	27.4	22.7	17.5
Mtwara	32.7	64.3	26.6	56.0	22.4	51.8
Morogoro	43.7	52.1	23.6	19.5	20.7	19.5
Katavi	46.2	68.7	24.9	37.3	19.9	31.5
Kigoma	39.8	43.3	21.0	18.5	18.9	16.5
Tabora	47.7	57.3	21.6	22.5	18.0	21.0



FIGURE 4: MPL BY REGION, GRADE 4, TANZANIA.



(unweighted n = 1,276)

Three trajectory types are visible. In the best-performing regions, most children have already reached MPL by age 10 and Grade 4 mainly consolidates existing competencies. In “catch-up” regions — Shinyanga, Simiyu, Rukwa and Tabora — substantial gains occur between age 10 and Grade 4, but from a very low base and inflated by over-age and repeating pupils. In several mid-performing regions (for example Iringa, Mbeya and Njombe) combined proficiency stagnates or declines by Grade 4, because reading — the main constraint — does not improve even as additional years of schooling accumulate. Set against the Education and Training Policy’s expectation that children acquire secure reading, writing and numeracy within the first primary cycle, these results show policy expectations being met in only a subset of regions, while the persistence of very low age-10 outcomes elsewhere sits uneasily with the policy’s equity commitments and with Dira 2050’s goal of reducing regional disparities.

KEY MESSAGE

Tanzania operates a multi-speed system: the same grade represents very different levels of mastery across regions. Foundational literacy is the binding constraint everywhere, and regional gaps are structural — rooted in school quality, teacher deployment and home learning — not merely transitional.

6.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 2025 BASELINE

These results provide a timely baseline for monitoring the newly launched KKK National Scientific Strategy, particularly in regions where fewer than half of children currently reach MPL in both domains. Because the indicators map directly onto SDG 4.1.1(a), they show precisely where Tanzania is close to, and far from, universal foundational proficiency at the end of lower primary. Read against the Education and Training Policy (2014, 2023 Edition) and Dira 2050 — both of which commit to equitable, high-quality basic education and to reducing regional inequality — the evidence signals a clear risk: unless foundational learning is strengthened in lagging regions and age-appropriate learning is explicitly monitored for all ten-year-olds, today's regional deficits will harden into structural human-capital gaps. Equally, the high and stable outcomes in regions such as Dar es Salaam, Kilimanjaro and Tanga demonstrate that near-universal foundational proficiency is achievable under current policy and financing conditions — establishing an internal benchmark for what the rest of the system can reach.





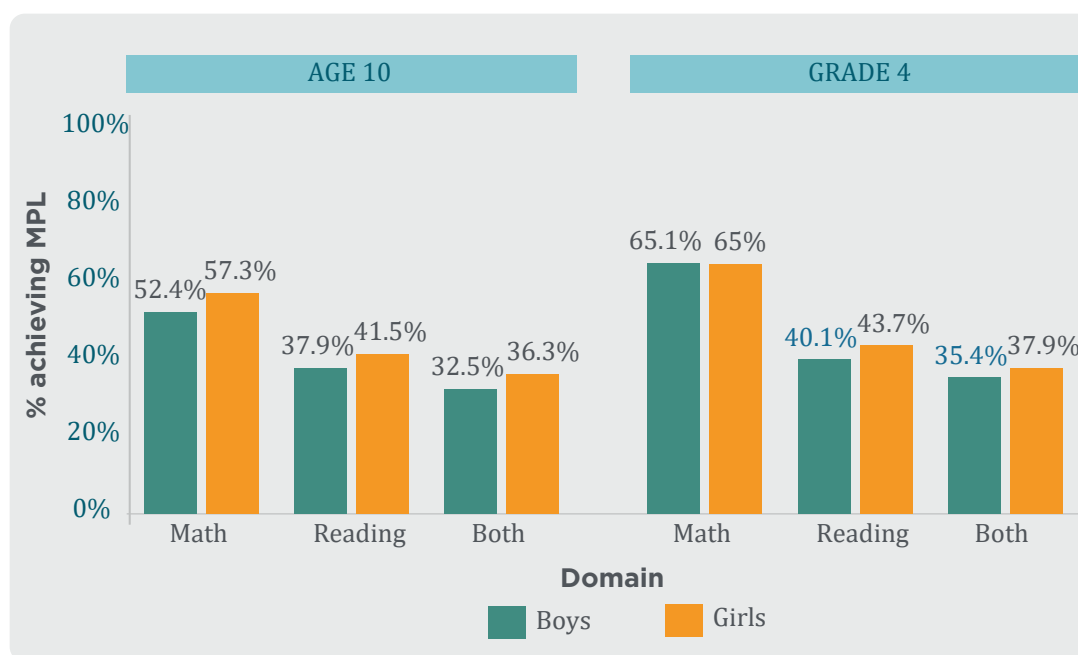
7. LEARNING OUTCOMES BY GENDER, LOCATION, WEALTH AND FAMILY SUPPORT

This section examines the cross-cutting factors that pattern foundational learning in Tanzania — gender, location, wealth and household economic activity, parental education, family support, and (added for the Tanzanian context) language of instruction and digital access. Throughout, associations are descriptive rather than causal: these drivers are closely inter-related and jointly reflect deeper socio-economic inequalities.

7.1 GENDER DIFFERENCES

Gender differences are small but consistent, with girls slightly ahead. At age 10, 57.3% of girls versus 52.4% of boys reach MPL in mathematics, 41.5% versus 37.9% in reading, and 36.3% versus 32.5% in both. The advantage is modest (about 4–5 points) but uniform across domains, and runs counter to common STEM stereotypes. By Grade 4 the pattern holds — around 65% of both sexes reach MPL in mathematics, but only 40.1% of boys and 43.7% of girls reach MPL in reading, and 35.4% and 37.9% respectively in both. Boys' mathematics improves fastest between age 10 and Grade 4 (+13.7 points vs +9.2 for girls), closing the earlier female lead in mathematics, while the small female advantage in reading persists.

FIGURE 5: MPL BY GENDER AT AGE 10 AND GRADE 4, TANZANIA.



(Unweighted n =5,617)

TABLE 5. MPL BY GENDER, AGE 10 AND GRADE 4, TANZANIA.

DOMAIN	GROUP	AGE 10 MPL	GRADE 4 MPL	CHANGE (PP)
Math	Boys	52.4	66.1	+13.7
Math	Girls	57.3	66.5	+9.2
Reading	Boys	37.9	40.1	+2.2
Reading	Girls	41.5	43.7	+2.2
Both	Boys	32.5	35.4	+2.9
Both	Girls	36.3	37.9	+1.6

Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025.

This small female edge is consistent with Tanzania-specific EGRA evidence, which shows girls reading a quarter to half a grade level above boys, an advantage that appears before formal schooling. The core inequity, however, is not between boys and girls but between competencies — the system is much better at delivering numeracy than literacy — and between children in different circumstances. Gender-responsive strategies remain necessary (to protect girls from dropout linked to early marriage and to engage boys in reading), but they are secondary to the spatial and socio-economic gaps that follow.

7.2 URBAN-RURAL DIFFERENCES

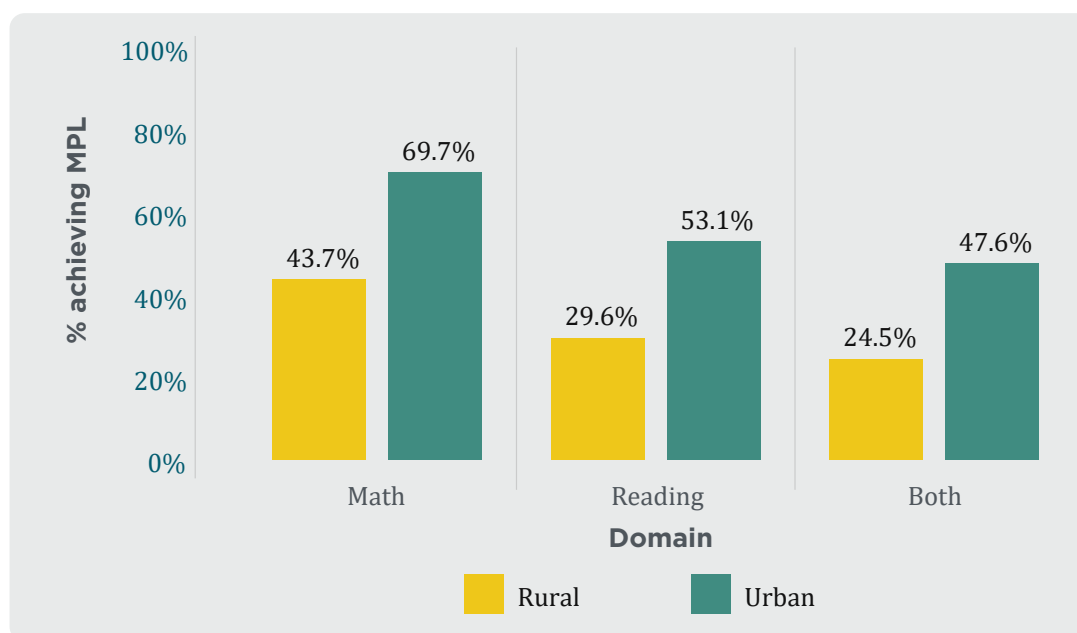
Where a child lives is a powerful determinant of learning. At age 10, urban children reach MPL at far higher rates than rural children: 69.7% versus 43.7% in mathematics, 53.1% versus 29.6% in reading, and 47.6% versus 24.5% in both — an urban combined-proficiency rate nearly double the rural rate. By Grade 4 both groups improve (rural: 59.5% / 36.7% / 30.9%; urban: 72.1% / 48.4% / 43.9%), and the mathematics gap narrows from about 26 to 13 points, but sizeable gaps persist in reading (≈ 12 points) and combined proficiency (≈ 13 points). Additional years of schooling benefit rural learners but do not overcome their structural disadvantages: weaker home learning environments, fewer trained teachers, larger classes and scarcer materials.

TABLE 6. MPL BY LOCATION, AGE 10 AND GRADE 4, TANZANIA.

DOMAIN	LOCATION	AGE 10 MPL	GRADE 4 MPL	CHANGE (PP)
Math	Rural	43.7	59.5	+15.8
Math	Urban	69.7	72.1	+2.4
Reading	Rural	29.6	36.7	+7.1
Reading	Urban	53.1	48.4	-4.7
Both	Rural	24.5	30.9	+6.4
Both	Urban	47.6	43.9	-3.7

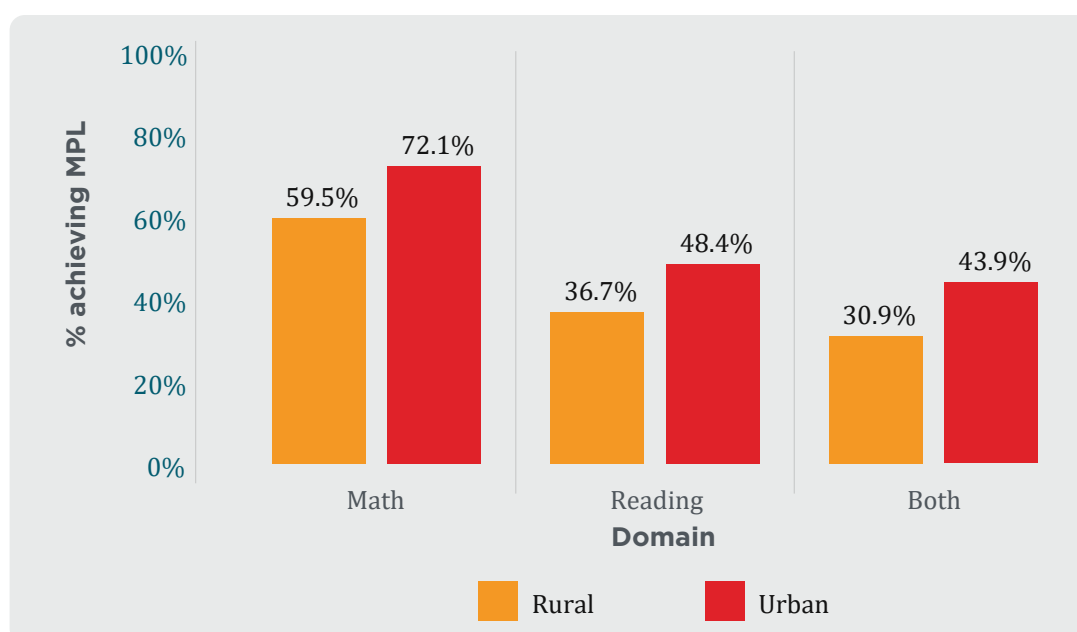
Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025.

FIGURE 6: MPL BY LOCATION, AGE 10, TANZANIA.



Unweighted n =1,300

FIGURE 7: MPL BY LOCATION, GRADE 4, TANZANIA.



Unweighted n =1,276

The equity challenge is therefore spatial more than gendered, arguing for a deliberate rural-first approach to the KKK strategy — prioritising rural schools for early-grade teacher coaching, decodable texts and storybooks, and regular formative assessment, in line with Dira 2050's commitment to reduce spatial inequality.

7.3 WEALTH, HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND PARENTAL EDUCATION

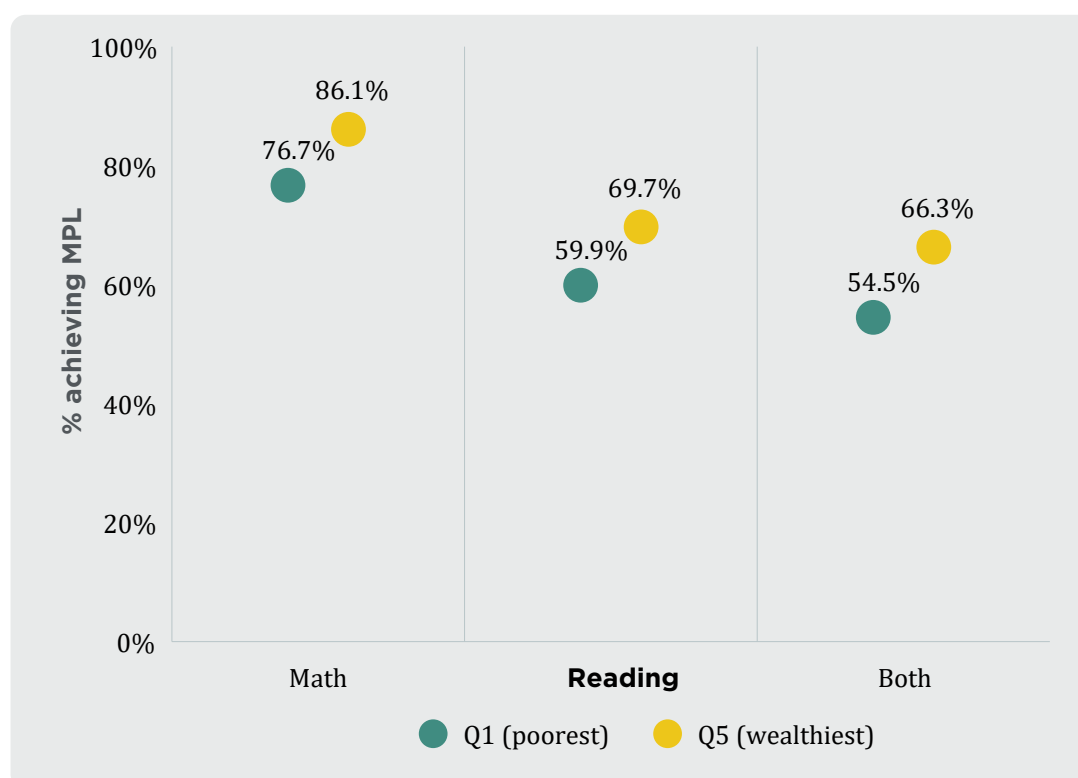
Household socio-economic status shows a clear, monotonic gradient with learning. Using asset-based wealth quintiles (constructed via principal components analysis) for children aged 10–14, combined MPL rises from 54.5% in the poorest quintile (Q1) to 66.3% in the wealthiest (Q5) — a gap of about 12 points — with reading showing the steepest gradient. Fee-free basic education appears to have compressed disparities among poorer households, but the wealthiest retain a distinct advantage through richer home environments and greater capacity to meet indirect schooling costs.

TABLE 7. MPL BY WEALTH QUINTILE (SES), AGES 10-14, TANZANIA (ASSET-BASED PCA).

SES QUINTILE	MATH MPL	READING MPL	BOTH MPL
Q1 (poorest)	76.7	59.9	54.5
Q2	80.5	60.3	56.9
Q3	82.7	62.9	59.6
Q4	86.8	68.7	65.5
Q5 (wealthiest)	86.1	69.7	66.3

Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025.

FIGURE 8: MPL BY WEALTH QUINTILE (SES), AGES 10-14, TANZANIA.



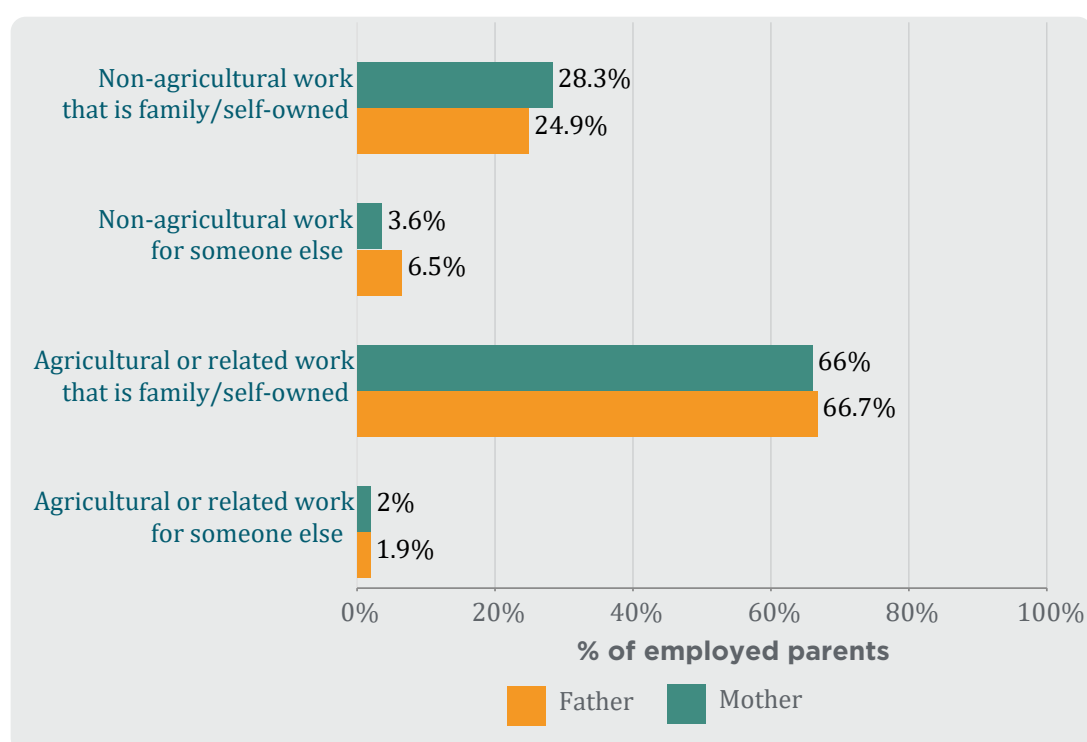
(unweighted n = 5,617; Q1 = poorest, Q5 = wealthiest (asset-based PCA))

Household livelihood matters as much as assets. Children in non-agricultural households reach combined MPL at 63.7% — nearly double the 35.8% in agricultural households — while households with no employed parent (47.7%) still outperform agricultural ones. This “agricultural penalty” (a 27.9-point gap in combined proficiency versus non-agricultural households, concentrated in reading) reflects rural residence, seasonal labour demands that reduce learning time, lower parental literacy and scarcer reading materials. Learning outcomes are lowest when either parent works in family-based agriculture and highest when parents hold non-agricultural, especially salaried, work.

TABLE 8. MPL BY HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIC-ACTIVITY TYPE, AGES 10-14, TANZANIA.

HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIC ACTIVITY	MATH MPL	READING MPL	BOTH MPL
Agricultural	62.2	40.1	35.8
No employed parent	69.6	51.5	47.7
Non-agricultural	84.7	66.8	63.7

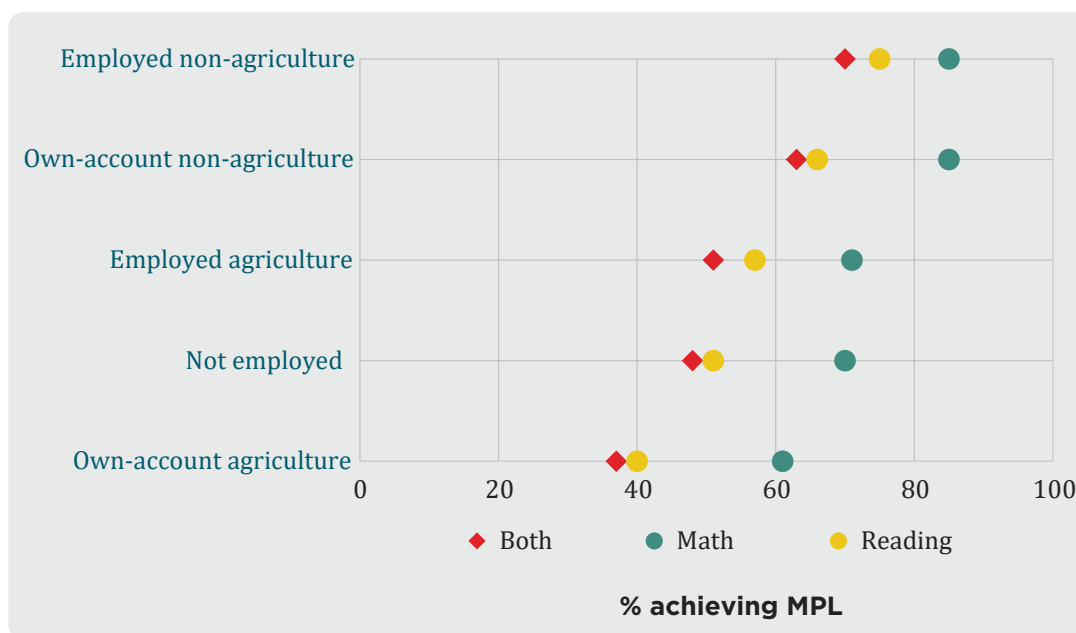
FIGURE 9: PARENTAL EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC SECTOR, TANZANIA (EMPLOYED PARENTS).



(employed parents only; unweighted n: mothers = 3,006; fathers = 2,875)

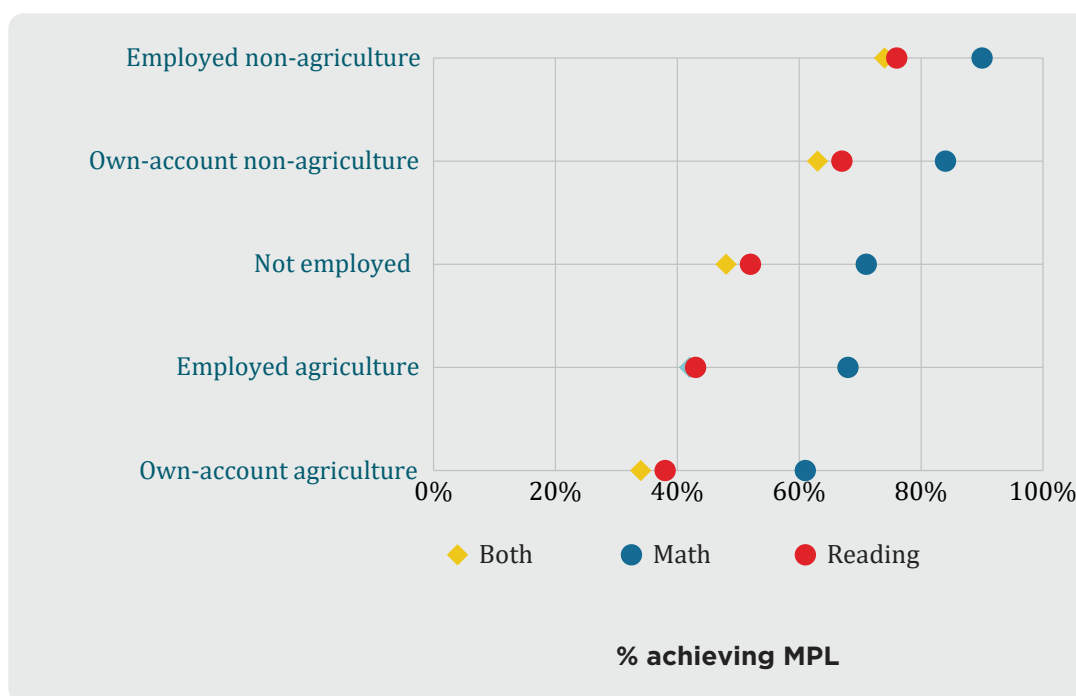
The pattern holds for both parents. MPL is lowest when the mother or father works in family-based agriculture (around 40% in each single domain and the mid-30s in both), rises into the high 40s and low 50s where parents are not formally employed, and is highest where parents hold non-agricultural work — especially salaried employment, where combined MPL reaches the mid-60s to low-70s. What matters for learning is less the gender of the working parent than the type of livelihood: stable non-agricultural income is associated with higher and better-educated households and richer home learning environments, whereas subsistence and informal agricultural work intersects with rurality and low parental education to produce the deepest exclusion. Routine monitoring should therefore disaggregate foundational outcomes by parental economic activity so that progress can be judged not only on average, but for children in the agricultural and informal sectors that still anchor the economy.

FIGURE 10: MPL BY MOTHER'S ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, AGES 10-14.



(Unweighted n = 5,617)

FIGURE 11: MPL BY FATHER'S ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, AGES 10-14.



(Unweighted n = 5,617)

Read alongside the regional results, these wealth and livelihood gradients track the country's internal geography closely: the poorest, most agricultural households are concentrated in the same western, lake and deep-southern regions that record the lowest MPL, so household disadvantage and regional disadvantage compound one another. Material constraints therefore remain a live barrier to learning for a large share of Tanzanian children, even where basic-service coverage (toilets, mobile phones) is high.

Parental education

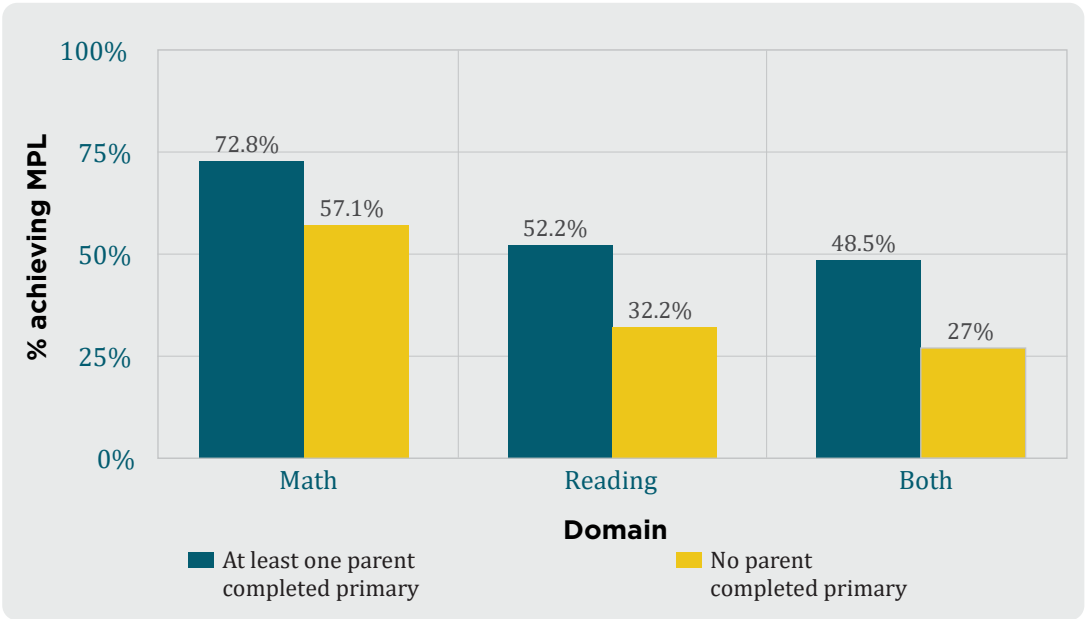
Parental education is among the strongest correlates of learning. When at least one parent has completed primary school, as a proxy for household SES and as a distinct correlate. The effect is largest in reading (a 20-point rise), with mathematics showing more resilience at low parental education but still a 16-point gap. Nearly three-quarters of children whose parents lack primary education fail to master both domains. Parental schooling acts both — through more frequent literacy and numeracy practice at home, familiarity with school routines and higher aspirations — which argues for complementing school reform with adult literacy programmes and structured guidance for low-education parents.

TABLE 9. MPL BY PARENTAL EDUCATION, AGES 10-14, TANZANIA.

PARENTAL EDUCATION	MATH MPL	READING MPL	BOTH MPL
No parent completed primary	57.1	32.2	27.0
At least one parent completed primary	72.8	52.2	48.5
Difference	+15.7 pp	+20.0 pp	+21.5 pp

Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025.

FIGURE 12: MPL BY PARENTAL EDUCATION, AGES 10-14, TANZANIA.

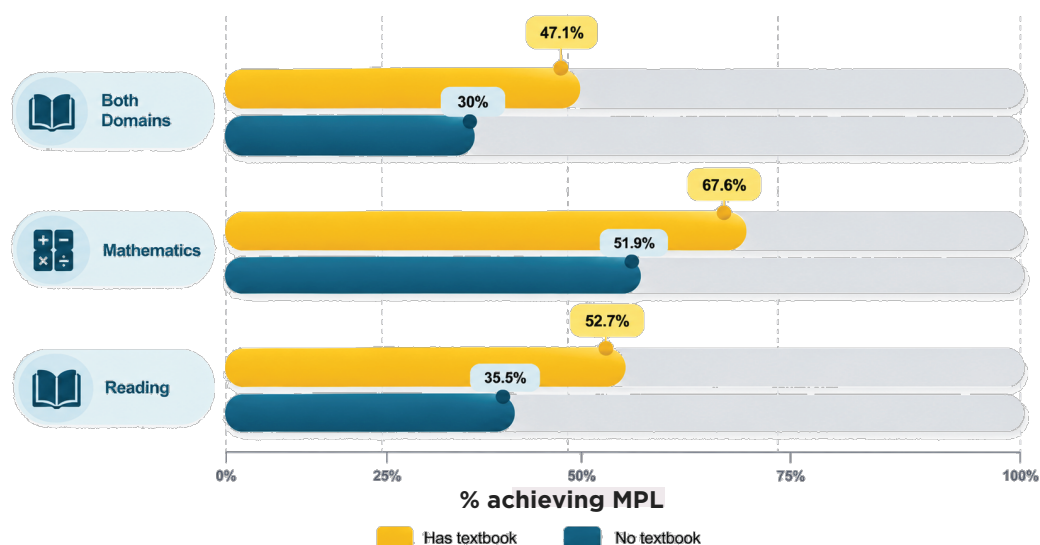


(Unweighted n =3,630)

7.4 FAMILY SUPPORT DIFFERENCES

Section 5.3 described how scarce and unequally distributed supportive home conditions are; the point here is how strongly each is associated with learning. Children with textbooks at home reach combined proficiency at 47.1% versus 28.0% without (≈19 points), those with homework help at 46.5% versus 29.5% (≈17 points), and those with paid tuition at 51.2% versus 31.8% (≈19 points, though tuition access is heavily concentrated among wealthier urban households and largely reflects selection). Crucially, these supports benefit boys and girls almost identically, reinforcing that Tanzania’s challenge is one of poverty, rurality and weak home environments rather than gender-based exclusion.

FIGURE 13: MPL BY TEXTBOOK ACCESS, AGE 10, TANZANIA.



(Unweighted n = 1,239)

Because the same households that lack books also tend to lack homework support, deprivations cluster. Textbooks display a particularly steep reading gradient, suggesting they serve not only as study aids but as one of the few sources of extended print exposure in Tanzanian homes, given how rarely storybooks are present. Homework support reaches only three in ten children, reflecting parents' own education levels, time poverty in subsistence agriculture and informal work, and prevailing norms about the division of responsibility for learning between school and home. The practical agenda is therefore twofold: ensure universal textbook provision and support families — through UWaWa and community reading and homework programmes — to build minimally print-rich environments, while pairing these with poverty-reduction and livelihood measures that ease the structural constraints keeping many families from providing academic support.

7.5 LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION VERSUS HOME LANGUAGE

A distinctive feature of the Tanzanian context is that the language of instruction and assessment — Kiswahili — is spoken at home by the great majority of children (85.4%). For most Tanzanian children there is therefore no gap between the language of the home and the language of the classroom, which makes Tanzania a clear test of whether language match alone secures foundational learning. It does not. Within Tanzania, children who speak the test language at home do reach combined MPL at a higher rate at Grade 4 than those who do not (38.6% versus 25.8%), but even among the large majority who speak Kiswahili at home, fewer than four in ten achieve combined proficiency. Removing the language barrier is necessary but not sufficient: the persistence of low reading outcomes despite near-universal language match points to instructional quality, exposure to reading and access to learning materials — not language of instruction — as the binding constraints.

TABLE 10. COMBINED MPL BY WHETHER THE CHILD SPEAKS THE TEST LANGUAGE (KISWAHILI) AT HOME, GRADE 4, TANZANIA

HOME LANGUAGE (GRADE 4)	BOTH MPL
Speaks Kiswahili (test language) at home	38.6
Does not speak test language at home	25.8

Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025.

KEY MESSAGE

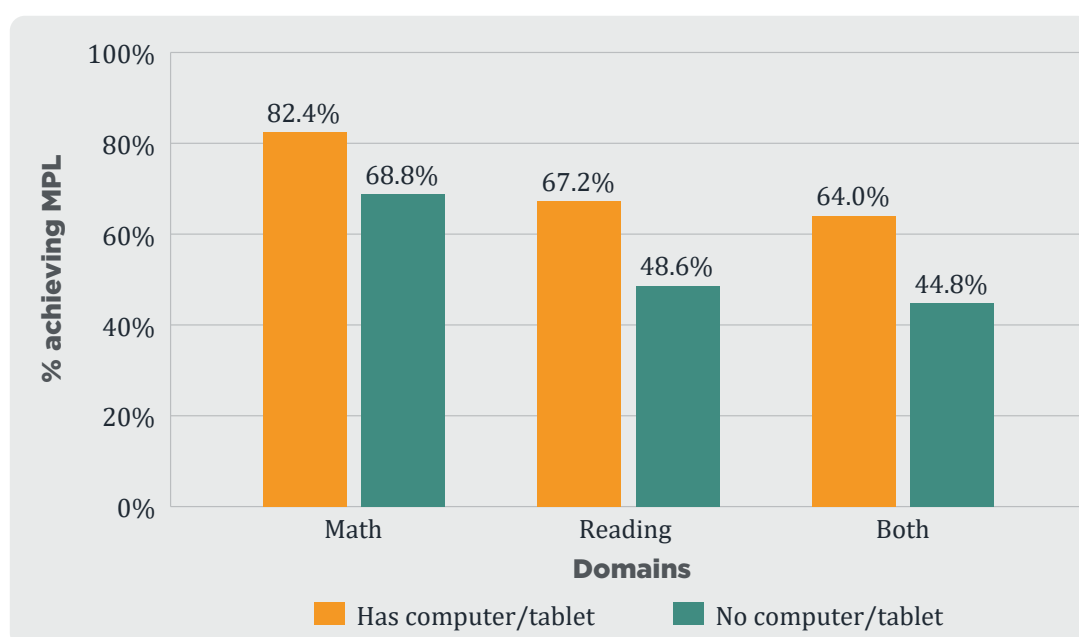
Kiswahili is spoken at home by 85.4% of Tanzanian children, yet only 38.6% of them reach combined proficiency. The reading crisis is driven by instructional quality and print-poor homes — not by language of instruction.

TABLE 10. MPL BY COMPUTER/TABLET ACCESS, AGES 10-14,

DIGITAL DEVICE (AGES 10-14)	MATH MPL	READING MPL	BOTH MPL
No computer / tablet	68.8	48.6	44.8
Has computer / tablet	82.4	67.2	64.0

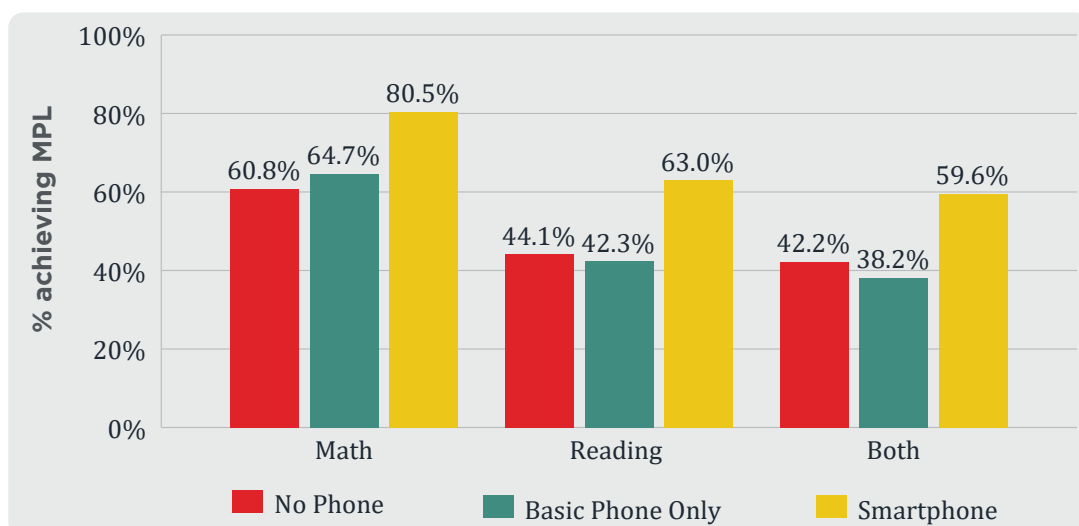
Source: PAL Network ICAN-ICAR 2025.

FIGURE 14: MPL BY COMPUTER/TABLET ACCESS, AGES 10-14.



(Unweighted n = 5,617)

FIGURE 15: MPL BY HOUSEHOLD PHONE TYPE, AGES 10-14, TANZANIA.



(Unweighted n = 5,617; smartphone = subset of phone owners)

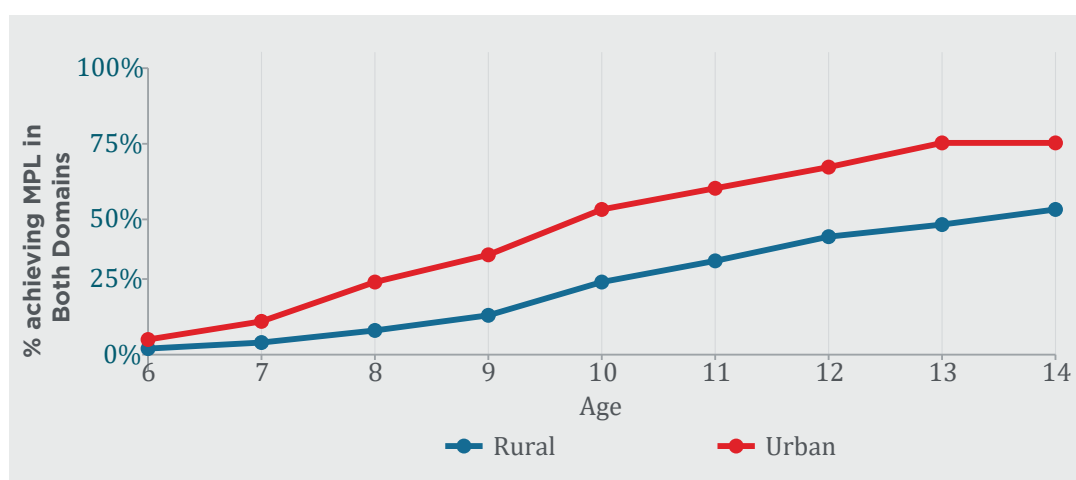


8. LEARNING TRAJECTORIES: PROGRESS ACROSS AGE AND GRADE

A learning trajectory shows the share of children reaching MPL at successive ages or grades, revealing where gaps open up. Tanzania's trajectories carry three central messages.

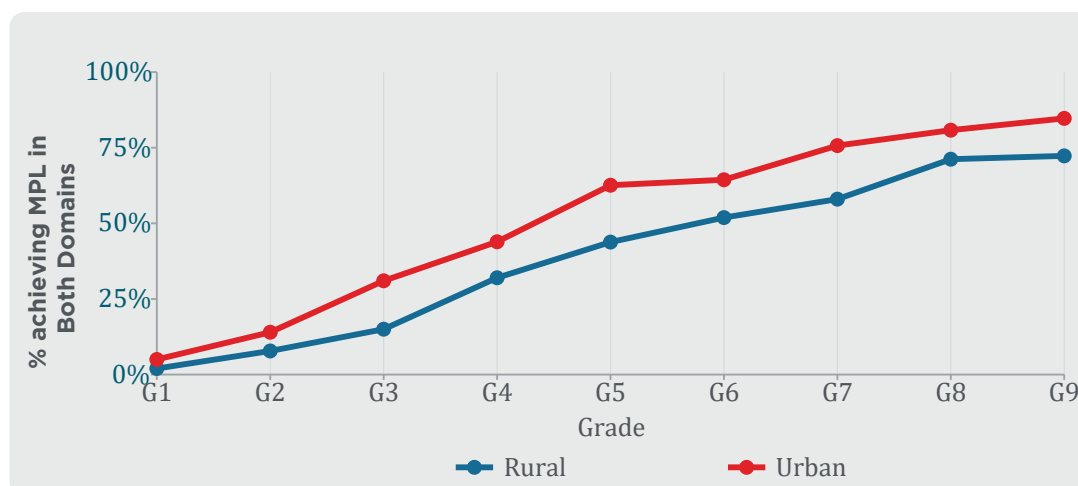
- Grade-based curves are steep; age-based curves are flat. Combined MPL rises from very low levels in Grade 1 to around three-quarters of learners by Grades 8–9, showing real gains for those who stay enrolled. By age, however, the share reaching combined MPL climbs only gradually — from about 5–6% at age 6 to just above 55–60% by age 14 — never approaching universal proficiency. The contrast reflects over-age entry, repetition and time spent out of school diluting learning when cohorts are viewed by age.
- Location gaps are persistent and do not close. Urban learners lead at every age and grade by roughly 15–25 points, and the gap does not narrow over time: the urban curve rises to about 70% by ages 13–14 while the rural curve plateaus below 50%. The same years of schooling yield systematically less learning in rural settings.
- Gender curves overlap. Boys and girls follow almost identical trajectories, with small, non-systematic differences — confirming that structural factors, not gender, drive most inequality.

FIGURE 16: LEARNING TRAJECTORIES BY AGE AND LOCATION, TANZANIA.



(Unweighted n =13,166)

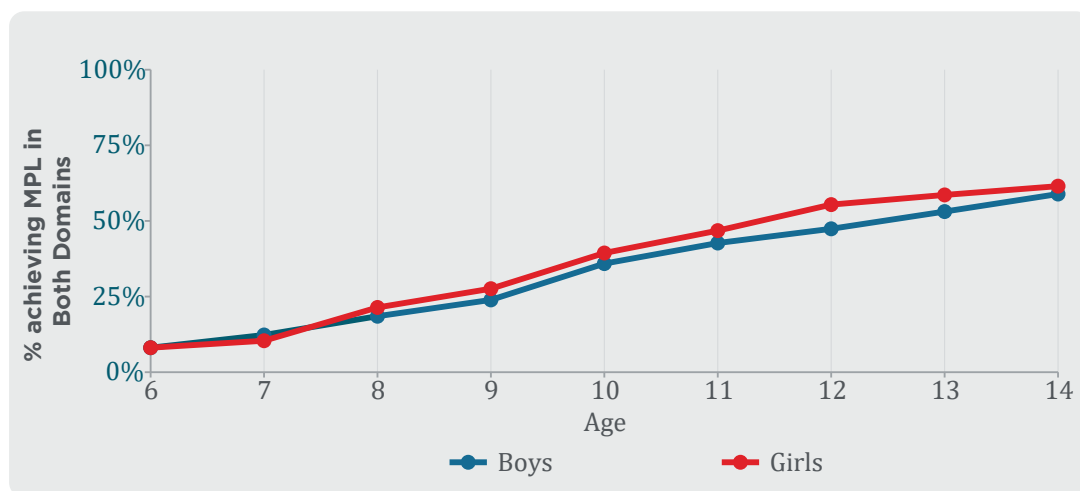
FIGURE 17: LEARNING TRAJECTORIES BY GRADE AND LOCATION, TANZANIA.



(Unweighted n =11,655)

The gender-disaggregated trajectories reinforce the point: boys' and girls' curves largely overlap and converge by age 14, with girls slightly ahead in some age bands and boys in others but no systematic national gap. This holds for both age-based and grade-based views, confirming that when boys and girls have similar schooling exposure they reach broadly comparable levels of foundational learning.

FIGURE 18: LEARNING TRAJECTORIES BY AGE AND GENDER, TANZANIA.



(unweighted n = 13,166)

Together, these patterns confirm that the system does generate learning over time — children who remain in school learn more each year — but too slowly to bring all learners to MPL by the end of primary, as SDG 4.1.1(a) requires. Closing the gap requires a two-pronged focus: raising instructional effectiveness system-wide while aggressively targeting rural schools so their trajectories converge toward urban levels.





9. INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS: WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

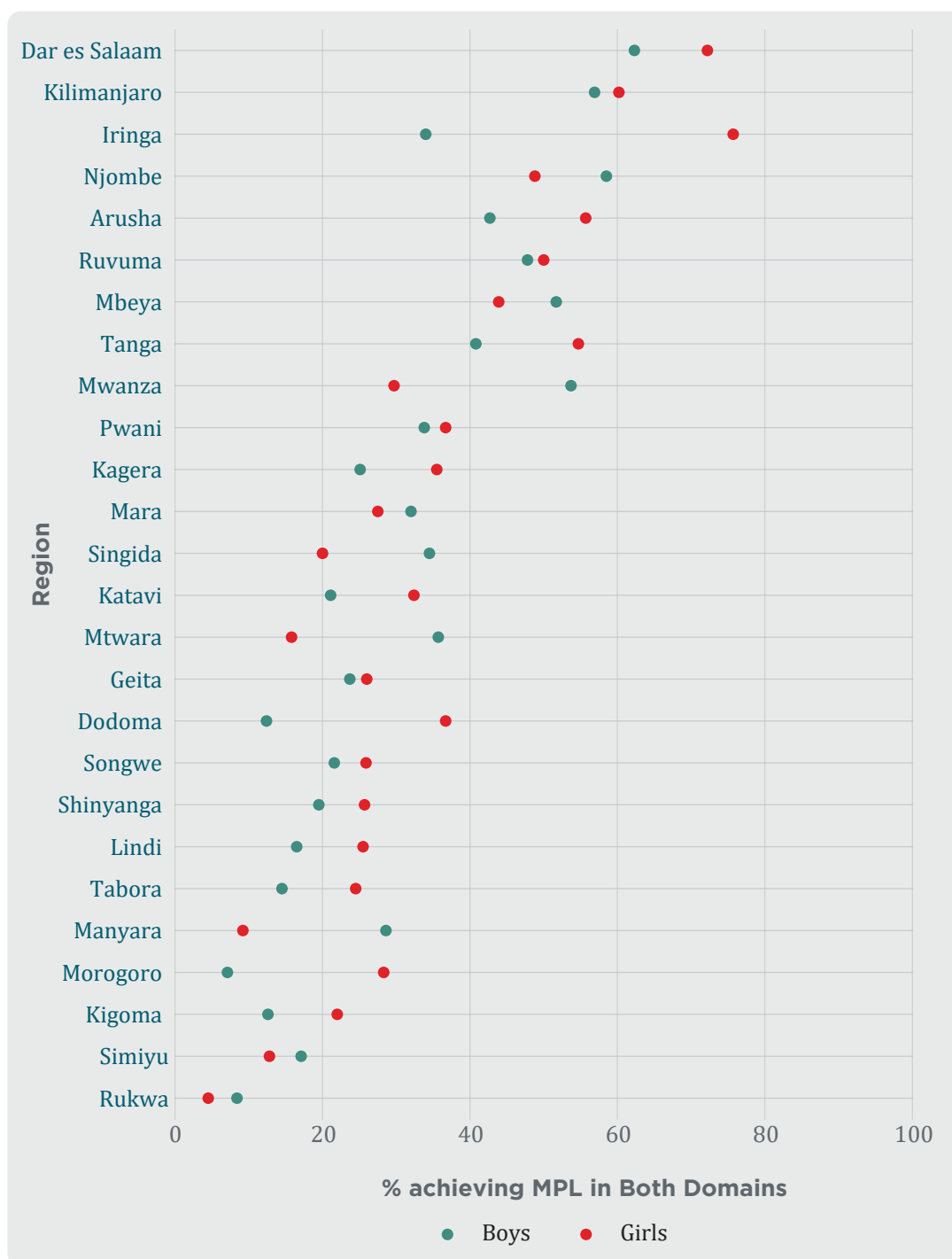
This section identifies the children facing the deepest, compounded disadvantage. It reports the intersections the 2025 data robustly supports — region by gender, region by location, and enrolment status. Because subgroup sizes do not support reliable gender-stratified estimates within each wealth, parental-education and family-support category, gender interactions are treated descriptively here rather than as separate weighted cross-tabulations; those finer breakdowns are reserved for the reproducible R pipeline where cell sizes permit. As throughout, associations are descriptive rather than causal.

9.1 REGION × GENDER

Across regions, boys and girls cluster closely: when a region performs poorly it does so for both sexes, and there is no consistent national pattern of one sex leading. Gender is therefore a secondary axis of inequality — it does not, on its own, define a distinct “most at risk” group. The small female advantage seen nationally holds in most regions but is everywhere dwarfed by the between-region gap.



FIGURE 20: INTERSECTIONAL: MPL (BOTH) BY REGION AND GENDER, AGE 10.

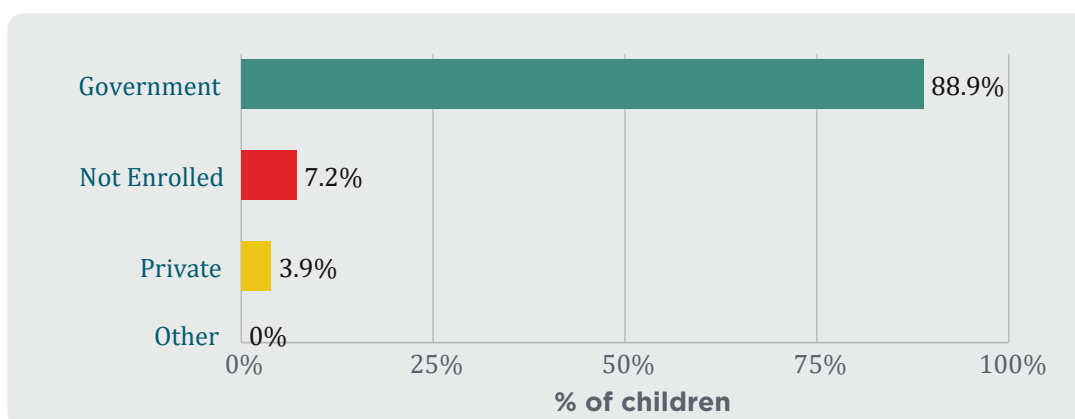


(Unweighted n = 1,300)

9.3 OUT-OF-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS

The clearest “most at risk” group is children outside the school system. Tanzania has achieved high levels of school participation among adolescents aged 10–14: 88.9% attend government schools and 3.9% private schools, leaving 7.2% out of school. Gender parity in access is near-complete (7.8% of boys vs 6.6% of girls out of school), but the urban–rural divide is pronounced: 10.4% of rural adolescents are out of school compared with just 2.9% of urban peers.

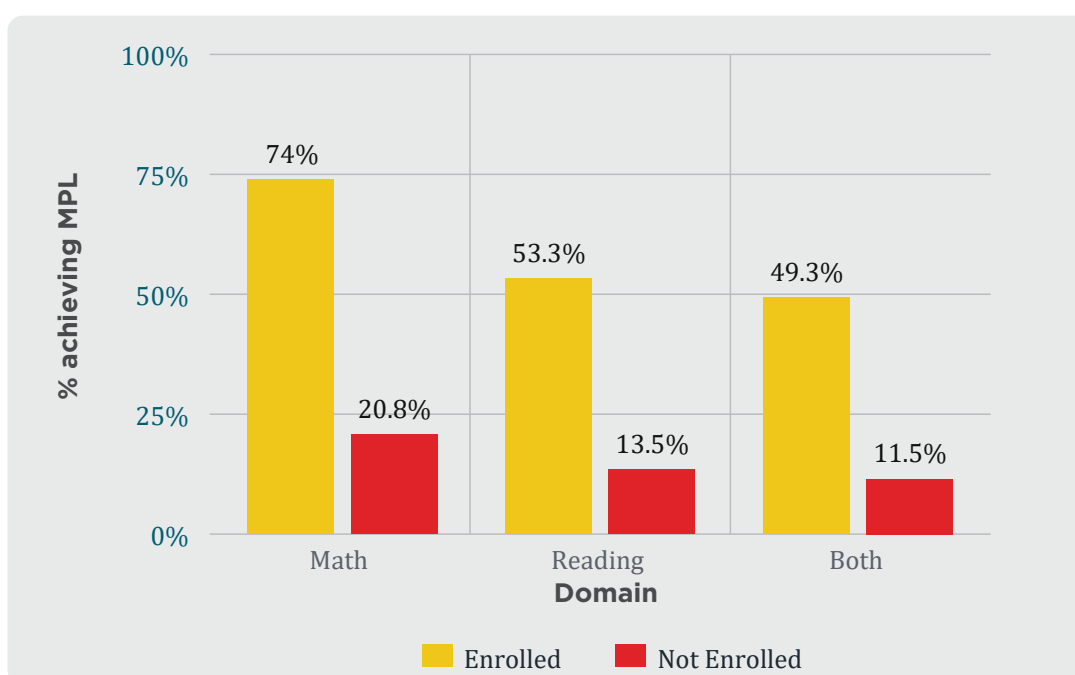
FIGURE 22: ENROLMENT STATUS OF ADOLESCENTS AGED 10-14, TANZANIA.



(Unweighted n = 5,617)

The consequences of non-enrolment for learning are severe. Among enrolled adolescents, 74.0% reach MPL in mathematics, 53.3% in reading, and 49.3% in both. Among out-of-school adolescents the figures collapse to 20.8%, 13.5% and just 11.5% respectively. Being out of school is therefore strongly associated with deep and persistent learning deficits — confirming that improving foundational learning cannot rely on classroom reform alone but must include flexible, second-chance pathways to re-engage the out-of-school 7.2%, especially in rural communities.

FIGURE 23: MPL BY ENROLMENT STATUS, AGES 10-14, TANZANIA



(Unweighted n = 5,617)

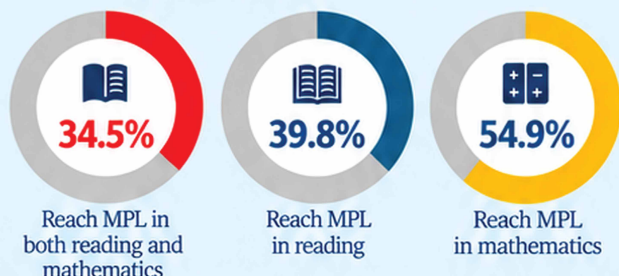
Taken together, the deepest cumulative risk falls on out-of-school and rural children in the lowest-performing regions — and, within those groups, on the poorest agricultural households with low parental education. The policy implication is a rural-first, equity-driven approach to resource distribution and active re-engagement of out-of-school adolescents, with gender-responsive elements retained so that the most disadvantaged girls are not left behind as overall learning improves.

10. Key Findings for Tanzania

1

A systemic foundational learning crisis.

Only **34.5%** of ten-year-olds reach MPL in both reading and mathematics. Performance is stronger in mathematics (54.9%) than reading (39.8%), placing Tanzania in the “Low” band and off track for SDG 4.1.1(a).

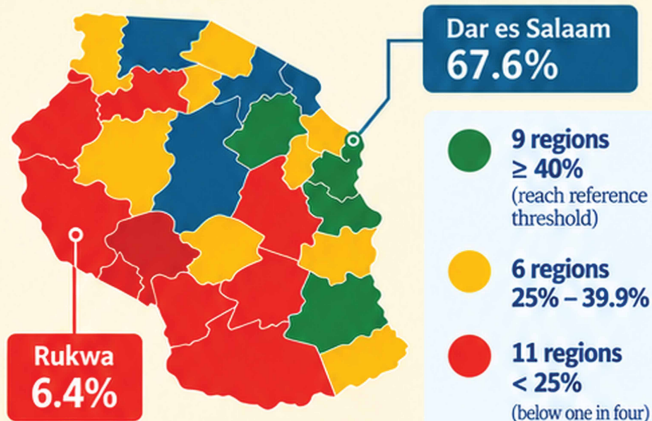


Tanzania is in the “Low” band and off track for SDG 4.1.1(a).

2

Extreme regional inequality — a multi-speed system.

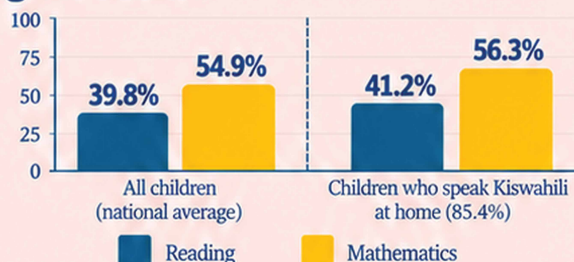
A 61-point gap in combined proficiency separates Dar es Salaam (67.6%) from Rukwa (6.4%). Only 9 of 26 regions reach the 40% reference threshold, and 11 fall below one in four.



3

The reading emergency is the binding constraint.

Reading (39.8%) trails mathematics (54.9%) nationally and in almost every region. The gap persists even among 85.4% of children who speak Kiswahili – the language of assessment – at home, so it is not explained by the unfamiliarity with the language. The cross-sectional data shows this pattern but cannot establish its cause.



4

Poverty, livelihood and parental education shape outcomes.



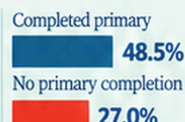
Household livelihood

Children in non-agricultural households reach combined MPL at 63.7% versus 35.8% in agricultural ones (a 27.9-point penalty).



Parental education

Having a parent who completed primary nearly doubles combined proficiency (48.5% vs 27.0%).



Learning resources are scarce

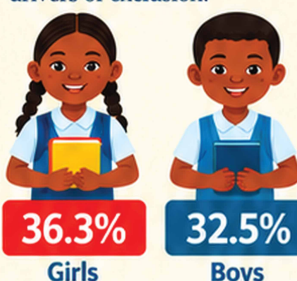
Only 31.9% have books, 35.8% textbooks, and 9.4% a computer or tablet (linked to a ~20-point advantage).



5

A modest, consistent female advantage.

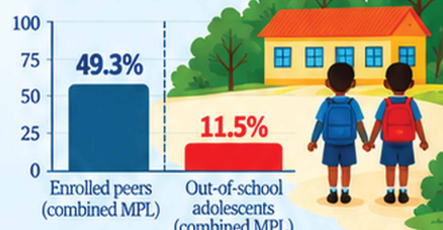
Girls led, slightly, at age 10 (36.3% vs 32.5% combined MPL), confirming that geography and poverty not gender – are the primary drivers of exclusion.



6

Out-of-school and “invisible” learners are almost entirely excluded.

The 7.2% of adolescents out of school reach combined MPL at only 11.5% versus 49.3% of enrolled peers, and flat age-based trajectories show many 14-year-olds still lacking foundational skills – non-enrolment concentrated among rural children.



7

A historic, actionable baseline.

The 2025 results establish Tanzania’s official SDG 4.1.1(a) baseline (including out-of-school children) and enable tiered, data-guided targeting toward Dira 2050 and the KKK strategy.



Evidence
Targeting
Action
Dira 2050
KKK Strategy

11. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Progress depends on strategies tailored to each performance tier rather than uniform national programming. The operational framework below aligns with the Education and Training Policy (2023 Edition) and the KKK strategy.

TIER	REGIONS	RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS
Emergency (Low / Critical)	Rukwa, Simiyu, Kigoma, Tabora, Morogoro, Manyara, Lindi, Shinyanga, Geita, Mtwara, Katavi, Singida, Songwe, Kagera	Equity-driven investment in teacher deployment and retention incentives; rehabilitation of basic infrastructure; guaranteed supply of core learning materials; intensive community mobilisation and home-learning support; per-capita spending above the national average.
Acceleration (Middle)	Ruvuma, Dodoma, Pwani, Mbeya, Mara	Focused quality improvement; structured early-grade literacy and numeracy; curriculum-implementation and school-leadership support; targeted teacher coaching to cross the 40% benchmark within the planning horizon.
Model & Scale (High)	Dar es Salaam, Kilimanjaro, Njombe, Iringa, Tanga, Arusha, Mwanza	Use as peer-learning and teacher-training hubs; document and disseminate effective leadership, community engagement and classroom practice for adaptation in lower-resource settings.

The 2025 findings call for a shift from universal enrolment to universal foundational mastery, aligned with Dira 2050 and the KKK National Scientific Strategy.

11.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

- Differentiated regional targeting. Apply the tiered framework in Table 11: emergency, equity-driven investment (teachers, infrastructure, above-average per-capita spending) in critical-band regions such as Rukwa, Simiyu and Kigoma; acceleration (structured pedagogy, coaching) in middle-tier regions such as Ruvuma and Dodoma; and model-and-scale roles for high performers such as Dar es Salaam and Kilimanjaro.
- Treat early-grade reading as an emergency. Prioritise structured literacy pedagogy (phonics and fluency in Kiswahili), decodable texts, and TaRL so every child reads with comprehension by the end of Standard II.
- Adopt combined proficiency as the central metric. Institutionalise MPL tracking across grades, embed combined proficiency in national monitoring, and use the 2025 results as the official SDG 4.1.1(a) baseline — including out-of-school learners.
- Close the resource gap with an equity lens. Move decisively toward the 1:1 textbook ratio, prioritising rural schools where home resources are scarcest, and expand access to storybooks.
- Keep gender-responsive, intersectional strategies. Protect girls in poor rural and agricultural households from dropout while engaging boys in reading from the early grades.

11.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR NGOS AND PARTNERS

- Target the binding constraint of literacy through remediation models such as Jifunze, TaRL and structured, evidence-based reading programmes.
- Strengthen parent-teacher associations (UWaWa, a swahili for PTA) to build print-rich homes, helping low-education parents use local resources such as markets and farms as learning tools.
- Reach the invisible learner: flexible, second-chance pathways for the 7.2% of out-of-school adolescents, concentrated in rural areas.
- Advance digital inclusion with low-cost, context-appropriate solutions given the 9.4% household device rate.
- Integrate early identification of functional difficulties so children with remembering communication or sensory challenges receive tailored support.

12. CONCLUSION

The 2025 ICAN-ICAR assessment gives Tanzania a historic baseline and marks a decisive shift from counting school places to understanding what children actually learn. Near-universal enrolment has been achieved, yet only about one in three ten-year-olds reaches MPL in both reading and mathematics, and fewer than four in ten reach it in reading alone. The majority of children are progressing through primary school without the combined competencies needed for continued learning, productive work and full participation in society.

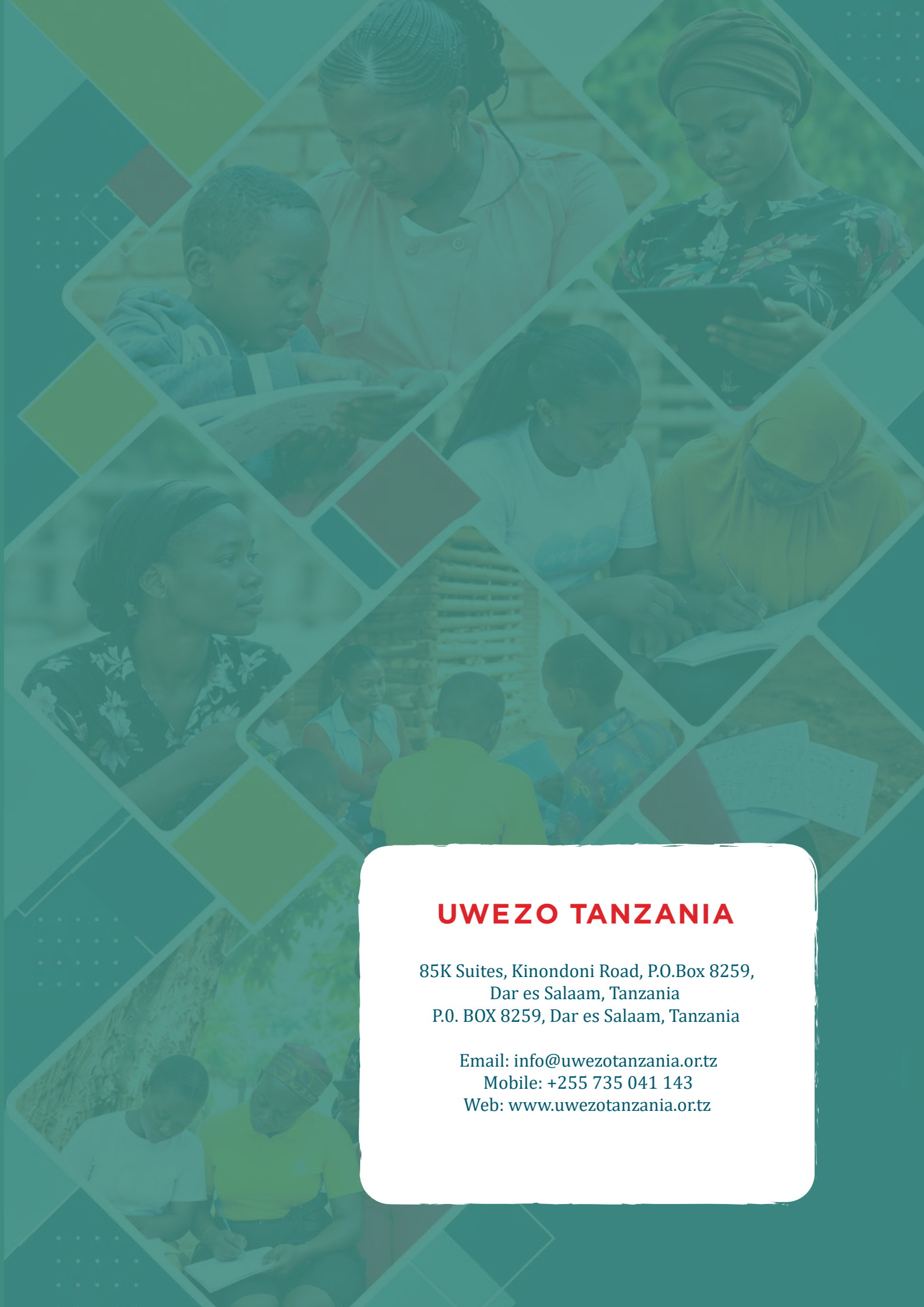
The system is markedly unequal and multi-speed. A small cluster of regions and better-resourced, non-agricultural households approach or exceed the 40% combined-MPL threshold, while many western, lake and deep-southern regions, rural communities and agricultural households sit two or more learning years behind, some below 20%. Geography and poverty are far more powerful than gender: girls and boys perform similarly when they share equivalent conditions. Across all subgroups, literacy is the binding constraint — reading ($\approx 40\%$) trails numeracy ($\approx 55\%$) despite near-universal Kiswahili at home — pointing to instructional quality, print-poor homes and insufficient time-on-task in the early grades, not language of instruction.

Learning trajectories show that children who stay in school do make progress, but too slowly, and that out-of-school adolescents face near-total exclusion from mastery. If these spatial and socio-economic disparities are not addressed, they will harden into long-term human-capital inequalities that undermine Dira 2050. The path to a knowledge-based society by 2050 begins with securing foundational skills for every child, in every region. Tanzania should treat early-grade reading as an emergency, tier its regional support and guide it with data, strengthen the home learning environment, bring invisible learners to the centre of reform, and institutionalise regular household-based measurement — using combined proficiency as the key measure of school and system performance. The 2025 results provide both the evidence and the urgency to act.

KEY MESSAGE

Move from measuring enrolment to measuring learning: make foundational reading and numeracy — and combined proficiency — the central indicators of Tanzania's progress toward Dira 2050 and SDG 4.1.1(a).





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