

E-ISSN: 2985-0800



2026

Volume 4 No. 1
January - June

Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development

FACULTY OF SOCIAL ADMINISTRATION
THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

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Purpose of the Journal

The ***Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development*** is an Academic journal of Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University. Journals are published articles on all dimensions of social policy, social change and development. The academical, philosophical, theoretical, empirical and methodological intuitive understanding and knowledge building in the social policy, social change and development arena. Also, welcome articles from young researchers, Ph.D. scholars, and academicians to submit articles to the journal.

The journal scheduled to be published twice a year:

Issue 1: January – June

Issue 2: July - December

Dean Forwarding Message

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to present the June 2026 issue of the *Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development*, a scholarly platform dedicated to advancing critical inquiry and evidence-informed research on contemporary social policy and development challenges. This issue reaffirms the journal's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary scholarship that bridges research, policy, and practice in addressing complex social issues across diverse national and international contexts.

The contributions featured in this issue examine a broad range of pressing policy concerns, including the transition of adolescent girls from institutional care, comprehensive sexuality education, girls' educational retention through social protection programs, evidence-based policymaking in global governance, and workforce transformation towards an entrepreneurial economy. Although situated in different geographical settings including Zimbabwe, Vietnam, India, Thailand, and the international policy arena these studies share a common commitment to promoting inclusive development, social justice, and effective governance through innovative and evidence-based policy approaches.

A notable strength of this issue is its emphasis on the importance of integrating empirical evidence into policymaking and program design. The articles collectively demonstrate how robust research can inform interventions that improve educational outcomes, strengthen social protection systems, enhance institutional effectiveness, and promote sustainable economic and social development. They also highlight the value of comparative perspectives in understanding both context-specific challenges and shared global policy concerns.

The diversity of themes and methodological approaches presented in this issue reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of contemporary social policy research. By bringing together contributions from different regions of the Global South alongside analyses of international governance institutions, this issue enriches scholarly dialogue and offers valuable insights for academics, practitioners, development professionals, and policymakers seeking innovative solutions to complex social challenges.

I would like to commend the Editor-in-Chief, Asst. Prof. Dr. Mahesh Chougule, for his academic leadership, editorial dedication, and continued commitment to strengthening the quality and international visibility of the journal. I also extend my sincere appreciation to all

contributing authors for sharing their valuable research and to the reviewers for their careful evaluations and constructive feedback, which are essential in maintaining the journal's high academic standards.

It is my sincere hope that the scholarship presented in this issue will stimulate critical discussion, encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, and contribute to the development of effective social policies that advance equity, inclusion, and sustainable development both within the region and globally.

With best wishes,

Associate. Prof. Dr. Auschala Chalayonnavin
Dean of Faculty of Social Administration
Thammasat University
Bangkok, Thailand

Editorial

Strengthening Social Policy through Evidence, Governance, and Inclusive Development

As Editor-in-Chief, it gives me great pleasure to present the June 2026 issue of the *Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development*. This issue reflects the journal's continued commitment to publishing high-quality, evidence-based scholarship that advances understanding of contemporary social policy, governance, social change, and sustainable development. The articles featured in this issue provide valuable insights into policy innovations and development challenges across diverse national and international contexts, reinforcing the importance of interdisciplinary research in addressing today's complex social issues.

This issue brings together five original contributions that examine critical dimensions of social policy and development across Zimbabwe, Vietnam, India, Thailand, and the international policy arena. Collectively, these studies explore themes of youth transitions, gender equality, educational access, evidence-based governance, entrepreneurship, and institutional reform. While grounded in different socio-political contexts, they share a common objective: identifying effective policy responses that promote social justice, inclusive development, and improved human well-being.

The opening article explores the livelihood needs of adolescent girls transitioning from institutional care in Zimbabwe through the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. By identifying gaps in human, social, financial, public, and physical assets, the study demonstrates the importance of participatory approaches that place young people at the centre of policy and program design. The findings highlight the need for integrated social protection systems that support successful transitions from institutional care to independent adulthood.

The second article examines the legal and policy framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in Vietnam. Despite growing international recognition of CSE as a cornerstone of adolescent health and gender equality, implementation remains fragmented. The authors critically analyse policy gaps, institutional barriers, and socio-cultural challenges while proposing practical recommendations to strengthen national policy, teacher capacity, curriculum development, and multisectoral collaboration.

Gender-responsive social protection is further explored through an evaluation of the Kanyashree Scholarship Program in West Bengal, India. Using district-level evidence, the study assesses the program's effectiveness in reducing girls' school dropout and promoting educational continuity. While recognizing the program's considerable achievements, the analysis also identifies emerging challenges, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the need for adaptive and resilient education policies.

Expanding the discussion to the international level, the fourth contribution investigates evidence-based policymaking within global governance through an examination of the relationship between the Policy Studies Organization and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The article highlights the growing importance of knowledge brokers, epistemic communities, and policy networks in strengthening multilateral decision-making and institutional effectiveness in addressing global development challenges.

The final article focuses on Thailand's workforce transformation towards an entrepreneurial economy. Through qualitative policy analysis, the authors propose a comprehensive multi-level governance framework that addresses structural barriers in entrepreneurship, human capital development, institutional coordination, and regional innovation ecosystems. The study demonstrates how effective public policy can contribute to sustainable economic transformation while promoting inclusive development.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue reinforce several important messages. Effective social policy must be evidence-informed, participatory, and responsive to local realities. Inclusive governance requires meaningful engagement with vulnerable populations and stronger coordination across institutions and sectors. Moreover, the experiences presented in this issue demonstrate that countries across the Global South continue to generate innovative policy solutions that contribute significantly to global debates on sustainable development and social justice.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I extend my sincere appreciation to all authors for their valuable scholarly contributions and to our reviewers for their rigorous evaluations and constructive feedback. Their dedication to maintaining high academic standards is essential to the continued growth and quality of this journal.

We hope the articles published in this issue stimulate further research, encourage policy dialogue, and inspire innovative approaches to addressing contemporary social policy challenges. As societies continue to navigate rapid economic, demographic, technological, and environmental transformations, robust evidence and interdisciplinary scholarship remain indispensable for building more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable futures.

Asst. Prof. Dr. Mahesh Chougule

Editor-in-Chief

Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development

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Needs Assessments for Adolescent Girls Transitioning from Institutional Care Facilities in Zimbabwe: A Sustainable Livelihood Approach

Pamhidzayi Berejena Mhongera¹

Sipho Sibanda^{2*}

Abstract

Transition of adolescents from care facilities to independent living arrangements has been a topical issue in the childcare and protection sector. Mechanisms and systems must be implemented to ensure seamless transitions. This mixed-methods study, part of a broader evaluation of adolescent girls transitioning from institutional care in Harare, Zimbabwe, employed the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach to assess the livelihood needs of 32 girls from two institutions. Data were collected from 16 adolescents still in care facilities and 16 who had exited care facilities. Data collection involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with all participants and two focus group discussions with girls in both institutions. For care leavers, responses were retrospective. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed concurrently using Framework Analysis. Quantitative findings categorised assets and assigned values to each, while qualitative results used narratives and direct quotes to compare the needs of girls within and outside institutional care. The study identified both similarities and differences in prioritized livelihood needs: human assets (41.5%) such as education, skills development and advocacy; social assets (29.5%) such as relationship-building and family connections; public assets (18.75%) such as access to services and support systems; financial assets (9%) such as economic resources and opportunities; and physical assets (1.25%) such as accommodation and material resources. The assessment highlights significant gaps in meeting these needs within institutional settings and recommends actively involving adolescent girls in the design of policies and programs that address their development priorities.

Keywords: Sustainable livelihood approach, Needs assessments, Livelihood needs, Adolescent girls, Institutional care, Youth transitions

Introduction

The transition to adulthood is a pivotal and complex journey, marking the profound shift from childhood dependency to adult self-sufficiency (Ramohai, 2025). While this period is filled with potential, its outcomes are not equally distributed. For young people without access to essential support systems, it can be a time of significant vulnerability, with lifelong consequences for their physical, psychological and economic well-being (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025). This challenge is

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Received 30 October 2025 Revised 23 May 2026 Accepted 2 June 2026

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particularly acute for young people leaving institutional care. Unlike their peers in family-based settings, care leavers are often thrust into independence without the necessary resources or sustained support. Research consistently shows that this leads to negative outcomes, including interrupted education, unemployment, homelessness, poor mental health and increased risks of poverty and exploitation (Van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019; Mhongera & Lombard, 2017). This is a global concern, but the gaps in structured transition programs and aftercare support are more pronounced in the Global South.

Despite a growing body of care-leaving research, the specific plight of adolescent girls remains a critical blind spot, obscuring the profound influence of gender on transition outcomes (van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019). A gender-sensitive lens is essential, as the challenges girls face, such as heightened risks of gender-based violence, systemic barriers to education and employment and societal expectations, are distinct and compounding (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025; World Health Organization (WHO), 2023). Without understanding these gender-specific realities, support programs risk being ineffective, leaving adolescent girls to navigate a perilous path to adulthood alone.

Gender mainstreaming in childcare and protection is crucial for adolescent girls exiting care because it tackles the unique and layered vulnerabilities they experience due to their gender and care status. Hesse-Biber (2012) views gender mainstreaming as a process that identifies and addresses the development challenges and needs of both women and men, while considering the impacts on both genders throughout all phases of policy and program development formulation, planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation. In the institutional context, transition programs should be gender-responsive (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025). To achieve this, it is essential to amplify the voices of adolescent girls and boys so they can express their specific gender-related needs (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Gender responsiveness refers to the planning approach where programs and policy measures are designed specifically to tackle and prevent issues that may arise if the needs stemming from socially constructed gender differences between men and women are not properly addressed (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025).

In designing transition programs, conducting needs assessments should be a top priority because they identify the specific requirements and gaps of the target population. This ensures that the programs are tailored effectively to address actual needs, leading to better outcomes and efficient allocation of resources. Livelihood needs include the capabilities, assets (both tangible and intangible), income and activities that individuals, households, or communities require to meet their essential needs and maintain their well-being (UNDP, 2017). These needs go beyond just covering basic survival essentials like food, water and shelter, but also include the ability to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses such as natural disasters or economic and social challenges (Morse, 2025). Successfully, meeting livelihood needs requires not only access to these forms of capital, but also the ability to mobilise and manage them effectively (Natarajan, 2022). This capacity is often shaped by broader vulnerabilities stemming from external influences such as government policies, institutional frameworks, market dynamics, and fluctuating environmental conditions, which can either constrain or enable sustainable livelihoods (Scoones, 2015; UNDP, 2017).

Mhongera and Lombard (2017) positions need assessments as more than a mere administrative step, but as a basis for a targeted, evidence-based and gender-conscious child protection system. Accordingly, needs assessments are the critical link between acknowledging the unique challenges faced by adolescent girls leaving care and taking meaningful action. By mapping each girl's individual risks, strengths and aspirations, the system can shift from being a generic, reactive support to proactively

co-creating a pathway to a safe, sustainable and empowered future for care leavers (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025). In short, needs assessments ensure that these young women do not just leave care but are resilient enough to deal with the shocks and stress of life beyond care.

This article is based on a study that built on a larger research project that examined the transition experiences and livelihood outcomes of adolescent girls exiting two residential childcare centres in Harare, Zimbabwe. Applying, the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), this paper assesses how access to various capital, including human, social, physical, financial and natural, affected the livelihood outcomes of these young women beyond care. The research compared adolescents transitioning from a government-operated dormitory-style facility (Institution A) with those from a non-governmental organization (NGO) managed, family-oriented facility (Institution B). Findings from that study showed that the absence of structured, well-funded and comprehensive transition programs prevented many adolescent girls from obtaining the services and support necessary to build the assets needed for sustainable livelihoods. Consequently, girls who had left care encountered higher levels of poverty and more challenging transition experiences than those still in care (Mhongera & Lombard, 2016).

Upon reaching the age of eighteen, young people living in residential institutions in Zimbabwe are typically discharged from care and cease to receive institutional support. Many transition out of care without the resources necessary to sustain independent livelihoods, with limited social competencies and weak or absent support networks, circumstances that heighten their vulnerability to multiple socio-economic risks (Child Protection Society, 2014). As increasing numbers of young people approach the age threshold for discharge, challenges related to reunification and community integration become increasingly pressing. In many cases, care leavers exit institutions without adequate material, social, or economic assets required for independent living. Although some may reconnect with relatives or friends within the community, these informal support systems are often constrained by poverty and may lack the capacity to provide sustained assistance. Others return to family environments characterised by prior abuse, exposing them to the risk of re-victimisation upon reunification. Together, these circumstances severely restrict young people's livelihood opportunities and undermine successful transitions to adulthood. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening the integration of care leavers into social and economic systems to enhance their access to employment opportunities, income-generating resources, public services and supportive social networks. However, the limited availability of programs promoting social and economic empowerment contributes to unsuccessful transitions, particularly among adolescent girls, who frequently encounter gendered constraints that compound their vulnerabilities during the transition from care to adulthood.

Against this backdrop, adolescent girls transitioning out of residential institutional care face a range of complex and frequently unmet needs. This article examines the livelihood needs of adolescent girls transitioning out of institutional care in Harare, Zimbabwe. Through a systematic assessment of needs, the study moves beyond broad generalisations to identify the specific vulnerabilities and support deficits shaping the livelihood outcomes of this population. The inquiry was guided by two central questions: What are the needs of livelihood of adolescent girls transitioning out of two residential institutions in Harare, Zimbabwe? In what ways do these livelihood needs influence their well-being and future opportunities? By addressing these questions, the study sought to generate an evidence base to inform the design of contextually relevant and targeted interventions aimed at supporting adolescent girls to achieve safe, sustainable and self-reliant lives beyond institutional care.

Background

Worldwide, it is estimated that five to six million children live in residential care facilities (Neville et al., 2025), while millions more are placed in informal family-based alternative care (e.g., kinship care or foster care) or remain at risk of separation due to poverty, disease, or disaster (Sibanda, 2025). In Germany and Denmark, over 30% of children in care remain in residential settings, while in Sweden, residential care continues to serve 22% of children (Gozho et al., 2026; Ulybina, 2024). The Sub-Saharan Africa region has a high rate of informal alternative care, predominantly driven by the extended family system taking in orphans. Many children live with neither biological parent, often absorbed into kinship networks stretched to their economic limits (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). Zimbabwe has one of the highest prevalences of children in alternative care in the region (Gwenzi, 2019). Roughly 24% of children live with neither biological parent, the country has 562000 orphans, and there are approximately 4500 children in formal institutions, while only 660 children are in formal foster care systems (Ntali, 2026).

Ironically, care leavers are expected to become independent, self-sufficient and productive adults almost overnight, yet they often lack the essential resources and support systems needed to navigate this difficult transition successfully (SOS, 2022). This expectation starkly contrasts with the wider context in Zimbabwe, where young people face profound challenges in their journey to adulthood. The transitions of young people in Zimbabwe are fraught with difficulties that raise concerns not only for the individuals themselves but also for their families, communities and the nation as a whole. Alabi (2024) underscores the severe barriers urban youth encounter in achieving self-sufficiency, mainly due to rampant unemployment and harsh socio-economic conditions.

Traditionally, youth followed a relatively predictable path of leaving school, pursuing further education and securing employment. However, shifting labour market dynamics and rising unemployment have disrupted this progression (ILO, 2023; Mauchi et al., 2011). Consequently, many school leavers experience prolonged periods of joblessness, leading to growing desperation and elevated rates of criminal behaviour (Luyi et al., 2025). If young people supported by families struggle to attain independence, then care leavers, often isolated from familial networks, face even more daunting obstacles, making their path to self-sufficiency significantly more precarious.

Research highlights the profound challenges care leavers face as they transition to independence (Ramohai, 2025; Pote et al., 2022). Nkomo et al. (2023) observes that many care leavers feel unprepared, immediately confronting financial hardship and housing instability upon discharge. A study by the Zimbabwe Care Leavers Network confirms this, revealing that unstable livelihoods force many into constant movement, with no fixed address (SOS, 2022). Desperate for shelter, some end up homeless, become commercial sex workers, or enter marriages of convenience. Tragically, the study reported women trapped in abusive marriages and unable to leave because they have nowhere to go (SOS, 2022). Compounding these crises are unemployment, a lack of education, limited healthcare access, and profound social isolation. In response, the Zimbabwe Care Leavers Network advocated for policies that enable a gradual, supported transition process alongside comprehensive financial, social and emotional support (SOS, 2022).

Adolescent girls in Zimbabwe face greater vulnerability and poor livelihood outcomes compared to their male peers. This is especially pronounced among orphaned girls, who are less likely to access quality education, healthcare and other livelihood needs due to poverty and entrenched socio-cultural barriers (Mhongera & Lombard, 2016). In urban areas, orphans are three times more likely to

contract HIV than non-orphans, with girls facing heightened danger due to increased risks of forced sex and sexual exploitation (Moyo, 2021). Early marriage remains prevalent, especially among girls from the poorest households and rural areas. Driven by poverty and harmful traditional practices, early marriage disrupts education, leads to early childbearing and limits access to reproductive health services (Fight Inequality Alliance, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Undernutrition is another significant challenge, and about 64% of women and adolescent girls in Zimbabwe are undernourished, with higher rates in rural areas. This malnutrition is linked to poverty, limited access to nutritious food and discriminatory norms, increasing health risks for girls and their future children (Nhancumba, 2023).

Adolescent girls, especially orphans in care, face disproportionate challenges such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, early marriage, undernutrition and a higher risk of HIV infection. To support their successful transition into adulthood and improve livelihood outcomes, it is essential to implement gender-responsive programs that address these vulnerabilities (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025). For these programs to succeed, they must reflect the livelihood needs of girls in the institutional context and show sensitivity to how these needs drive their livelihood choices and how these choices impact their livelihood goals. Under Zimbabwe's Children's Act, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, together with relevant institutions, is legally responsible for providing protection and care to children living in institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2010a).

To support this mandate, the National Residential Care Standards were developed to guide services that meet the individual needs of children in care and prepare them for independent life after leaving institutional settings (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2010b). However, both the government and care institutions often lack sufficient financial, human and material resources to run effective transition programs. This shortfall has detrimental effects on the livelihoods of young people leaving institutional care, many of whom then struggle to successfully integrate into society.

Addressing the unique and gender-specific challenges faced by adolescent girls leaving care requires conducting targeted needs assessments that capture their distinct vulnerabilities and aspirations. Such assessments enable the design and implementation of gender-responsive transition programs aligned with Zimbabwe's legal frameworks and care standards, ensuring that the support provided is tailored to the realities of girls' lives (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025). By identifying specific barriers such as early marriage, educational gaps and health risks, these assessments help optimise resource allocation and intervention strategies, thereby improving the prospects for girls to achieve successful transitions and sustainable livelihoods despite existing institutional constraints (Scoones, 2015).

Upholding the principle of participation by actively involving care leavers, especially adolescent girls, in research on gender-specific livelihood needs is crucial to ensuring that their voices and experiences directly inform program design. When care leavers participate in assessing their own challenges and opportunities, the resulting data more accurately reflects their realities and priorities, fostering empowerment and ownership of the transition process (UNDP, 2017). As advocated by the Sustainable Development Approaches, people are not passive recipients of welfare-enhancing projects but are active agents of change in the development process (DFID, 1999; UNDP, 2017; Sibanda, 2025). This inclusive approach not only strengthens the relevance and effectiveness of gender-responsive interventions but also aligns with Zimbabwe's commitment to child rights and participation, ultimately leading to more sustainable and meaningful support for girls as they move towards independent, fulfilling lives.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in sustainable livelihoods and feminist approaches, the study gathered evidence directly from adolescent girls transitioning out of care. By centering their voices, the study provided a crucial foundation for designing effective and equitable policies and programs that support these young women.

Sustainable Livelihood and Feminist Interpretive Approaches to Care Leaving

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) offers a holistic and people-centred framework for critically assessing the efficacy of transition programs designed for adolescent girls, especially those exiting institutional care. By focusing on the five key capitals: human, social, natural, physical and financial, the SLA moves beyond simplistic metrics to evaluate how these initiatives build a foundation for long-term well-being (UNDP, 2017). When integrated with feminist theoretical perspectives, this approach gains a critical lens to deconstruct the unique, intersectional challenges, such as gendered vulnerabilities and systemic inequities that shape these girls' journeys into adulthood and independent living (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025).

This powerful synergy aligns with the core assertion of DFID (1999: 12) that “adopting the sustainable livelihood approach provides a way to improve the identification, appraisal and evaluation of developmental programs so that they better address the priorities of poor people,” ensuring interventions are not only effective but also emancipatory. Similarly, the feminist interpretive approaches adopt a transformative agenda that seeks to tackle the underlying causes of gender-based inequality and meet the needs of marginalised groups. Thus, according to Parry (2020: 3), “feminist research aims to represent diverse and unique lived experiences across gendered and cultural divides to address issues of inequality, gender-based violence, body politics, the discrimination of marginalised groups and the distributive nature of agency.”

A feminist interpretive lens was applied to critically explore the structural power inequalities influencing girls' livelihood needs and strategies. Drawing on the work of Hesse-Biber (2012), this perspective moves beyond a surface-level assessment of resources and institutions to examine the underlying power relations that shape them. The framework centres on key questions: In what ways do patriarchal norms limit girls' access to financial resources and constrain their livelihood opportunities? Do institutional systems truly strengthen girls' autonomy, or do they unintentionally reinforce dependency? It also considers which forms of social capital are recognized as valuable and how unequal power relations within social networks may expose girls to exploitation. By prioritising these concerns, the feminist approach keeps attention focused on the structural causes of inequality rather than merely its visible effects.

Livelihood needs encompass the diverse range of capital and assets that individuals and communities rely on to sustain and enhance their well-being (Morse, 2025). According to UNDP (2017), the assets include human capital, which consists of skills, knowledge, health and labour capacity that enable people to work and adapt. Natural capital covers vital resources such as land, water and biodiversity that provide raw materials and ecosystem services essential for survival and economic activities (UNDP, 2017). Financial capital refers to money, savings and access to credit, which facilitate investment and consumption (Natarajan et al., 2022). Physical capital includes infrastructure, tools, equipment and technology that support productive activities. Social capital involves the networks, relationships and social norms that foster cooperation, access to information and mutual support (UNDP, 2017).

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach suggests that individuals' access to and use of the five capitals is not direct but is influenced by transforming structures and processes. These include institutions, organizations, policies, and social norms that shape livelihood opportunities (DFID, 1999). In this study, residential childcare facilities serve as a primary transforming structure. Their internal policies on education, life skills training and especially the discharge and aftercare processes significantly impact the girls' asset portfolios as they transition from care. Key structures also include the Zimbabwean Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare. The Government's child protection and social welfare policies, cultural and gender norms, and power dynamics within households and communities strongly influence the girls' ability to access assets needed to secure their livelihoods.

Assets play a crucial role in reducing vulnerability and enabling people to access livelihood opportunities. Hence, understanding access to various kinds of assets is key to identifying different levels of vulnerability and finding ways to mitigate their impact. It is important to assess vulnerability levels to ensure fair resource allocation among populations living in poverty. Equally, a vulnerability assessment of care leavers is critical as the institutional context is characterised by risks. As asserted by Freidus (2010: 294), care leavers are at risk of exposure to physical and sexual abuse, dependence on the institution, undermining local kinship and family systems and lack of adequate health care and food. Furthermore, aging out of institutional care is very risky, as most care leavers fail to cope with the shock and stress of rejoining the community without enough support (SOS, 2022).

DFID (1999) emphasises the importance of understanding the specific aims of different groups when considering livelihood outcomes, since the needs, priorities, and interests vary among people. Similarly, this study sought to understand the varying livelihood needs, priorities and interests of adolescent girls leaving two childcare residential facilities through their participation in conducting needs assessments. As affirmed by (DFID, 1999), participatory needs assessments offer valuable insights into the diverse objectives of individuals and how to effectively gather reliable information about them.

In summary, the SLA framework aligns with feminist research principles by transforming needs assessments from a supposedly neutral administrative tool into a conscious, reflexive and emancipatory practice aimed at challenging power structures and co-creating knowledge with adolescent girls in the institutional context.

Methodology

The study adopted a convergent mixed-method approach with a qualitative emphasis. Needs assessments are one of the four categories of program evaluation, which seek to understand the level of need using multiple social indicators or variables (Engel & Schutt, 2008). Evaluation research is one of the feminist research strategies that assesses how effectively different actions meet needs and solve problems (Kabeer, 2021). The feminist principles that shaped the design of the study include participation, giving the adolescent girls a voice and a platform to tell their stories, and using the skill of reflexivity throughout the execution of the study. The study assessed the livelihood needs of adolescent girls in Institutions A and B, as well as examined how the identified livelihood needs affect their well-being and future opportunities.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently and later integrated during analysis and interpretation. Data collected using semi-structured interview schedules were placed into

asset categories, where each asset (variable) was allocated a value or score. The scores were assigned through a frequency count. Statistics were also used to analyse and compare the livelihood needs of adolescent girls inside and outside Institutions A and B. Using the Microsoft Excel computer package, the scores were summed and calculated as a percentage of each asset category. These statistics were presented in tables and graphs, analysed and then interpreted. Qualitative data were presented as narratives and participants' voices.

The research involved thirty-two participants, namely, sixteen adolescent girls residing in two institutions (A and B); sixteen who had been discharged from the same facilities. To accommodate the high mobility of the participants, particularly those who had left institutional care, availability sampling was utilised, and contact was established using records from the two institutions and the District Social Services Office. Data collection incorporated semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and direct observation. While interviews were conducted with both groups, FGDs were conducted solely with current residents, while the principal researcher performed observations on the living conditions of participants outside the institutions, and the researcher documented some field notes.

All research tools contained similar research questions. However, participants outside care responded to the questions retrospectively. The research questions were as follows:

1. Identify 5 livelihood needs that you consider a priority for you to achieve your livelihood goals.
2. How do these livelihood needs affect your well-being and future opportunities?

Data were analysed using framework analysis, selected for its systematic and transparent approach, which is appropriate for policy-oriented research and aligns with the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), framework analysis is concerned with describing and interpreting what is happening in a particular setting to improve efficiency and outcomes. The analysis followed five key steps: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to gain a holistic understanding; (2) identifying a thematic framework, developed initially from research questions and the SLA (e.g., human, social and financial assets) and refined inductively using the data; (3) indexing the data by applying the framework systematically to tag relevant text; (4) charting the data into a matrix with themes as columns and cases as rows, allowing for comparison across cases and themes; and (5) mapping and interpreting to identify patterns, associations, and explanations leading to an overall interpretation.

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Zimbabwe Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare, as well as the participating institutions. Informed consent and assent were rigorously obtained: guardians and institutional directors consented for minors, while participants over 18 years of age, who had exited institutional care, self-consented. All participating adolescent girls in the institutions gave signed assent after receiving an age-appropriate explanation of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained via the use of pseudonyms and the storage of data in a secure, password-protected file. This ethical rigour was vital for protecting the vulnerable participants' safety and dignity. The principles of non-deception, voluntary participation, and avoidance of harm were also adhered to throughout the study.

By synthesising data from the interviews, focus groups, and observations through framework analysis, the study provides a comprehensive description and interpretation of the livelihood needs and priorities of adolescent girls during and after their institutional care experiences in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Findings

The findings are presented below, beginning with the biographic profiles of the adolescent girls inside and outside Institutions A and B. Next, the livelihood needs of adolescent girls within the two institutions are highlighted, followed by those of their peers who have exited these institutions. A comparative analysis of the livelihood strategies between the two groups is then provided. Finally, the authors discuss the findings, draw conclusions, and offer recommendations.

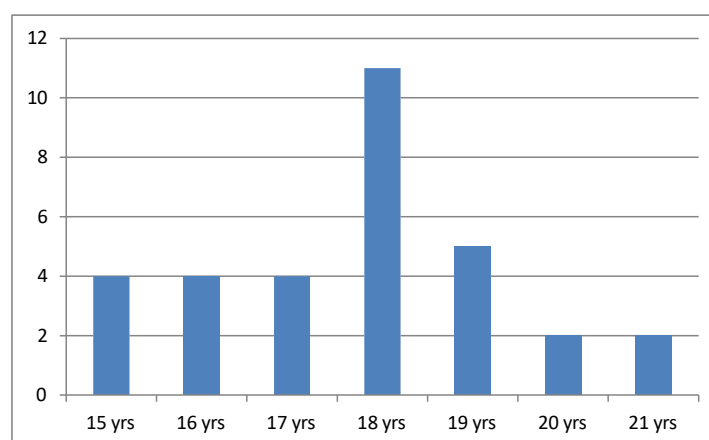
1. Biographic Profile of Participants

This study involved 32 adolescent girls, with an equal split between those currently living in institutions (Institutions A and B) and those who had exited those institutions; 16 girls were in each group.

1.1 Age of Participants

The ages of the girls residing in the institutions ranged from 15 to 18 years, while those who had left ranged from 18 to 21 years of age. The ages of participants are depicted in Figure 1 below:

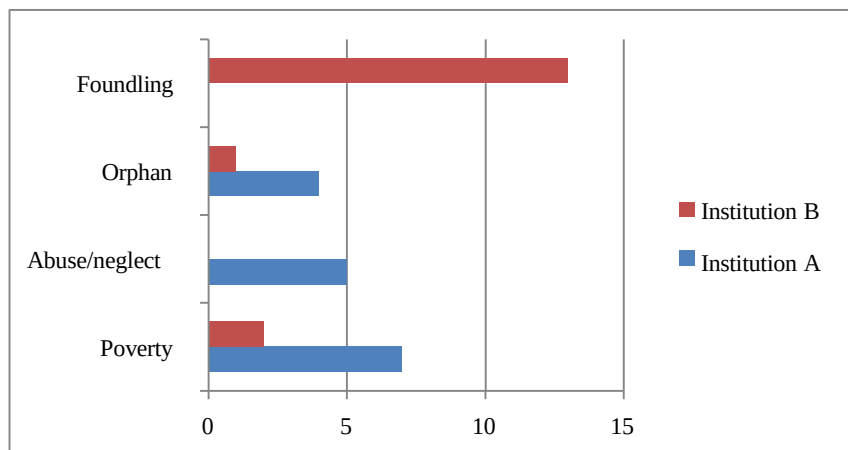
Figure 1 Age of participants



As seen in Figure 1 above, the age distribution of girls that participated in the study was as follows: girls aged 18 years made up the largest group, constituting 34.38% (11 out of 32) of the total sample, followed by 19-year-olds at 15.62% (5 out of 32), followed by 17-year-olds at 12.5% (4 out of 32), 16-year-olds at 12.5% (4 out of 32), 15-year-olds at 12.5% (4 out of 32) (Adolescents aged between 15 and 17 years accounted for 37.5%; 12 out of 32), and the smallest group was those aged 20, representing 6.25% (2 out of 32) and 21-year-olds, accounting for 6.25% (2 out of 32).

1.2 Reasons for Placement

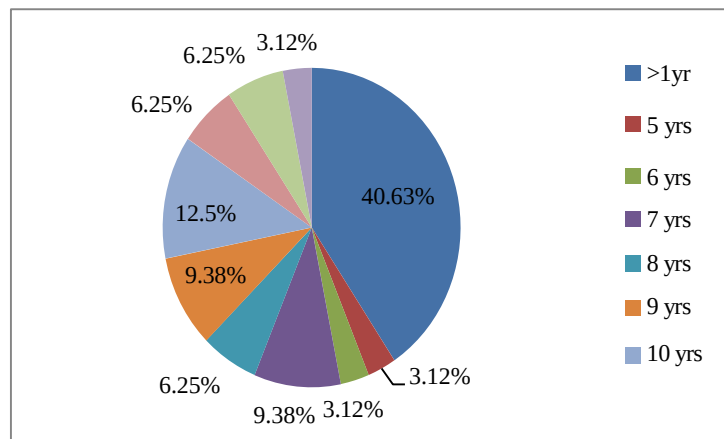
The adolescent girls were placed in institutional care due to various socio-economic challenges, including poverty, orphanhood, abuse or neglect by family members, abandonment at birth, and ill-health of a surviving parent. Figure 2 below illustrates the different reasons for placement.

Figure 2 Reasons for placement in the institution

As illustrated by Figure 2 above, 40.63% (13 out of 32) of the total adolescent girls were foundlings. These girls were abandoned by their biological parents at birth and were placed in Institution B, where they were raised by housemothers. In Institution B, 6.25% (2 out of 32) and 3.12% (1 out of 32) were placed because of destitution and orphanhood, respectively. 21.88% (7 out of 32) of the total girls in Institution A were admitted because of poverty. The parents of these girls were either living in streets or in squatter camps. Out of the total, 15.62% (5 out of 32) of girls in Institution A were removed from unsafe environments following some abuse from family members or relatives, and 12.5% (4 out of 32) were orphans with no supportive relatives.

1.3 Age on Admission

The ages when the girls were admitted to both institutions are shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 Age on Admission

As seen in Figure 3 above, out of the total, 40.63% (13 out of 32) who are foundlings were admitted to Institution B soon after birth. 12.50% (4 out of 32) were admitted when they were 10 years old, and 18.76% (6 out of 32) were either seven or nine years old at the time of admission. Similarly, 18.75% (6 out of 32) were admitted to the institution at the ages of 8, 11, and 12, respectively, and 9.36% (3 out of 32) were 5, 6, and 13 years old when they were placed in institutional care. The findings noted significant socio-economic challenges, including family instability, economic deprivation and vulnerability to exploitation among participants as reasons for placement. Foundlings constituted a larger proportion of participants, highlighting a unique dimension of lifelong institutionalisation.

2. Adolescent Girls' Livelihood Needs

Gender-specific livelihood needs are crucial for adolescent girls in institutional settings. Participants currently in these institutions shared responses based on their present needs, while young women who have left care reflected on their experiences in retrospect.

Both girls in care and care leavers identified five core livelihood needs, all addressing immediate requirements for short-term survival and future opportunities. The principal researcher organized these needs into five asset categories: Human Assets (skills/knowledge), Physical Assets (tangible resources), Social Assets (support networks), Financial Assets (economic resources) and Public Assets (community/institutional resources).

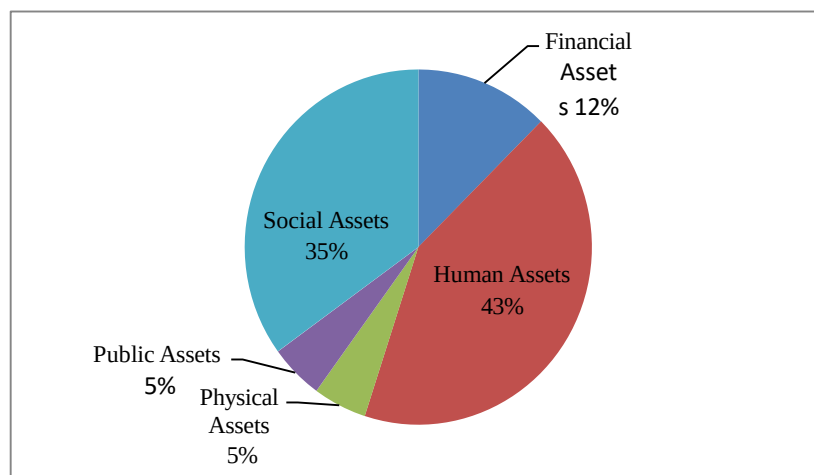
The principal researcher analysed responses using a quantified scoring system: Each need received a single score. 8 participants generated 40 total responses (5 needs × 8 participants). Scores were aggregated per category and converted to percentages. The subsequent section details the specific livelihood needs identified for adolescent girls in Institution A, presented through this analytical framework.

3. Livelihood Needs for Adolescent Girls in Institution A and Institution B

3.1 Livelihood Needs for Adolescent Girls in Institution A

Figure 4 shows the livelihood needs of eight adolescent girls in Institution A. An analysis of the chart below shows that adolescent girls in Institution A required the most human assets. Of all the livelihood needs, human assets constitute 43%, social assets (35%), financial assets (12%), public assets (5%) and physical assets (5%).

Figure 4 Livelihood needs for adolescent girls in Institution A

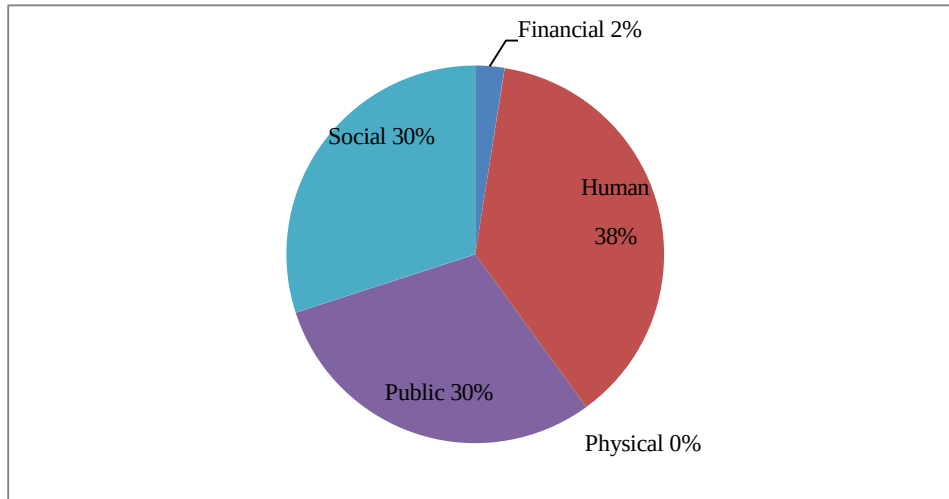


These livelihood needs are further broken down as follows. The analysis shows that the greatest need that adolescent girls in Institution A have is good food (75%). Although the girls are receiving 3 or 4 meals a day, their problem is not one of access but of the quality of food provided. 62.5% of the girls need pocket money, school fees, social interaction, as well as the love and support of family and relatives. 37.5% of the girls need new clothes and shoes, and 25% need career exploration, employment skills and talent development training. Finally, 12.5% of the adolescent girls need a passport, birth certificate, private living space and health cover, respectively. The livelihood needs of adolescent girls in Institution B are analysed as follows.

3.2 Livelihood Needs of Adolescent Girls in Institution B

The chart below demonstrates the livelihood needs of adolescent girls in Institution B. Adolescent girls in Institution B need human assets the most. The needs are ranked as follows: human assets (38%), public and social assets (30%), financial assets (2%), and physical assets (0%). Accordingly, the girls do not need physical assets.

Figure 5 Livelihood needs of adolescent girls in Institution B



A further assessment of the livelihood needs of adolescent girls in Institution B revealed that 87.5% of them need career exploration experiences, employment skills, and talent development programs. Seventy-five per cent of them need the love and support of family and relatives. Passing of the examination is very important for continued funding from the local non-governmental organization, thus 62.5% of the girls need textbooks and remedial classes. Fifty per cent of the girls need family tracing services and birth certificates. Girls who need the birthday parties constitute 37.5% of the total. Twenty-five per cent of adolescent girls need to visit places of interest, training in confidence and relationship building, as well as cell phones. Lastly, 12.5% of the adolescent girls need new clothes and shoes, pocket money, a passport, a mentor/role model and a male/father figure. The section below compares the livelihood needs of adolescent girls in the two institutions.

4. Comparative Analysis of Livelihood Needs (Inside Institutions A and B)

Table 1 below illustrates the different livelihood needs that the girls within the two institutions have. It shows their different priorities. The analysis, therefore, focuses on needs that are more prominent for adolescent girls in both institutions.

Table 1 Comparison of the Livelihood Needs of Girls inside Institutions A and B

Type of need	Institution A (n/8)	Institution B (n/ 8)	Variance
Pocket money	5	1	4
Good food	6	-	6
Educational support (school fees)	5	-	5
Educational support (tuition, textbooks, school shoes)	-	5	-5
New clothes	3	1	2
Medical support	1	-	1

Type of need	Institution A (n/8)	Institution B (n/ 8)	Variance
Career exploration, employment skills, talent development	2	7	-5
Private living space	1	-	1
Cell phone	1	1	-
Passport	1	2	-1
Birth certificate	1	4	-3
Visiting places of interest	1	2	-1
Social interaction /community exposure visits	4	-	4
Love and support of family/relatives	5	6	-1
Relationship of trust (mentor, foster parent, role model, caregiver)	4	1	-3
Family tracing	-	4	-4
Confidence and relationship building training	-	2	-2
Birthday (party, cakes)	-	3	-3
Male/father figure	-	1	-1
Total	40	40	

The analysis shows that good food is needed most by adolescent girls in Institution A, whilst adolescent girls in Institution B are satisfied with the quality of food being provided. More adolescent girls in Institution A need pocket money than those in Institution B. During focus group discussions, some adolescent girls in Institution A shared the following views on pocket money:

“We need pocket money to buy delicious food that our age mates eat, such as chicken, chips, pizza and burgers. The meals that are prepared in this institution do not taste good at all, and we are tired of eating the same type of food over and over again.”

“As girls, we always need money for personal use. Looking good and presentable is important to us because it boosts our confidence, and with money, we can fix our skin and hair.”

Due to inconsistent educational funding, adolescent girls in Institution A need scholarships for secondary education. On the other hand, adolescent girls in Institution B are more concerned about passing their examinations and require support to improve their grades.

The lack of birth certificates affects girls in Institution B, who also want birthday celebrations. Birth registration for adolescent girls in Institution B is problematic because most of them are foundlings who do not know their biological families. On birth certificates and birthday celebrations, three girls said:

“I envy girls who have birth certificates and whose birth days are commemorated. I feel out of place if someone asks me when I was born. It also makes me sad not to have birthday celebrations year after year.”

“It would mean a lot to me to have a small party or even a cake for my birthday. To have someone remember me on my birthday makes me feel special and loved.”

“I wish my Probation Officer and Superintendent could be able to facilitate our birth registration before the end of the year. Next year, I will be sitting for a national examination, and my birth certificate is needed for the registration process.”

As a measure to protect the girls, movements outside the institution’s premises are restricted. Written consent is required whenever a girl wishes to visit relatives or non-relatives in the community. Although this practice seeks to ensure the safety of girls, some of them feel that they are being deprived of social interaction. Hence, 50% of adolescent girls in Institution A need to go out of the institution for community exposure visits and social interaction. Adolescent girls in Institution B need family tracing services, while all adolescent girls in Institution A know their relatives. This question of family tracing and support evoked a lot of emotions from the girls.

One adolescent girl from Institution B made the following remarks:

“I need to know my biological parents or relatives. I, however, do not know how I will feel after meeting them for the first time because I have many questions I need to ask them. Firstly, I need to know why they abandoned me as a baby. Secondly, I need to know where they were all these years or why they did not make an effort to look for me.”

Another girl from Institution A said:

“Knowing my relatives has not made a positive difference in my life because they have not been there for me when I needed them. I am just like one who has no relatives at all. I feel my relatives do not love or care for me; otherwise, they would visit me or invite me to their homes during school holidays.”

The following comments were made by one girl in Institution A.

“I am not interested in being reunited with my relatives because of the physical and emotional abuse they inflicted on me following the death of my parents. They grabbed all our parents’ property, leaving my brother and me destitute and with no inheritance. We were also denied food and told to go and fetch it from *kuchuru* (the burial place of my parents).”

Girls in Institution B need training programs for career exploration, employment skills, talent development, confidence and relationship building to prepare and qualify them for developmental opportunities in the community. During focus group discussions, some girls made the following remarks:

“We need training programs that empower us economically and socially.”

“Some of us do not have families, and others with families do not receive support from them.”

“If we are empowered, we will be self-sufficient, and we will be able to make important decisions on our own.”

Adolescents in Institution B have access to life skills transferred informally from their housemothers and are therefore more resourceful and self-motivated compared to girls in Institution A. The researchers observed that adolescent girls in Institution B are more emotionally stable and confident compared to their counterparts in Institution A. This may be attributed to more time spent with their housemothers, unlike girls in Institution A, who have one caregiver supervising over 20 girls at a given

time. Adolescent girls in Institution A, therefore, need more contact and one-on-one time with adults such as caregivers, mentors or foster parents.

5. Comparative Analysis of Livelihood Needs (Outside Institutions A and B)

The next section analyses the livelihood needs of adolescent girls who have left Institutions A and B.

5.1 Livelihood Needs for Adolescent Girls Outside Institution A

An analysis of the livelihood needs of adolescent girls discharged from care sought to establish the 5 livelihood needs they had before leaving care. The following presents an analysis of girls who left Institution A.

Figure 6 Livelihood needs of adolescent girls outside Institution A

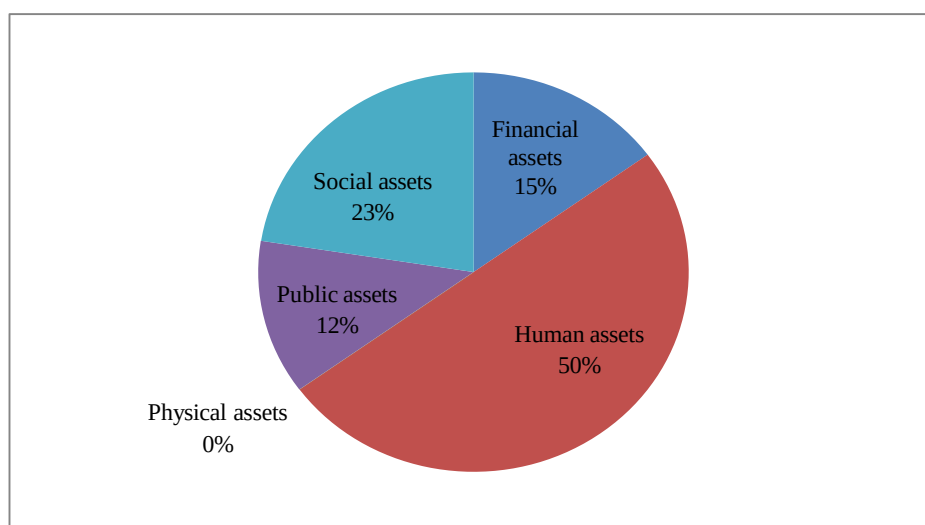
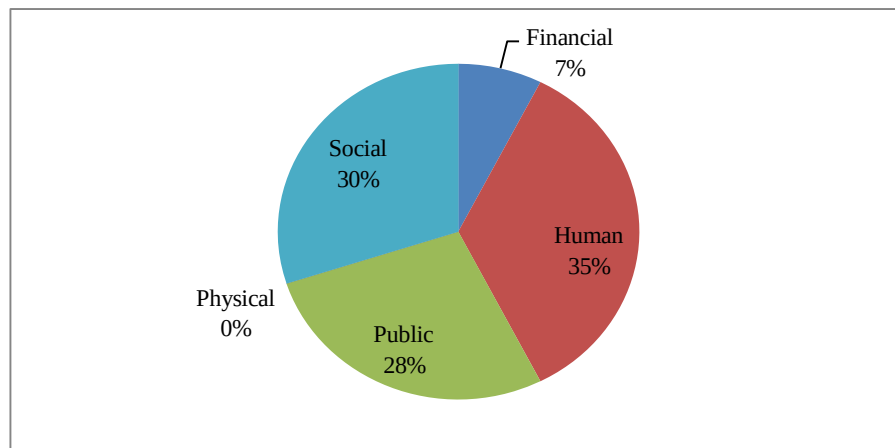


Figure 6 shows that adolescent girls outside Institution A needed human assets the most (50%). This was followed by social assets (23%), financial assets (15%) and public assets (12%). Adolescent girls outside Institution B did not need physical assets. The foregoing is elaborated on below.

Seventy-five per cent of the adolescent girls from Institution A needed good food and pocket money more than other needs. Secondly, the adolescent girls needed school fees (62.5%). Half of the girls needed life skills and training to build their confidence. The next level of needs (37.5%) was for social interaction activities and cell phones. These were followed by family tracing services, relationship building and career exploration experiences (25%). Adolescent girls from Institution A who needed new clothes, a passport, and a birth certificate accounted for 12.5%.

5.2 Livelihood Needs of Adolescent Girls Outside Institution B

Figure 7 outlines the livelihood needs of adolescent girls who were discharged from Institution B. According to Figure 7, adolescent girls outside Institution B most needed human assets (35%), followed by social assets (30%), public assets (28%) and financial assets (7%). The girls did not need physical assets (0%). An analysis of these assets is presented below.

Figure 7 Livelihood needs of adolescent girls outside Institution B

Adolescent girls outside Institution B needed educational support the most (75%). Secondly, they needed assistance to get birth certificates (62.5%). Fifty per cent needed to visit places of interest. The fourth need comprised birthday parties, love and support of family and relatives, confidence and relationship training, pocket money, new clothes and shoes (37.5%). A quarter (25%) of the girls needed cell phones, career exploration and employment skills. Those who needed a passport, a mentor and a male/father figure constitute 12.5%.

6. Comparative Analysis of Livelihood Needs (Institution A and B)

Table 2 below shows the different needs that adolescent girls outside Institution A and B had whilst in care.

Table 2 Comparison of the livelihood needs of girls outside Institutions A and B

Type of need	Institution A (n/8)	Institution B (n/8)	Variance
Pocket money	6	3	3
Good food	6	0	6
Educational support (school fees)	5	0	5
Educational support (tuition, textbooks, school shoes)	0	6	-6
New clothes	1	3	-2
Career exploration, employment skills, talent development	2	2	0
Cellphone	3	2	1
Passport	1	1	0
Birth certificate	1	5	-4
Visiting places of interest	0	4	-4
Social interaction activities	3	0	3
Love and support of family/relatives	4	3	1
Relationship of trust (mentor, foster parent, role model, caregiver)	2	1	1

Type of need	Institution A (n/8)	Institution B (n/8)	Variance
Family tracing	2	3	-1
Training in confidence and relationship Building	4	3	1
Birthday (party, cakes)	0	3	-3
Male/father figure	0	1	0
Grand Total	40	40	

The analysis focused on the needs as well as the priorities of adolescent girls discharged from the two institutions. Firstly, adolescent girls outside Institution A needed good food and pocket money. Adolescent girls in Institution B were satisfied with the food provided. One of the young women from Institution B said:

“To augment her income, my housemother provided catering services to social functions such as weddings and birthday parties at weekends. She was a great cook, and we learnt how to prepare a variety of dishes as well as bake cakes and other pastries. Because of her skills, we were guaranteed tasty meals every day, and we were also taught how to cook. I continue to use the skills to meet my livelihood needs even now.”

The greatest need for adolescent girls outside Institution B was educational support to help them pass their examinations. The need for school fees payment was equally important for adolescent girls outside Institution A. Five out of eight girls outside Institution B needed birth certificates before leaving institutional care. Fortunately, all the girls got their birth certificates before exiting care. One adolescent girl in Institution A left care before accessing a birth certificate.

While adolescent girls outside Institution B needed opportunities to visit places of interest, those in Institution A needed community visits for exposure and social interaction. During the interviews, one adolescent girl from Institution A said:

“I needed more community exposure to prepare me for life outside institutional care. I wanted to learn how people in a normal family interact because I lacked that experience before and during my placement in the institution.”

Adolescent girls outside Institution B needed birthday parties and cakes on their birthdays. Half of them needed love and support of family/relatives, as well as confidence and relationship-building training, compared to three girls from Institution B. Three girls in Institution B required new clothes and family tracing programs, while three girls in Institution A needed cell phones. One of the girls from Institution B made the following remarks:

“I needed new clothes because all we ever received in the institution were old clothes that had been donated by individuals and bales received from the government. I also wanted the opportunity to go to town on my own and choose clothes that fit me.”

7. Comparative Analysis of Livelihood Needs Inside and Outside Institutions A and B

This section provides a comparative analysis of the needs of adolescent girls inside Institutions A and B versus those outside the same institutions. Table 3 demonstrates the number of responses from the girls for each livelihood need.

Findings show that adolescent girls both inside and outside institutional care in Zimbabwe have the following livelihood needs and priorities, distributed across different asset categories:

- Human assets (41.5%): These include education, skills development and advocacy capabilities.
- Social assets (29.5%): Relationship-building and family connections
- Public assets (18.75%): Access to services and support systems
- Financial assets (9%): Economic resources and opportunities
- Physical assets (1.25%): Accommodation and material resources

Table 3 Comparative analysis: Livelihood needs in and outside Institutions A and B

Type of need	Inside A and B (n/16)	Outside A and B (n/16)	Variance
Pocket money	6	6	0
Good food	6	6	0
Educational support (school fees)	5	5	0
Educational support (tuition, text books, school shoes)	5	6	-1
New clothes	4	4	0
Medical support	1	0	1
Career exploration, employment skills, talent development	9	4	5
Private living space	1	0	1
Cell phone	2	4	-2
Passport	3	3	0
Birth certificate	5	6	-1
Visiting places of interest	3	4	-1
Social interaction activities	4	3	1
Love and support of family/relatives	11	7	4
Relationship of trust (mentor, foster parent, role model, caregiver)	5	3	2
Family tracing	4	5	-1
Training to build confidence and relationship building	2	7	-5
Birthday (party, cakes)	3	6	-3
Male/father figure	1	1	0
Total	80	80	

A total of 160 responses (80 from inside care and 80 from outside care) were collected from 32 adolescent girls who participated in the study. According to the analysis, both similarities and variances in livelihood needs exist. The following shared needs comprised pocket money, good food, educational fees, new clothes, passports and a male/father figure, and this constituted 31.25% of the total livelihood needs. Variations were noted on career exploration, employment skills, talent development, confidence,

relationship building training, love and support of family/relatives, educational support, private living space, cell phones, visiting places of interest, social networking, relationships of trust, family tracing and birthday parties, which constituted 68.75% of all the girls.

As shown from the analysis, the higher the number of responses, the greater the need and vice versa. Thus, in programming, addressing essential livelihood needs should be the highest priority. The analysis reveals that although some livelihood needs remain static over time, others change constantly. Therefore, periodic needs assessments should be conducted to capture the changing needs of young people in the institutional context. Capturing these changes is instrumental in developing livelihood strategies that are responsive to both the shared and individual needs of adolescent girls.

Discussion

Findings show that adolescent girls both inside and outside institutional care in Zimbabwe have the following livelihood needs and priorities, distributed across different asset categories, namely: 1. Human assets, such as education, skills development and advocacy capabilities. 2. Social assets, such as relationship-building and family connections. 3. Public assets, such as access to services and support systems. 4. Financial assets, such as economic resources and opportunities. 5. Physical assets, such as accommodation and material resources

One of the key objectives of Zimbabwe's National Orphan Care Policy is to engage, motivate, and raise awareness among communities nationwide to develop support strategies and interventions for orphans (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2010b). Consistent with this objective, the National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children seek to identify, mobilise, and coordinate resources to support orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2011). Despite the existence of these policy frameworks, institutions remain responsible for implementing programs that equip young people with practical skills for independent living and prepare them for employment or further education (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2010b). However, this study found that institutions continue to face significant resource constraints, limiting their ability to adequately support adolescent girls. Similar findings were reported by Ramohai (2025). Despite Zimbabwe having policies and frameworks to support Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), these statistics reveal significant gaps in meeting the comprehensive needs of adolescent girls in institutional settings (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2010b). Findings comparing different institutional models indicate that transition experiences and outcomes vary significantly based on the resources available to each institution, as well as the quality and quantity of transition services provided (Ramohai, 2025; Pote et al., 2022). These findings highlight the need for gender-responsive transition programming that addresses the specific needs and priorities of adolescent girls leaving institutional care (Kabeer, 2021; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025).

The findings indicate that adolescent girls experience challenges in transitioning out of institutional care facilities. Although young people in all environments go through the transition from childhood to adulthood, the differences in social and living arrangements result in variances in life experiences, level of access to assets and livelihood strategies (UNDP, 2017). The transition challenges are often more pronounced for adolescent girls, who face additional gender-specific obstacles (Sibanda & Berejena Mhongera, 2025). Studies indicate that adolescent girls leaving institutional care are particularly vulnerable to socio-economic risks that can significantly impact their transition outcomes (Stein, 2019; Pote et al., 2022; Ramohai, 2025). The abrupt cessation of support services when adolescents reach the legal age of majority (typically 18 years in many countries, including Zimbabwe)

leaves many young women without the financial, social and emotional support needed to establish independent lives (Gwenzi, 2019).

Findings from this study regarding the difficulties in transitioning out of institutional care facilities resonate with a study of young people who left Israeli group homes. According to Schiff and Benbenishty (2006), care leavers perceived their transitions as hard, with girls facing more difficulties than boys. The retrospective study, which investigated the young people's experiences within care and post-care, showed that the young people who left care needed more time to prepare for their transitions, follow-up and support soon after leaving care, assistance in housing and employment, as well as help in renewing relationships with biological families (Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006). According to Schiff and Benbenishty (2006), the girls needed a longer preparation time than boys to process the feelings and thoughts about transitions and establishing closer relationships with relatives, peers or parental figures before leaving care.

The study revealed the need for adolescent girls to be taught "how to redefine themselves and order their lives and relationships, considering the breakup of current relationships and the social constraints imposed on women in the general society" (Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006: 351). The study recommended that young people, particularly adolescent girls, need person-centred and gender-specific programs that will adequately meet their livelihood needs to facilitate smoother transitions from institutional care (Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006). In that regard, conducting needs assessments helps in understanding the unique and complex needs of adolescent girls in the institutional context, informs gender-sensitive and effective programming, addresses gaps in existing support systems, promotes the participation and agency of girls, ensures holistic and sustainable outcomes, and guides policy and resource allocation. Fortunately, for care leavers in Zimbabwe, there is a great scope for the transformation of the care leaving landscape through increased lobbying and advocacy work of Zimbabwe Care Leavers Network, with the possibility of favourable care reforms that support sustainable livelihoods among care leavers.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and gendered challenges faced by adolescent girls transitioning out of institutional care in Zimbabwe and underscores the limitations of existing systems in adequately preparing them for independent livelihoods. Although Zimbabwe has established policy frameworks, including the National Orphan Care Policy and the National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, the findings reveal a persistent gap between policy intent and practice. Resource limitations within institutions continue to constrain the provision of comprehensive transition services, leaving many adolescent girls insufficiently prepared for adulthood despite formal commitments to care, protection and social inclusion. Consequently, many adolescent girls experience unmet livelihood needs that negatively affect their social, economic and psychosocial well-being.

Institutions play a pivotal role in addressing the livelihood needs of young people transitioning to independent living and self-sufficiency. This is because institutional policies, processes, and programs have the power to shape the circumstances and opportunities of young people either negatively or positively, resulting in varied livelihood outcomes. The unfavourable socio-economic conditions prevailing in Zimbabwe have affected the capacity of institutions to provide adequate services and support to meet the livelihood needs of adolescent girls transitioning from care. As a result, adolescent girls have unmet livelihood needs that affect their social, economic and psychosocial well-being. Additionally, the lack of participation of adolescent girls in reviewing their development plans

implies that their unique needs are not being identified. Consequently, their transition needs are not addressed in transition policy making and programming.

Implications of the Study

The study underscores the need to build robust monitoring systems to assess both immediate and long-term impacts and to adapt programs based on feedback and changing needs. The findings suggest that adolescent girls are active agents of development capable of articulating their views and developmental needs. Their increased participation in transition planning and programming is recommended, along with the development of support models that incorporate gender-specific concerns and address poverty in the institutional context. Therefore, the successful transition of adolescent girls from institutional care requires coordinated efforts across government agencies, NGOs, communities and girls to provide holistic support addressing their multifaceted needs.

This study has implications for social policy, particularly in relation to care transition systems and youth empowerment in Zimbabwe. It underscores the need for policies that strengthen institutional capacity to adequately support adolescent girls transitioning from care into independent living. Social policies should prioritise sustainable economic support, access to education and vocational training, psychosocial services, and employment opportunities to improve livelihood outcomes for care leavers. Another social policy implication of the study is the importance of participatory policy development. Adolescent girls transitioning from care should be actively involved in the design, review, and implementation of transition programs and development plans to ensure that policies respond to their specific needs and lived experiences. Without their inclusion, institutional interventions risk remaining ineffective and disconnected from the realities faced by young women leaving care.

Institutions and caregivers of adolescent girls who aged out of institutions need adequate resources to meet the livelihood needs of adolescent girls in the institutional context. Regular meetings should be held with adolescent girls to review their development plans. Needs assessments should be conducted to establish the individual and shared needs of adolescent girls during and after care. Therefore, data on the adolescent girls' livelihood outcomes should be collected periodically to monitor progress being made towards the achievement of livelihood goals. The process should be participatory, allowing the girls to express their views and opinions on the transition process.

Longitudinal studies can also be carried out to follow different cohorts transitioning from institutions to assess their evolving livelihood needs and outcomes over longer periods of time. The authors also recommend research on adolescent boys' transitions from institutional care to assess variances in livelihood needs, strategies and outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the research results highlighting the distribution of adolescent girls' livelihood needs across human, social, public, financial and physical assets, the following recommendations are proposed:

Table 4 Priority Areas and Key Recommendations

Asset Type	Priority (%)	Key Recommendations
Human	41.5	Education, skills, advocacy, mentorship
Social	29.5	Peer groups, family engagement, social norm change

Asset Type	Priority (%)	Key Recommendations
Public	18.75	Access to services, adolescent-friendly spaces
Financial	9	Financial literacy, savings, microfinance
Physical	1.25	Safe accommodation, material resources, infrastructure

By prioritising interventions according to these findings and integrating efforts across asset domains, programs can more effectively address the comprehensive livelihood needs of adolescent girls and support their transition to empowered and resilient adulthood. The study recommends the following;

Strengthen Human Assets (41.5%)

- Expand access to quality education, including both formal schooling and non-formal learning opportunities.
- Integrate skills development programs, especially in digital literacy, vocational training and life skills such as decision-making, self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Promote advocacy and leadership training to empower girls to participate in community decision-making and advocate for their rights.
- Partner with local organizations to provide mentorship and role models, especially female mentors, to reinforce positive aspirations.

Enhance Social Assets (29.5%)

- Facilitate the creation of safe spaces and peer support groups where girls can build trust, share experiences, and develop social networks.
- Encourage family engagement programs that strengthen family connections and support systems, recognizing the critical role families play in girls' wellbeing.
- Promote community-based initiatives that foster positive social norms and gender equality, reducing isolation and building collective agency.

Improve Access to Public Assets (18.75%)

- Ensure adolescent girls have access to essential services, including health care (especially sexual and reproductive health), counselling and legal support.
- Strengthen referral systems and community outreach to connect girls with available public services and support structures.
- Advocate for adolescent-friendly service spaces, ensuring that services are accessible, confidential and responsive to girls' unique needs.

Expand Financial Assets (9%)

- Implement financial literacy and savings programs tailored for adolescent girls, combining financial education with access to savings products for a stronger impact.
- Provide opportunities for safe and age-appropriate income generation, such as microenterprise development, internships, or apprenticeships.

- Facilitate access to microfinance, small grants, or seed capital, ensuring that financial interventions are linked to broader skills and empowerment programs.
- Integrate financial asset-building with other interventions to maximise both economic and non-economic outcomes, such as improved health and self-confidence.

Bolster Physical Assets (1.25%)

- Address the acute need for safe accommodation, especially for vulnerable groups such as out-of-school, married, or orphaned girls.
- Support access to basic material resources, such as school supplies, hygiene products and transportation, to remove barriers to participation in education and training.
- Where feasible, advocate for infrastructure improvements (e.g. safe transport, secure community spaces) that directly benefit adolescent girls' mobility and security.

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Laws, Policies, and Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programs for Students in Vietnam: Status, Causes, and Solutions

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the legal and policy framework, implementation status, and barriers to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) for students in Vietnam. Through a review and analysis of policy documents, research reports, and international technical guidance, the study shows that the implementation of CSE in Vietnam remains fragmented, lacking systematization, and does not fully meet global standards. Although there are certain legal foundations, Vietnam still lacks a coherent national policy and a stand-alone CSE curriculum. The current integration model does not ensure comprehensive content coverage or consistency in pedagogy. Key challenges include policy gaps, limited teacher capacity, a lack of standardized materials, and deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, such as gender bias and community reluctance. Accordingly, the paper proposes a set of strategic solutions, including establishing a clear national policy framework, investing in teacher training and professional development, developing context-appropriate teaching materials, and promoting multisectoral coordination among education, health, and social organizations to create an enabling environment for effective CSE implementation, thereby empowering the young generation in Vietnam.

Keywords: Comprehensive sexual education, Policy and law, Program, Vietnam.

Introduction

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is recognized as a global public-health and development priority. Its importance is affirmed in the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) (World Health Organization, 2015). International frameworks emphasize that CSE is not only a tool for reducing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections but also a means of advancing human rights, gender equality, and youth empowerment (UNESCO et al., 2018; UNICEF et al., 2021). By equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and values, CSE helps them build healthy relationships, make informed decisions, and protect their health throughout their life course.

In Vietnam, socio-economic transformation since the Doi Moi reforms in the late 1980s has influenced traditional norms regarding gender and sexuality among adolescents (Burns et al., 2024). However, Vietnamese adolescents, especially marginalized groups such as ethnic minority girls, continue to face persistent challenges in sexual and reproductive health. Data from the 2019 Global

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Received 1 November 2025 Revised 23 May 2025 Accepted 2 June 2026

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School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) in Vietnam raise notable concerns: 10.42% of students reported experiencing physical violence in the 12 months before the survey; the proportion of students having first sexual intercourse before age 14 doubled from 1.48% in 2013 to 3.51%; while condom use among sexually active students declined from 52.6% to 42.4% (World Health Organization, 2022). Adolescent abortion rates remain high, with 60–70% of approximately 300,000 cases annually involving students, placing Vietnam among the highest in Southeast Asia and fifth globally (Nguyen & Le, 2024). For vulnerable groups, ethnic minority students face stark inequities: maternal mortality ratios two to three times the national average, and a study in A Luoi District (Hue province) found that 85.9% of ethnic minority adolescent girls had poor SRH knowledge and 79.4% did not know the most fertile period (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023). Students with disabilities face gaps in accessible materials, increasing the risk of abuse. These realities underscore the urgency of CSE content on respectful relationships and violence prevention skills, demonstrating CSE as an evidence-based intervention addressing concrete health problems.

CSE is “a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality” (UNESCO et al., 2018). In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) draws on UNESCO’s International Technical Guidance to deliver CSE in response to increasing adolescent challenges, including early sexual initiation, unintended pregnancy, and STIs. While the policy context reflects progressive, rights-based commitments, implementation is constrained by cultural and structural factors. For example, Vietnam has ratified international conventions on the rights of the child and gender equality that inform domestic laws, yet social norms that treat sexuality as taboo hinder adequate provision (Yount et al., 2023).

This paper aims to review and critically analyze the legal system, policy environment, and implementation status of CSE for students in Vietnam. Building on this analysis, we identify gaps, root causes of prevailing challenges, and propose evidence-based strategic solutions to improve the quality and effectiveness of CSE within the national education system. Through this multidimensional analysis, the study contributes to policy dialogue in Southeast Asia, where similar cultural and institutional challenges persist, and provides valuable evidence for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders striving to build a healthy, equitable, and empowered generation in Vietnam.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative policy analysis combined with a literature review of national legal documents, policy frameworks, and international technical guidelines on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). The analysis examines the coherence, scope, and implementation gaps of CSE policies in Vietnam across multiple governance levels.

Document selection followed a purposive and systematic approach. National legal and policy documents were identified based on their relevance, legal authority, and recency, including laws, national strategies, ministerial decisions, and official curriculum guidelines issued primarily by the Ministry of Education and Training and related agencies. In addition, international frameworks and guidance documents (e.g., UNESCO, WHO, UNFPA) were included to provide a comparative and normative reference.

While this study does not adopt a full Systematic Literature Review (SLR) protocol, it applies key principles of systematic review, including transparent selection criteria, thematic categorization, and critical synthesis of sources. The collected documents were analyzed using a thematic framework

to identify patterns, gaps, and challenges in policy design and implementation across macro, meso, and micro levels.

Content

1. Legal and policy framework in Vietnam on comprehensive sexuality education for students

CSE is recognized as essential to human development, helping children and adolescents build a sound understanding, life skills, human rights values, and a commitment to gender equality. Globally, CSE is implemented as an integral part of health education, global citizenship education, and human rights education. Vietnam, as a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (United Nations Population Fund, 1994), has gradually integrated sexuality education and reproductive health into its school curricula.

Reviewing current legal and policy instruments is the first step in identifying national political commitment, as well as opportunities and challenges for institutionalizing CSE. Although Vietnam lacks a dedicated national law or policy on CSE, several legal documents provide an indirect basis for implementing relevant provisions.

In the table below, we outline a three-tier framework of Vietnam's legal and policy context for Comprehensive Sexuality Education across educational levels.

Table 1 Vietnam's Legal and Policy Framework on CSE

TIER 1: LEGAL FOUNDATIONS		
<i>Legal basis for introducing sexuality education and CSE in schools.</i>		
Legal document	Articles & relevant excerpts	Content related to CSE
Constitution (2013)	Arts. 37, 38, 39	Ensures gender equality; the right to education; the right to health care and protection, including reproductive health.
Law on Gender Equality No. 73/2006/QH11	Arts. 6, 7, 14	Sets fundamental principles on gender equality; mandates gender mainstreaming in policies, programs, and plans; prohibits gender stereotypes in textbooks; promotes gender equality in access to knowledge.
Law on Children No. 102/2016/QH13	Arts. 6, 37–41, 44	Stipulates children's rights to protection from abuse and violence and to age-appropriate education, including sexuality education.
Law on Education No. 43/2019/QH14	Arts. 2, 8, 29–31	General education must ensure holistic development, including ethics, lifestyle, life skills, gender, and reproductive health.
Law on Youth No. 57/2020/QH14	Arts. 11, 16, 19	Ensures youth receive education on sexuality, reproductive health, life skills, and access to youth-friendly services.
Penal Code No. 100/2015/QH13	Arts. 90, 141–147	Defines sexual offenses (rape, coercion, sexual intercourse with persons under 16, etc.) as a legal basis for educating students on preventing harassment and abuse.

Table 1 Vietnam's Legal and Policy Framework on CSE (Continue)

TIER 2: NATIONAL POLICIES & STRATEGIES		
<i>Operationalizes legal provisions via goals, orientations, and intersectoral responsibilities.</i>		
Policy / Strategy	Issuing authority	CSE-related content
National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030 (Decision 28/QĐ-TTg, 2021)	Prime Minister	Sets targets to strengthen gender equality education in schools; trains teachers on gender; builds safe, non-discriminatory learning environments.
Vietnam Population Strategy to 2030 (Decision 1679/QĐ-TTg, 2019)	Prime Minister	Assigns MOH and MOET to provide reproductive health education and integrate sexuality education in curricula.
Vietnam Youth Development Strategy (2021)–2030 (Decision 1331/QĐ-TTg, 2021)	Prime Minister	Enhances life skills education, reproductive health, violence prevention, and gender equality for adolescents and young people.
National Action Plan on Adolescent and Youth SRH 2020–2025 (Decision 5914/QĐ-BYT, 2020)	Ministry of Health	Target: 80% of adolescents and youth receive SRH education; integrates safe sex, contraception, STI/HIV prevention, gender equality, and violence prevention.
Education Development Strategy 2021–2030 (Decision 711/QĐ-TTg, 2022)	Prime Minister	Integrates sexuality education, SRH, and life skills into curricula; strengthens education on equality and prevention of gender-based violence in schools.
TIER 3: EDUCATION PROGRAMS, IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE & INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION		
<i>Documents and guidance that operationalize CSE in schools.</i>		
Document / Program	Issuing/coordinating body	CSE-related content
Circular 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT – General Education Curriculum (2018)	MOET	Integrates sexuality education & SRH into subjects: Natural & Social Sciences (grades 1–3), Science (grades 4–5), Biology, Civic Education, and Experiential Activities (lower/upper secondary).
Decision 4834/QĐ-BGDĐT (17 Dec 2019)	MOET	Approves curricula and teacher guidance for CSE at lower secondary (grades 6–9) and upper secondary (grades 10–12).
Decision 777/QĐ-BGDĐT (22 Feb 2021)	MOET	Approves guidance materials: CSE for preschool; CSE in the 2018 primary curriculum; and in the 2018 lower and upper secondary curricula.
Decision 656/QĐ-BGDĐT (27 Feb 2024)	MOET – UNFPA	Approves guidance for implementing CSE within the 2018 curriculum for students with disabilities in inclusive secondary education.
“Sexuality and Adolescent SRH in Schools” (2015)	MOET & UNFPA	Guides teachers in integrating gender, abuse prevention, and responsible decision-making.

Document / Program	Issuing/coordinating body	CSE-related content
UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance	UNESCO	International technical guidance on CSE.
MOET – UNFPA (2022) Training Materials	MOET – UNFPA	Training of Trainers on comprehensive sexuality and life skills education.
Plan (2022) Teacher Guidance	Plan International	Teacher guidance on CSE for lower and upper secondary students.
MOET – UNESCO – UNFPA – Plan cooperation (2018–present)	Intersectoral	Pilots and scales CSE in provinces (e.g., Cao Bằng, Khánh Hòa, Vĩnh Long, Hà Giang, Lai Châu) and develops national TOT materials.

Vietnam’s CSE legal framework is rooted in statutory instruments and has been operationalized through intersectoral strategies. Since 2019, MOET has cooperated with UNESCO, UNFPA, Plan International, and other partners to pilot CSE across educational levels in multiple provinces. The 2024 guidance for students with disabilities marks progress toward inclusion (MOET & UNFPA, 2024).

Compared with regional and global policies, Vietnam’s framework is broad in scope and signals a strong state commitment to gender equality and children’s rights.

Table 2 Comparison of Vietnam’s CSE with selected countries

Country	Key CSE policy features	Comparison with Vietnam
Thailand	Policy support for CSE within basic education, with sexuality education integrated across primary and secondary curricula and provided as a standalone subject in vocational institutions (UNICEF & Thailand, Ministry of Education, 2017).	A similar level of commitment, but Vietnam lacks a dedicated, stand-alone CSE framework.
Philippines	The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (RA 10354, 2012) mandates CSE from the primary level. (MOET, 2018).	Vietnam remains at the “integration” stage without mandatory provisions.
Indonesia	CSE is integrated into religious and moral education; it focuses on abuse prevention and early pregnancy prevention.	Culturally similar to comparable social challenges.
Nepal	Adopt UNESCO’s CSE framework at at lower secondary and secondary level; unified national teacher training (UNFPA, 2020).	Vietnam has analogous documents (e.g., Decision 4834/BGDĐT, 2019), but with a narrower scope.
Australia, New Zealand	Sexuality education is compulsory within Health and Physical Education (mandatory through primary and lower secondary; optional in senior secondary in NZ). Some Australian states explicitly require assessment and reporting (NSW Department of Education, 2026).	Vietnam could learn from quality assurance and teacher competency models.

Even compared with the Philippines and Thailand, two ASEAN neighbors, Vietnam appears to be in the “policy preparation” phase rather than the “complete institutionalization” phase. These countries were selected because they represent regional peers in Southeast Asia with comparable socio-

cultural contexts that have progressed further in institutionalizing CSE (Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal), as well as high-income education systems (Australia and New Zealand) that offer mature models of compulsory CSE and quality assurance.”

2. Implementation status of CSE for students in Vietnam

CSE has been integrated into Vietnam’s general education curriculum to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for sexuality, reproductive health, and human rights. In practice, schools in many provinces and major cities have made progress in implementing CSE, supported by MOET’s educational materials and teacher training programs.

However, a significant gap persists between laws and policies on paper and realities in classrooms. CSE content is often delivered in a fragmented manner, lacks systematization, and fails to meet students’ needs, especially those from vulnerable groups.

2.1 Curricular model and content

Under the 2018 General Education Curriculum, CSE-related topics are integrated across subjects and educational activities. At the primary level, issues such as personal hygiene, friendship, family, and basic abuse prevention are introduced through Natural and Social Sciences, Science, Ethics, and Experiential Activities (Nguyen, 2016; UNFPA, 2020). At the lower secondary level, human reproduction and STIs are primarily covered in Grade 8 Biology, while other aspects are addressed in Civic Education and Experiential and Career Guidance. Nonetheless, this integrated model produces gaps and constraints, as highlighted in recent reviews (MOET, 2018). However, this integration model creates several 'gaps' and limitations in the curriculum, as indicated in the review study by Le Minh Thi (2022) and the curriculum framework documents (Plan International & MOET, 2022b).

Table 3 Analysis of CSE integration in the educational curriculum in Vietnam

Educational level	Subjects with integration	Topics covered	Gaps / Limitations
Primary	Science; Ethics; Experiential Activities	Personal hygiene, basic abuse prevention, friendship, and family.	Lacks content on bodily and emotional changes during puberty; concepts of gender and gender diversity.
Lower Secondary	Biology (Grade 8); Civic Education; Experiential Activities	Human reproduction; STIs; friendship; love.	Neglects early puberty (Grades 6–7); content is heavily biomedical; lacks psychosocial, rights-based, and diversity dimensions.
Upper Secondary	Biology; Civic Education; Experiential Activities	Advanced SRH topics; relevant legal provisions (e.g., marriage).	Remains fragmented; quality depends on teacher initiative and capacity.

2.2 Pedagogy and teacher capacity

Teacher training materials emphasize learner-centered, participatory pedagogy and create safe spaces for open discussion (Plan International Vietnam, 2023). In practice, however, many teachers rely on didactic transmission. Key reasons include limited capacity to teach sensitive topics and discomfort when discussing sexuality, hindering classroom effectiveness and safe environments for student questions (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023).

2.3 Access for vulnerable student groups

The implementation of CSE for vulnerable student groups faces even greater challenges. Specialized guidance materials emphasize the need to adjust content, methods, and teaching materials to suit the specific needs of students with disabilities (Plan International & MOET, 2022a). However, practical implementation requires teachers to possess specialized skills and invest significant time and resources, which many schools lack. Ethnic minority students face unique barriers, such as language barriers, strict cultural norms around sexuality and child marriage, and geographical isolation, which make it difficult to access information and health services (Burns et al., 2024). Current CSE programs are often not adapted to the cultural context and specific needs of these communities.

3. Challenges and barriers to CSE implementation in Vietnam

Identifying and systematically categorizing barriers is a prerequisite for designing multi-level and sustainable interventions. While Vietnam has made progress in intersectoral integration and teacher capacity building, implementation continues to face multidimensional challenges at the macro (policy), meso (school), and micro (community and individual) levels (Le, 2022).

3.1. Macro level (policy and system)

At the macro level, obstacles stem from an insufficiently coherent institutional commitment and weak coordination mechanisms, leading to fragmented and unsustainable implementation. Vietnam currently lacks a comprehensive national policy and a clear roadmap for CSE, resulting in inconsistent, overlapping efforts (MOET & UNFPA, 2024). CSE has not been designed as a continuous, coherent program; instead, content is dispersed across subjects (e.g., Grade 5 and 8 Science, Civic Education, Experiential Activities), which dilutes compared to a standalone subject (Nguyen, 2016; Keogh et al., 2018). Clear knowledge gaps exist in the official curriculum, particularly for Grades 6–7, early adolescence, when demand for sexuality information is high. CSE content emphasizes cognitive knowledge while underdeveloping behavioral skills (communication, negotiation, decision-making). Weak links between school health systems and professional health services limit comprehensive counseling and care; accessible, adolescent-friendly services for students with disabilities are notably lacking (Le, 2022; MOET & UNFPA, 2024). Public funding for CSE remains modest, creating dependence on NGO and donor projects and undermining sustainability and scalability (Keogh et al., 2018). Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are underdeveloped, making it difficult to implement continuous program improvement without standardized tools. Finally, interministerial coordination (e.g., between MOET and MOH) remains suboptimal (Keogh et al., 2018).

3.2. Meso level (schools and teachers)

At the school level, the main challenges involve system capacity and teacher preparedness to deliver CSE effectively. First, pre-service teacher education and in-service training do not yet equip teachers with sufficient knowledge, pedagogy, and attitudes to deliver CSE confidently and effectively (UNESCO et al., 2018; Trang, 2021). Counselors working in school psychology are often part-time and lack professional training despite the specialized nature of this work (Plan International & MOET, 2022a). Second, teachers struggle with abstract and sensitive topics (e.g., sexual relations, reproduction) and scientific terminology (e.g., in Grade 5 Science), leading many to skip or gloss over lessons. Third, resources and methods remain limited; textbooks often include only simple illustrations (Nguyen, 2016). Schools lack engaging teaching aids, and teachers default to traditional methods to maintain control, while feeling uncomfortable with participatory approaches (Even theoretically knowledgeable teachers face difficulties translating concepts into classroom practice (Keogh et al., 2018). The absence

of standardized, culturally appropriate teaching packages further constrains delivery. Additional burdens include performance pressures, heavy workloads, and school environments that lack the safety and trust needed for discussing sensitive content—resulting in perfunctory implementation (Nguyen, 2016; DeJaeghere et al., 2021).

3.3. Micro level (community, family, and students)

At the micro level, barriers arise from socio-cultural norms, family knowledge gaps, and psychological pressures on students. Traditional norms—shaped in part by Confucian values—sustain taboos around sexuality; entrenched gender bias and rigid social expectations inhibit open conversations on CSE (Nguyen et al., 2025). Parents often lack the knowledge and skills and feel reluctant to discuss sexuality with their children (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023); some oppose school-based CSE outright. Stigma toward minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities hampers inclusion and diversity (Dinh et al., 2024; Plan International & MOET, 2022a). Even when students possess basic knowledge, they may lack the confidence to apply it due to peer pressure, fear of judgment, and insufficient skills to negotiate safer sexual practices (Nguyen et al., 2025).

4. Root causes of barriers to CSE implementation

Moving from “symptoms” (barriers) to “root causes” deepens analysis and informs solutions with greater potential for systemic impact. Barriers to CSE in Vietnam arise from the intersection and mutual reinforcement of socio-cultural, institutional, and economic factors.

4.1. Socio-cultural causes

Socio-cultural barriers to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in Vietnam are deeply rooted in traditional norms, many of which are shaped by Confucian values emphasizing modesty, moral restraint, and family honor. Within this cultural framework, sexuality is predominantly associated with marriage and reproduction, while open discussions, particularly with children and adolescents, are often considered inappropriate, especially at the primary education level (Nguyen, 2016).

These norms contribute to the emergence of an entrenched “culture of silence”, which operates not merely as a lack of communication but as a systemic constraint on knowledge exchange. Teachers and parents frequently express concern that sexuality education may encourage premature curiosity or misunderstanding; consequently, sensitive topics are often avoided, selectively delivered, or addressed superficially (Plan International, 2020). At the same time, ambiguity persists regarding the division of responsibility between schools and families: while some teachers defer sexuality education to parents, many parents expect schools to assume this role. This misalignment creates tension, particularly when scientific knowledge challenges established familial beliefs (Trang, 2021).

Gender norms further reinforce these constraints. Dominant stereotypes such as masculinity associated with assertiveness and femininity with passivity and chastity limit open dialogue on sexuality and restrict the development of equitable gender relations. These norms undermine bodily autonomy and disproportionately affect women, girls, and gender minorities (Thi et al., 2023; Yount et al., 2023).

The persistence of the “culture of silence” has significant implications for CSE implementation. Students often turn to informal and unreliable sources, including peers and unregulated online content, increasing their exposure to misinformation and risky behaviors. Simultaneously, teachers may feel constrained or uncomfortable in addressing sensitive topics comprehensively, thereby reducing the depth and effectiveness of classroom instruction.

Addressing these socio-cultural barriers requires a transition from silence to structured, age-appropriate, and culturally responsive communication. This entails normalizing discussions of sexuality within both school and family contexts, supported by clear institutional guidelines, teacher training, and community engagement strategies that foster trust and openness.

4.2. Systemic and institutional causes

Vietnam's educational tradition emphasizes centralized, one-way transmission and academic subjects, hindering the development of interactive, participatory, and life-skills-oriented pedagogy essential to effective CSE (Keogh et al., 2018). This systemic pattern interacts with cultural taboos: the didactic model is further entrenched when teachers hesitate to move away from moral-arbiter roles toward facilitation. The absence of a firm, institutionalized national CSE policy relegates CSE to a secondary priority, fragmenting resource allocation, teacher training, and quality assurance, and leaving implementation to local discretion rather than embedding CSE as an essential component of holistic education.

4.3. Economic and resource constraints

The limited government funding for "soft" programs, such as school health and life skills education, has resulted in a shortage of resources for CSE. This creates a heavy reliance on funding from international and non-governmental organizations, which undermines the program's sustainability and nationwide scalability. When projects end, activities are often suspended or terminated (Keogh et al., 2018). Furthermore, economic factors such as poverty are closely linked to reproductive health issues, especially in disadvantaged areas and ethnic minority communities. Poverty is one of the leading causes of child marriage, early school dropout, and limited access to information and health services, creating a vicious cycle of vulnerability (Trang, 2021).

These challenges and causes are not unique to Vietnam but reflect common issues in implementing CSE in many low- and middle-income countries. However, identifying the specific causes in the context of Vietnam provides a basis for discussion and guidance on appropriate solutions.

5. Proposed solutions to enhance CSE effectiveness in Vietnam

Addressing the identified root causes requires a systemic, multi-tiered approach that ensures alignment among policy design, institutional capacity, and socio-cultural transformation. Building on the analysis of existing gaps and international experience, we propose an integrated framework structured around three interconnected pillars: (i) policy and governance reform, (ii) system and teacher capacity strengthening, and (iii) community- and learner-centered interventions.

5.1. Policy and governance reform: Establishing coherence and accountability

A foundational priority is to move from fragmented integration toward an institutionalized national framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Vietnam should develop a dedicated national CSE policy or framework that clearly articulates objectives, minimum content standards, learning outcomes, and age-appropriate progression across grades. This framework should be formally anchored in existing legal instruments and accompanied by a realistic roadmap, including milestones and budgeting commitments.

Strengthening MOET–MOH coordination is essential to ensure coherence between school-based CSE and adolescent-friendly health services. A formal inter-ministerial mechanism should be established to jointly: (i) issue implementation guidelines for schools, including referral pathways to

health services; (ii) develop shared indicators and tools for monitoring CSE delivery and student health outcomes; and (iii) coordinate communication campaigns to ensure consistent messages across education and health sectors. Clarifying roles and accountability among central ministries, departments of education and health, and schools will help reduce overlaps and implementation gaps.

Finally, policy reform should be accompanied by dedicated and sustainable financing for CSE. This includes earmarking resources for teacher training, teaching and learning materials, monitoring and evaluation, and inclusive adaptations for vulnerable groups. Reducing dependence on short-term donor projects will enhance the sustainability and scalability of CSE nationwide.

5.2. System and teacher capacity: Embedding CSE into pre-service and in-service training

Effective CSE delivery depends on teachers who are confident, competent, and supported by their institutions. Vietnam should integrate CSE competencies into pre-service teacher education curricula at pedagogical universities and colleges. CSE should not be treated as an optional topic but as a required component of programs in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education. This integration should cover subject knowledge, participatory pedagogy, classroom management of sensitive topics, and referral procedures for cases of violence and abuse.

For the existing workforce, MOET and teacher training institutions should develop competency-based in-service programs linked to teachers' professional development frameworks. These programs can combine modular workshops, school-based mentoring, and peer-learning networks, allowing teachers to gradually build confidence and skills. Training should be accompanied by standardized, culturally appropriate teaching packages aligned with the 2018 General Education Curriculum, including lesson plans, case studies, and interactive activities for different grade levels.

At the school level, leaders should create conditions that enable teachers and counselors to implement CSE effectively—for example, by allocating sufficient time within timetables, recognizing CSE responsibilities in teachers' workloads, and strengthening school counseling services. Linking CSE implementation to existing quality assurance mechanisms can help institutionalize expectations and avoid perfunctory delivery.

5.3. Community engagement and breaking the culture of silence

Given the deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers identified in Section 4, policy and school reforms must be complemented by community engagement strategies that explicitly address the “culture of silence” around sexuality. Schools can organize regular information sessions and dialogue forums for parents and caregivers that explain the objectives and content of CSE, address common misconceptions, and emphasize evidence that CSE does not encourage early sexual activity but strengthens protection and decision-making skills.

Collaboration with mass organizations (e.g., Youth Union, Women's Union) and community leaders is crucial for adapting messages to local cultural contexts and reducing stigma around discussions of sexuality, gender, and diversity. Media and social media campaigns co-designed with young people can further normalize age-appropriate conversations about CSE and promote positive role models. These measures aim explicitly to break the entrenched culture of silence by creating safe, structured, and age-appropriate spaces for dialogue in both school and family settings.

5.4. Inclusive and context-specific approaches for diverse learners

To ensure that no learner is left behind, CSE in Vietnam must be tailored to the specific needs of ethnic minority students and students with disabilities, who face multiple and intersecting

vulnerabilities. For ethnic minority communities, CSE materials should be culturally sensitive and, where appropriate, bilingual (Vietnamese and relevant local languages). Teaching approaches can draw on visual aids, storytelling, and community-based activities that resonate with local norms while challenging harmful practices such as child marriage. Engaging trusted community figures, such as village leaders, religious leaders, and local health workers, can enhance legitimacy and uptake.

For students with disabilities, CSE should be integrated within the broader framework of inclusive education. This includes developing accessible materials (e.g., Braille, large print, audio, sign language, easy-to-read formats), training teachers in disability-inclusive pedagogy, and providing individualized support where needed. Schools should also ensure that reporting and counseling mechanisms are physically and communicatively accessible, so that students with disabilities can safely disclose abuse and seek help. These adaptations are essential to operationalize the rights-based commitment expressed in recent MOET–UNFPA guidance on CSE for students with disabilities.

5.5. Strengthening system integration and student support services

Finally, effective CSE requires stronger integration between schools and health and social services. Schools should establish clear referral protocols to adolescent-friendly health facilities and hotlines, with staff trained to identify and respond to cases of violence, abuse, or psychosocial distress. Multi-disciplinary teams involving teachers, school counselors, health workers, and social workers can coordinate support for at-risk students.

Developing simple, student-centered information tools—such as school-based information corners, confidential question boxes, or digital platforms moderated by trained professionals—can help bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. By aligning policy frameworks, school systems, and community environments, these solutions aim to transform CSE from a fragmented, project-based intervention into a coherent, institutionalized component of holistic education in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Effective implementation of CSE in Vietnam is not only an educational priority but also a critical public health and human rights imperative. While Vietnam has made important early efforts to introduce CSE, the current system remains fragmented and insufficiently comprehensive, limiting its overall effectiveness.

This study provides a systematic analysis of the legal, policy, and implementation landscape of CSE in Vietnam. The findings reveal that although a relatively broad legal and policy foundation exists, the absence of a dedicated national CSE framework and the overreliance on curriculum integration have resulted in significant gaps in content continuity, pedagogical depth, and quality assurance.

These limitations manifest across multiple levels. At the macro level, challenges in policy coherence, intersectoral coordination, and sustainable financing constrain long-term implementation. At the meso level, insufficient teacher preparation, a lack of standardized teaching materials, and limited institutional support weaken the quality of delivery. At the micro level, deeply embedded socio-cultural norms, particularly the “culture of silence” surrounding sexuality, continue to inhibit open communication, reduce community acceptance, and limit student engagement.

Importantly, these challenges are not isolated but interconnected, reflecting systemic constraints embedded within broader cultural, institutional, and educational structures. Addressing them therefore requires a comprehensive, whole of system approach that extends beyond the classroom.

Based on these findings, several strategic directions are proposed. First, a dedicated national CSE policy framework should be established, with clear implementation guidelines, sustainable resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms. Second, it is necessary to strengthen teachers' capacity through integrated reforms in both pre-service and in-service training, including the integration of CSE competencies and interdisciplinary approaches into teacher education. Third, intersectoral coordination between the education and health sectors should be institutionalized, particularly through strengthened school health linkages and joint monitoring systems. Fourth, culturally responsive and inclusive approaches must be prioritized to ensure equitable access for ethnic minority students and students with disabilities. Finally, addressing socio-cultural barriers requires sustained efforts to break the “culture of silence” through community engagement, parental involvement, and meaningful youth participation.

Taken together, these strategies point to the need for a systemic transformation of CSE in Vietnam, one that moves beyond fragmented interventions toward a coherent, inclusive, and sustainable model capable of advancing the health, rights, and well-being of future generations.

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From Access to Continuity: Effectiveness of the Kanyashree Scholarship in Reducing Girls' Dropout in West Bengal

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of the Kanyashree Program, West Bengal's flagship conditional cash transfer (CCT) scheme, in reducing school dropout among adolescent girls between 2017 and 2025. Drawing on district-level data, the study evaluates program through different parameters, including retention, renewal, and consistency. The findings reveal contrasting patterns. While K2 scholarships (higher-level continuation scholarships) show relatively stable or positive growth, K1 scholarships (initial entry-level) record a steady decline since 2020–21, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic disruptions in school enrolments. Retention and renewal indices point to both consolidation and fragility, as many districts maintain high continuation rates while others face persistent dropout pressures. Temporal consistency (0.85) reflects sustained program stability over several years, yet the sharp fall in the Retention Index to 65.46 in 2024–25 signals renewed stress. Spatial consistency has improved modestly, from 89.02 in 2021–22 to 91.08 in 2024–25, suggesting a narrowing of inter-district disparities. However, the simultaneous rise in spatial consistency alongside declining overall retention highlights systemic stressors that cut across districts. The analysis underscores both the achievements and limitations of Kanyashree as it has contributed significantly to delaying marriage and sustaining female education; however, the program's long-term sustainability remains vulnerable to structural and systemic pressures.

Keywords: Retention, Renewal, Dropout, Conditional cash transfer

Background

In 2025, West Bengal witnessed a striking decline of 1.7 lakh students in undergraduate admissions to State-run and aided colleges, with registrations dropping from 5.3 lakh in 2024 to 3.6 lakh. This downturn is particularly paradoxical given the State's flagship Kanyashree program, a conditional cash transfer (CCT) scheme explicitly designed to reduce dropouts and encourage female participation in higher education. The decline, despite such targeted interventions, raises critical concerns about both the structural weaknesses of the higher education system and the limits of incentive-based policies. Scholars point to systemic inefficiencies, most notably the nearly three-month delay between the publication of results and the initiation of the admission process as immediate barriers discouraging enrolment. Yet, the shift also reflects deeper transformations, as students are increasingly drawn to vocational and skill-based programs that promise quicker financial returns compared to traditional degree courses (Ghosh, 2025). This raises a fundamental question in the broader debate on CCTs. If even conditional incentives such as Kanyashree fail to sustain undergraduate admissions, does

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Received 9 January 2026 Revised 11 April 2026 Accepted 2 June 2026

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this indicate a diminishing relevance of conventional higher education, or does it reveal a policy gap wherein financial transfers alone cannot offset administrative inefficiencies and the misalignment between academic curricula and labour market aspirations? This study therefore explores the extent to which the decline in undergraduate admissions in West Bengal reflect the limitations of conditional cash transfer schemes such as Kanyashree in addressing structural inefficiencies and evolving educational aspirations?

The *Kanyashree Prakalpa* (KP), a flagship initiative of the Government of West Bengal, has emerged as one of the most widely recognized social protection programs targeting adolescent girls. Launched in 2012 by the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, it is designed as a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) scheme with the twin objectives of enhancing female secondary education and preventing early marriage. Its international visibility increased when it received the United Nations Public Service Award in 2017, positioning it as a model of gender-focused welfare intervention. The program operates on a two-tier scholarship structure. The first tier provides an annual scholarship to unmarried girls aged 13–19 who remain in education, thereby incentivizing school retention. The second tier offers a one-time grant to unmarried girls aged 18–19, conditional on continued enrolment, which serves as both a symbolic and practical measure to discourage child marriage. The later introduction of *Kanyashree Plus*, with its focus on a “graduation strategy,” further reflects an attempt to move beyond welfare dependence by linking social protection with pathways toward productive and resilient livelihoods. By 2019–20, more than three million scholarships (including both K1 and K2 components) were sanctioned, underlining the scheme’s large-scale reach. While these figures highlight impressive coverage, a critical perspective also demands attention to persistent challenges: ensuring equitable access across districts, monitoring long-term impacts on educational attainment and labour force participation, and addressing structural factors that continue to reproduce gender disadvantage. Thus, the Kanyashree Prakalpa is not merely a cash transfer scheme but a broader social experiment in reshaping gender norms and adolescent opportunities in West Bengal.

One of the most alarming social consequences observed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in West Bengal was the resurgence of child marriage and child trafficking. Reports in leading newspapers highlighted that prolonged school closures pushed many adolescent girls and boys out of the formal education system, thereby increasing their vulnerability to early marriage and exploitative practices. Districts such as South 24 Parganas, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, and Murshidabad were identified as particularly affected (Singh, 2020). This trend stands in sharp contrast to several other Indian states, which have recorded a substantial decline in the prevalence and headcount of child marriage, even as West Bengal continues to grapple with the issue despite flagship interventions such as the Kanyashree Prakalpa (Singh, 2024). These developments necessitate a critical re-examination of the effectiveness of Kanyashree in addressing its core objectives of delaying marriage and promoting continued education among adolescent girls. Against this backdrop, this paper explores seeks to explore the temporal dynamics of *Kanyashree* scholarships (K1 and K2) over the period 2017–2024, focusing on both their growth trajectories and district-level variations. Special attention is given to spatial inequalities in achievement, renewal, and overall coverage rates across districts. To assess the program’s performance more rigorously, four evaluative parameters are employed: retention, efficiency, renewal, and consistency. Together, these indicators provide a nuanced picture of the scheme’s reach, stability, and equity in implementation.

Following this introduction, Section Two outlines the theoretical lens of social inclusion through conditional cash transfers, situating the *Kanyashree* program within broader welfare discourses.

Section Three details the methodology, including the data sources, study area, and analytical techniques employed. Section Four presents the empirical findings and is divided into two subsections: the first examines the temporal and spatial trends of K1 and K2 scholarships over the past eight years; and the second evaluates the program's performance through three indicators—retention, renewal, and consistency. Finally, Section Five concludes the paper by synthesizing the key insights and offering policy-oriented recommendations.

Linking Conditional Cash Transfers to the Discourse on Social Inclusion

Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs have emerged globally as a distinctive approach to social assistance, offering both immediate relief and long-term pathways to social inclusion. Their core principle lies in linking financial support to verifiable behaviours, most often in the form of continued school attendance, regular health check-ups, or other investments in children's human capital. This represents a significant departure from traditional welfare policies that emphasized the direct provision of goods and services. Instead, CCTs recognize poor households as active agents, with responsibilities as well as entitlements, thereby fostering what has been described as a virtuous cycle between social protection and human development (World Bank, 2005). Social protection, once seen merely as a safety net, is increasingly framed as an investment in human capital and poverty reduction, while also strengthening the governance of public expenditure (Vakis, 2005).

By addressing both short-term consumption needs and long-term poverty alleviation objectives, CCTs seek to combine immediate relief with structural transformation. Their impact is particularly visible in societies marked by high inequality, where traditional social insurance tied to formal employment often excludes the most vulnerable. In such contexts, CCTs extend a redistributive function, reaching those at the margins of the labour market and fostering inclusion through education, health, and nutrition. It is within this international discourse that the Kanyashree Prakalpa of West Bengal stands out as a gender-focused adaptation of the CCT model, specifically designed to delay marriage and promote continued education among adolescent girls. Its recognition with the UN Public Service Award in 2017 further underscores its innovative character as a welfare intervention aimed at reshaping entrenched social norms (Singh, 2024).

Yet, while CCTs have demonstrated measurable success in improving short-term outcomes such as school enrolment, nutrition, and health care utilization, their long-term contributions to poverty reduction and social transformation remain contested. Many CCT programs are still too recent for a comprehensive assessment of their sustained developmental impact (Brière and Rawlings, 2006). Kanyashree, however, has operated for more than a decade, offering an opportunity to reflect on its broader influence on the social development landscape of West Bengal (Karmakar, 2023). Nevertheless, questions remain about coverage gaps, spatial inequalities in implementation, and the program's capacity to address structural drivers of gender disadvantage.

More broadly, debates around CCTs highlight both their promise and their limitations. On one hand, they compensate for market failures that perpetuate intergenerational poverty, while their conditionalities may help internalize positive externalities of education and health (Ravallion, 2003; Das et al., 2005). On the other hand, concerns persist regarding targeting accuracy, administrative capacity in low-income contexts, and the replicability of success across different socio-political settings. From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between CCTs and social inclusion can be explored through the share of beneficiaries who exit the scheme three interconnected dimensions, including their contribution to national social policy and poverty targeting, their ability to reshape accountability

relationships between governments, service providers, and beneficiaries, and their potential to extend support to historically excluded groups, particularly women (Brière and Rawlings, 2006). Within this framework, the present paper focuses on the accountability dimension, with specific reference to the Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal. The program provides an important lens to examine how conditional cash transfers not only establish new forms of engagement between the state and adolescent girls but also redefine accountability by linking government commitments with beneficiaries' educational participation and delayed marriage (Karmakar, 2023).

Methodology

This section is divided into the following two part:

1. Data Source and Study Area

The data utilised in this study were obtained from the official West Bengal Kanyashree portal. The period under consideration spans from 2017 to 2024, with the analysis focusing on three specific years—2017–18, 2021–22, and 2024–25—in order to trace and compare progress over time. District-wise data have been collected for these three years, with particular emphasis on the sanctioned K1 and K2 scholarships across 23 districts. The districts include Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Alipurduar, Koch Bihar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Purba Burdwan, Paschim Burdwan, Nadia, Hooghly, Howrah, Bankura, Puruliya, Jhargram, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, and Kolkata. Among these, Kolkata is a fully urbanized district, whereas the others are comparatively less urbanized. Notably, Murshidabad recorded the highest number of scholarship applications in 2024–25, while Kalimpong registered the lowest.

2. Methods Undertaken

To evaluate the program, the analysis begins with an assessment of the temporal trends in both K1 and K2 scholarships. Subsequently, the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) is computed across districts to capture long-term growth dynamics. In order to assess program effectiveness, three indicators, namely the Retention Index, Renewal Rate, and Consistency Index (CI), are constructed for K1 as K2 is one-time grant. The formulation of these indices is based on the following set of equations.

$$\text{Achievement Rate (AR)} = (\text{Total Sanctioned scholarship} / \text{Target scholarship}) * 100 \quad (\text{i})$$

$$\text{Retention index (RI)} = [\text{K1 Renewals (in year } t) / \text{cumulative K1 fresh scholarships up to year } t-1] * 100 \quad (\text{ii})$$

For instance, when calculating the Retention Index for 2024–25, the numerator comprises the total number of K1 renewals reported in 2024–25, while the denominator is taken as the cumulative number of K1 fresh sanctions between 2020–21 and 2023–24. The choice of a five-year reference period is based on the assumed academic trajectory of beneficiaries. A girl is typically sanctioned the K1 scholarship at entry into Class VIII (around age 13–14), and she remains eligible to renew the award annually through to Class XII. This corresponds to a maximum span of five academic years (Class VIII, IX, X, XI, and XII). Thus, taking cumulative fresh sanctions over the preceding four years (up to $t-1$) ensures that the denominator approximates the pool of students who could legitimately appear as renewals in year t . Accordingly, if 2024–25 is taken as the year of observation (t), then renewals reported in that year are measured against the cumulative fresh sanctions during 2020–21 to 2023–24, which reflects the maximum eligible cohort still in the system.

In the context of the Kanyashree program, the Dropout Index (DI) measures the proportion of beneficiaries who discontinue participation rather than renewing their scholarship. It is constructed as the inverse of the Retention Index (RI). While the RI indicates the share of eligible beneficiaries continuing into the next stage, the DI captures the share who exit from the scheme at that point. The Dropout Rate (DR) is calculated as:

$$\text{Dropout Rate (DR)} = (100 - \text{RI}) \quad (\text{iii})$$

While the Retention Index (RI) provides a cumulative measure of program sustainability by comparing annual renewals against the total pool of fresh beneficiaries since inception, it may not always reflect the actual renewal dynamics of specific beneficiary cohorts. In practice, a large denominator can dilute the indicator, and conversely, a one-year Renewal Rate may inflate values beyond 100 per cent because renewals in a given year often originate from multiple preceding cohorts. To address this, a modified Renewal Rate based on a rolling multi-year denominator is adopted. For instance, a three-year cumulative fresh intake (years $t-1$, $t-2$, and $t-3$) better approximates the effective pool of girls eligible for renewal in year t . This approach recognizes the typical progression of beneficiaries across secondary classes (VIII–XII), where renewals span several years, while also ensuring the index remains within logical bounds. Thus, the multi-year Renewal Rate serves as a complementary measure to the Retention Index: the former capturing cohort-specific continuation, and the latter offering a broader picture of long-term program sustainability. So, the Renewal Rate highlights continuation behaviour. The formula is:

$$\text{Renewal Rate (RR}_n\text{)} = [\{K1 \text{ Renewals (in year } t) / \sum K1 \text{ fresh (in year } t-1) \} * 100] \quad (\text{iv})$$

The Consistency Index measures the degree of stability in the program's performance across time or space. It indicates whether scholarship renewals or achievements are evenly sustained, rather than fluctuating sharply. To assess program stability, both temporal and spatial consistency were examined using two separate formulas. Temporal consistency was measured using the following expression:

$$\text{CI}_T = \{1 - (\sigma_t / \mu_t)\} * 100 \quad (\text{v})$$

σ_t = standard deviation of the retention index across years, μ_t = mean of the retention index across years

CI_T = Temporal Consistency

The following formula captures spatial performance of the program across districts in a given year.

$$\text{CI}_S = \{1 - (\sigma_d / \mu_d)\} * 100$$

σ_d = standard deviation of the retention index across districts, μ_d = mean of the retention index across districts, CI_S = Spatial Consistency

The CI is a useful measure for assessing the effectiveness and stability of conditional cash transfers like Kanyashree in retaining adolescent girls within formal education systems until adulthood. A higher CI indicates that a large proportion of girls either renew their K1 benefits annually, thereby demonstrating sustained engagement and educational continuity. Conversely, a low CI highlights discontinuity in participation, which may point to dropout, child marriage, or migration.

Findings and Discussion

1. Temporal and Spatial Dimensions of K1 and K2 Scholarships

The implementation of the Kanyashree program has had a significant impact on reducing dropout rates among girl students across educational stages in West Bengal. According to the Chief Minister (CM) at the Kanyashree Day celebration, the primary level (Classes I–V) dropout rate among girls, which stood at 4.75 per cent in 2011–12, has now declined to zero. At the secondary level, the dropout rate, once recorded at 16.32 per cent, has decreased substantially to 2.09 per cent in the academic year 2023–24. Similarly, at the higher secondary level, the dropout rate has fallen from 15.41 per cent to 3.17 per cent over the same period, according to the Chief Minister. This section therefore examines these assertions in detail, particularly in terms of whether the program has effectively reduced dropout rates; in other words, whether the scholarship scheme has been successful in retaining students. Figure 1 illustrates the temporal trend in the number of fresh and renewal K1 scholarships, showing that both fresh and renewal scholarships sanctioned under K1 have exhibited a declining pattern over the past eight years. Figure 2 shows a similar pattern for the K2 component, where the number of sanctioned upgrade (renewal) applications peaked at around 5.45 lakh in 2020–21 before gradually declining to about 4.40 lakh in 2024–25, while fresh applications have remained consistently low. This trend suggests a stabilisation of the eligible beneficiary base and a possible saturation effect as earlier cohorts transition out of the program.

Figure 1 Temporal Trends in K1 Scholarships under the Kanyashree Program

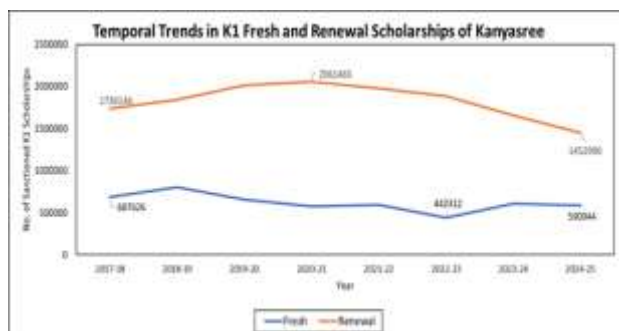
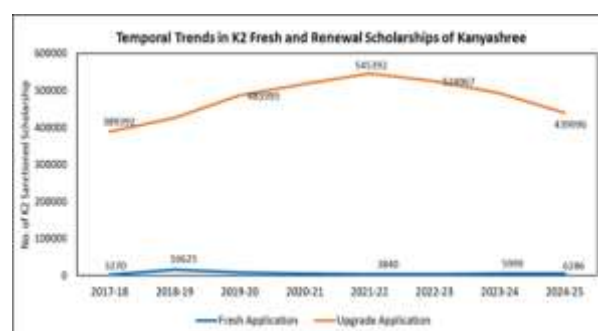


Figure 2 Temporal Trends in K2 Scholarships under the Kanyashree Program



Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_4.0/dashboard.php)

Similarly, the number of sanctioned fresh and renewal scholarships under K2 has also shown a decline. Notably, this downward trend in both K1 and K2 scholarships began in 2020–21, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown years, and even in the period that followed, the number of students receiving scholarships declined. To examine this pattern more systematically, the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) has been calculated across districts. Table 1 presents the CAGR for K1, while Table 2 reports the corresponding values for K2. Table 1 CAGR (2018–2024) of K1 Scholarships under Kanyashree across West Bengal Districts.

Table 1 CAGR (2018–2024) of K1 Scholarships under Kanyashree across West Bengal Districts

Compound Annual Growth Rate	Districts	Number of Districts
-5--0	Howrah, Jhargram, Purba Medinipur, Bankura, Bardhaman Purba, Malda, South 24 Parganas, Darjeeling, North 24 Parganas, Paschim Medinipur, Murshidabad, Hooghly, Birbhum, Uttar Dinajpur, Alipurduar, Coochbehar, Nadia, Jalpaiguri, Dakshin Dinajpur	19
0--1	Kolkata, Purulia	2
Above 1	Bardhaman Paschim, Kalimpong	2

Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

The district-wise distribution of Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) values for Kanyashree (K1) scholarships reveals a predominantly negative trend across West Bengal. A total of 19 districts fall within the range of –5 to 0, indicating a steady decline in sanctioned scholarships over the study period. This widespread contraction suggests that the downward trend is not confined to specific regions but is rather a general phenomenon across the state.

In contrast, only two districts—Kolkata and Purulia—exhibit marginally positive growth (0 to 1 per cent), suggesting relative stability rather than substantial expansion. Furthermore, a limited number of districts—Bardhaman Paschim and Kalimpong—show growth rates above 1 per cent, highlighting them as exceptions to the overall declining trajectory.

Table 2 CAGR (2018–2024) of K2 Scholarships under Kanyashree across West Bengal Districts

Compound Annual Growth Rate	Districts	Number of Districts
-3-- 0	Coochbehar, Nadia, Jalpaiguri, Dakshin Dinajpur	4
0-3	Bankura, Bardhaman Purba, Malda, South 24 Parganas, Darjeeling, North 24 Parganas, Paschim Medinipur, Murshidabad, Hooghly, Birbhum, Uttar Dinajpur, Alipurduar	12
Above 3	Bardhaman Paschim, Kalimpong, Kolkata, Purulia, Howrah, Jhargram, Purba Medinipur	7

Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

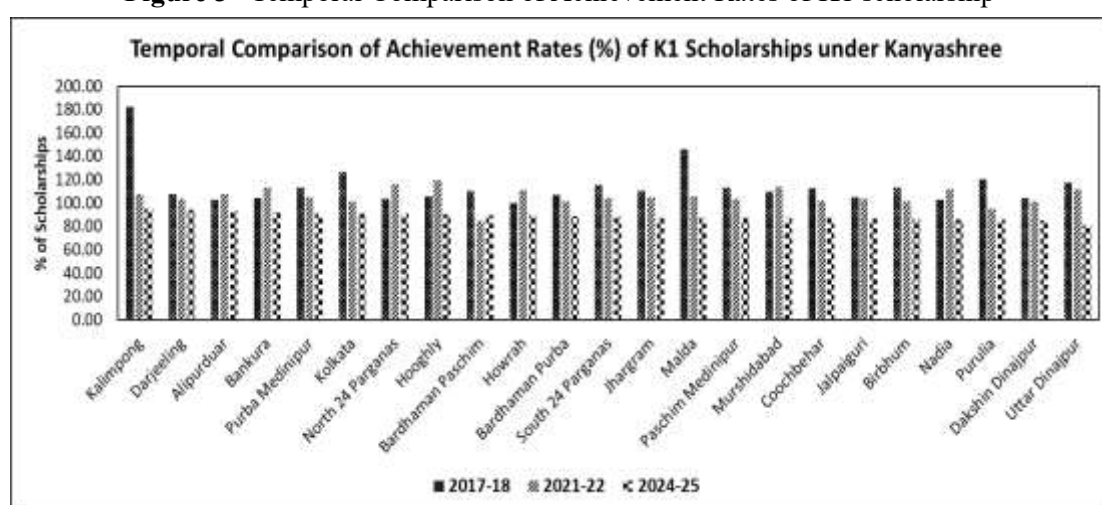
The Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) analysis of K2 scholarships between 2018 and 2024 highlights a mixed but overall positive trend across West Bengal districts. Unlike K1 scholarships, where a widespread contraction was observed, K2 scholarships display a more balanced distribution of growth rates.

A relatively small group of districts—Coochbehar, Nadia, Jalpaiguri, and Dakshin Dinajpur (4 districts)—record negative growth (–3 to 0 per cent), suggesting a contraction in scholarship uptake. However, the majority of districts—12 in total—fall within the 0 to 3 per cent range, including major regions such as Bankura, Bardhaman Purba, Malda, South and North 24 Parganas, Darjeeling, and Murshidabad. This indicates modest yet steady growth, reflecting relative stability in the distribution of K2 scholarships. Interestingly, seven districts (Bardhaman Paschim, Kalimpong, Kolkata, Purulia,

Howrah, Jhargram, and Purba Medinipur) show robust growth above 3 per cent. These comparatively higher growth rates suggest that in these districts, K2 scholarships have gained traction, either through improved program implementation, greater awareness, or enhanced enrolment at higher secondary and tertiary levels.

Overall, the distribution of CAGR values underscores that while some pockets of decline persist, the dominant trend for K2 scholarships has been positive, with nearly half of the districts showing moderate growth and a significant cluster demonstrating strong expansion. This pattern contrasts with the general decline in K1 scholarships, suggesting that retention into the K2 stage has been relatively more successful. This further implies that the impact of external disruptions, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a long-lasting effect on K1 scholarship uptake, with only a few districts demonstrating resilience or recovery.

Figure 3 Temporal Comparison of Achievement Rates of K1 scholarship



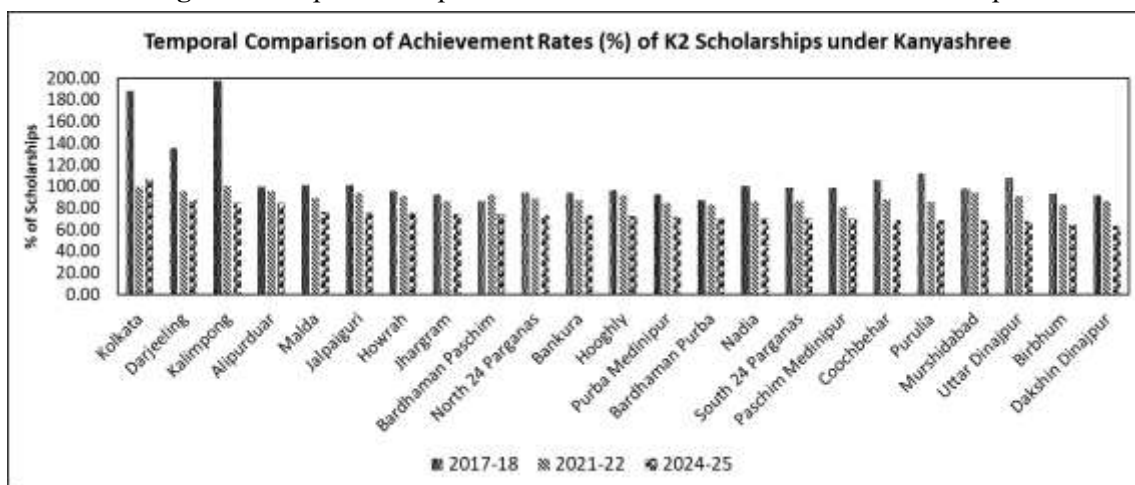
Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

In line with the CAGR findings, the temporal comparison of achievement rates (Figure 3) further substantiates the declining trajectory of K1 scholarships, highlighting how the weakening inflow of new entrants has persisted across most districts over time. As illustrated in Figure 3 the temporal comparison of achievement rates (%) of K1 scholarships across districts of West Bengal for three time points—2017–18, 2021–22, and 2024–25. The figure reveals a general downward trend in achievement rates over time. While most districts recorded relatively high achievement levels in 2017–18, subsequent years show visible declines, particularly by 2024–25. A few districts, such as Kalimpong and Malda, stand out with exceptionally high achievement rates in the initial period (exceeding 150 per cent in some cases), which may reflect either over-reporting in early phases of implementation or a surge in sanctioned applications relative to targets. However, by 2024–25, the rates in these districts, like most others, have contracted significantly.

The broad pattern of decline across nearly all districts is consistent with the negative CAGR values discussed earlier for K1 scholarships. This reinforces the argument that K1 uptake has been disproportionately affected by external shocks, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to reduced enrolment and sanctioning of fresh applications. In contrast to the relative resilience observed in K2, the decline in K1 achievement rates underscores the challenges of sustaining entry into the program at the initial level. Taken together, the Figure 3 and the CAGR analysis suggest that while the

Kanyashree scheme has remained functional, its capacity to attract new entrants (K1) has weakened over time, posing a potential risk to long-term program sustainability unless corrective measures are taken.

Figure 4 Temporal Comparison of Achievement Rates of K2 scholarship



Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

Figure 4 illustrates the temporal comparison of achievement rates (%) of K2 scholarships across districts of West Bengal for the years 2017–18, 2021–22, and 2024–25. In contrast to the general contraction observed in K1 scholarships, the trend for K2 appears relatively more stable, with several districts maintaining or even exceeding 100 per cent achievement levels in the earlier years. Districts such as Kolkata, Kalimpong, and Alipurduar initially recorded exceptionally high achievement rates approaching or surpassing 180–200 per cent in 2017–18 though these values have gradually declined in subsequent years. Despite this decline, the overall pattern demonstrates that achievement levels for K2 remain comparatively higher than K1 in most districts, suggesting that once students transition into the renewal or higher-level stage of the program, they are more likely to be retained. Even by 2024–25, although the achievement rates have moderated, a broad base of districts still report significant participation.

This finding aligns with the CAGR analysis presented earlier, which showed positive or moderate growth in a majority of districts for K2, unlike the widespread negative growth for K1. The evidence collectively implies that the Kanyashree scheme has been more successful in sustaining student participation at the K2 level, while the real challenge lies in ensuring a steady inflow of fresh entrants into K1.

2. Measuring Effectiveness Beyond Numbers: Retention, Renewal, and Consistency Indices

Building on this distinction between K1 and K2 trends, it becomes essential to move beyond aggregate growth rates and assess the program's effectiveness through deeper indicators. Retention, renewal, and consistency indices provide such measures, capturing both temporal sustainability and spatial equity in participation. A key objective of the K1 scholarship is to ensure that girls remain in the education system for an extended period. Accordingly, this section examines patterns of retention, renewal, and dropout among girl students.

Table 3 District-wise Comparison of K1 Scholarship Retention Index in 2021–22 and 2024–25

District	Retention Index		District	Retention Index	
	2021-2022	2024-2025		2021-2022	2024-2025
Alipurduar	74.82	70.93	Kalimpong	54.45	57.37
Bankura	80.44	74.92	Kolkata	63.36	55.16
Bardhaman Paschim	62.60	62.52	Malda	54.69	56.71
Bardhaman Purba	74.82	67.71	Murshidabad	65.58	60.76
Birbhum	73.50	62.82	Nadia	80.45	70.11
Coochbehar	74.69	66.87	North 24 Parganas	77.05	69.69
Dakshin Dinajpur	74.37	64.40	Paschim Medinipur	79.53	68.42
Darjeeling	60.51	60.58	Purba Medinipur	76.00	70.45
Hooghly	80.50	72.09	Purulia	69.19	65.31
Howrah	77.20	73.23	Siliguri	69.66	66.80
Jalpaiguri	71.70	64.66	South 24 Parganas	73.40	63.33
Jhargram	78.15	68.84	Uttar dinajpur	64.69	53.35

Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

The table 3 highlights a general decline in retention index across most districts between 2021–22 and 2024–25, indicating challenges in sustaining scholarship continuity over time. While a few districts such as Kalimpong (54.45 to 57.37), Malda (54.69 to 56.71), and Darjeeling (60.51 to 60.58) registered marginal improvements, the majority, including high-performing districts like Nadia (80.45 to 70.11) and Hooghly (80.50 to 72.09), witnessed a noticeable drop. Particularly concerning are the steep declines in districts such as Murshidabad (65.58 to 60.76) and Uttar Dinajpur (64.69 to 53.35), which point to deeper systemic challenges in sustaining scholarship retention over time. This pattern suggests that while the program initially achieved high levels of retention in many regions, sustaining momentum has become increasingly difficult, pointing to systemic issues in renewal and progression mechanisms.

Table 4 District-wise K1 Scholarship Dropout Rates in 2021–22 and 2024–25

District	Dropout		District	Dropout	
	2021-2022	2024-2025		2021-2022	2024-2025
Alipurduar	25.18	29.07	Kalimpong	45.55	42.63
Bankura	19.56	25.08	Kolkata	36.64	44.84
Bardhaman Paschim	37.40	37.48	Malda	45.31	43.29
Bardhaman Purba	25.18	32.29	Murshidabad	34.42	39.24
Birbhum	26.50	37.18	Nadia	19.55	29.89
Coochbehar	25.31	33.13	North 24 Parganas	22.95	30.31
Dakshin Dinajpur	25.63	35.60	Paschim Medinipur	20.47	31.58
Darjeeling	39.49	39.42	Purba Medinipur	24.00	29.55
Hooghly	19.50	27.91	Purulia	30.81	34.69
Howrah	22.80	26.77	Siliguri	30.34	33.20
Jalpaiguri	28.30	35.34	South 24 Parganas	26.60	36.67
Jhargram	21.85	31.16	Uttar dinajpur	35.31	46.65

Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

Based on the retention patterns discussed earlier, the dropout analysis (Table 4) provides a complementary perspective on the challenges of sustaining participation in the Kanyashree scheme. While a handful of districts such as Kalimpong, Malda, and Darjeeling show slight improvements, the majority report rising dropout rates, with sharp increases in districts like Nadia, Hooghly, and Paschim Medinipur that were previously strong performers. Particularly concerning are the escalations in Kolkata and Uttar Dinajpur, where dropout has reached critical levels. However, it is important to note that in Kolkata many girls are opting for admission into private institutions rather than government schools, which means that higher dropout figures there may partly reflect shifts in enrolment patterns rather than actual withdrawal from education. In contrast, the steep rise in dropout in Uttar Dinajpur more directly signals exclusion from schooling. Taken together, the decline in retention and the concurrent rise in dropout highlight systemic constraints that threaten the program's primary objective of reducing girls' dropout from education.

Table 5 District-wise K1 Scholarship Renewal Rates in 2020-21 and 2023-24

District	Renewal Rate		District	Renewal Rate	
	2020-2021	2023-2024		2020-2021	2024-2025
Alipurduar	99.00	100	Kalimpong	71.03	84.58
Bankura	100	100	Kolkata	85.13	82.36
Bardhaman Paschim	83.45	94.30	Malda	74.00	86.15
Bardhaman Purba	97.72	100	Murshidabad	88.10	93.55
Birbhum	98.51	98.76	Nadia	100	100
Coochbehar	99.54	100	North 24 Parganas	100	100
Dakshin Dinajpur	98.78	100	Paschim Medinipur	100	100
Darjeeling	80.48	89.05	Purba Medinipur	99.56	100
Hooghly	100	100	Purulia	92.56	100
Howrah	99.11	100	Siliguri	90.38	96.89
Jalpaiguri	95.07	99.97	South 24 Parganas	98.08	99.19
Jhargram	100	100	Uttar dinajpur	87.02	86.69

Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

The above concerns are further contextualised by the district-wise K1 Renewal Rates presented in Table 5, which reflect the extent to which beneficiaries continue within the scheme. The adoption of a modified renewal rate based on a rolling multi-year denominator allows for a more accurate assessment of cohort continuation, and the district-level patterns reveal both consolidation and divergence in outcomes. Several districts, including Bankura, Nadia, North 24 Parganas, Dakshin Dinajpur, Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, and Hooghly, maintain renewal rates consistently at or near 100 per cent, suggesting strong program stability despite dropout pressures. Other districts, such as Bardhaman Paschim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Malda show substantial improvement over time, pointing to reduced dropout tendencies and more effective outreach. Murshidabad, Siliguri, Purulia, and South 24 Parganas demonstrate steady consolidation from already high levels. In contrast, Kolkata records a slight decline and Uttar Dinajpur remains stagnant, aligning with the dropout patterns noted earlier and indicating persistent localised challenges. Taken together, the evidence underscores the overall effectiveness of the scheme in achieving near-universal continuation, while also reinforcing the need for targeted measures in specific districts where dropout and renewal gaps persist.

Table 6 Temporal Trend in the Retention Index of West Bengal

Year	Retention Index of K1
2017-18	44.42
2018-19	66.92
2019-20	72.08
2020-21	72.04
2021-22	72.48
2022-23	71.63
2023-24	72.96
2024-25	65.46

Note: from *Kanyashree portal*, by Government of West Bengal, Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, 2025, (https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php)

These district-level patterns gain further meaning when viewed against the temporal trend in the Retention Index for West Bengal as a whole (Table 6). The trajectory highlights both the achievements and the vulnerabilities of the scheme. Beginning at a relatively modest level of 44.42 in 2017–18, the index shows a sharp rise through 2018–19 and before stabilising in the range of 70–73 from 2019–20 onwards, which suggests that the program was able to achieve a broad consolidation phase after the initial years of implementation. However, the decline to 65.46 in 2024–25 signals renewed stress in sustaining participation, and this pattern corresponds with the concurrent rise in dropout rates and the uneven renewal patterns observed across districts.

The calculated Temporal Consistency Index (0.85) for the period 2017–2025 indicates a relatively high degree of stability in retention over time, although the fluctuations, particularly the recent downturn, show that this stability is not absolute. Instead, the pattern reflects both consolidation and fragility, since the scheme has successfully established a plateau of sustained participation for several years but remains vulnerable to systemic pressures that can reduce retention. This broader temporal trend resonates with the renewal analysis, as many districts demonstrate consistent continuation while a few districts mirror the same vulnerabilities evident in the declining retention levels in the declining retention levels, underscoring the need for closer policy attention in lagging regions.

Alongside temporal patterns, the spatial dimension also reinforces the overall assessment. The spatial consistency index, which rose from 89.02 in 2021–22 to 91.08 in 2024–25, suggests a gradual narrowing of inter-district disparities in retention performance. This improvement, though modest, signals that outcomes are becoming more evenly distributed across the state, with fewer districts significantly lagging behind. Importantly, the simultaneous rise in spatial consistency and fall in the state-level Retention Index highlights a dual reality: while gaps between districts are narrowing, the overall level of retention has weakened. This suggests that stressors affecting the scheme are systemic in nature, cutting across regions, and therefore require broad-based interventions rather than purely localised measures.

Conclusion

The Kanyashree Prakalpa has undoubtedly played a critical role in reshaping the educational landscape for adolescent girls in West Bengal by delaying early marriage and promoting continued schooling. The program has achieved notable success in improving renewal and consistency rates, particularly for K2 beneficiaries. However, the persistent decline in fresh K1 enrolments, coupled with rising dropout rates in several districts after the COVID-19 pandemic, signals systemic vulnerabilities that financial incentives alone cannot address. While spatial consistency has improved, indicating reduced inter-district disparities, the overall fall in retention underscores deeper structural constraints, such as administrative inefficiencies, socio-economic pressures, and shifting educational aspirations towards vocational and skills-based alternatives. Sustaining the program's gains, therefore, requires recalibration by integrating financial transfers with institutional reforms, ensuring better alignment between education and labour markets, and strengthening community-level engagement. Without such corrective measures, the long-term sustainability and transformative impact of Kanyashree will remain at risk.

To strengthen the impact and long-term sustainability of the Kanyashree Prakalpa, several measures are necessary. First, renewed efforts should be made to boost fresh K1 enrolments through targeted outreach in disadvantaged districts, while also addressing administrative bottlenecks such as delays in admission processes that often discourage continuation. Second, integrating vocational and

skill-oriented pathways within Kanyashree Plus can align scholarships with employability and labour market demand, thereby making education more attractive to students. Third, district-specific strategies should be developed for areas with persistently high dropout rates, supported by digital platforms that simplify access, improve monitoring, and provide timely information to beneficiaries. Fourth, parental and community engagement must be prioritised to counter social pressures like early marriage and reinforce the value of education. Finally, linking the scheme with complementary social protection programs in health, nutrition, and livelihoods, combined with real-time district-level monitoring and evaluation, can create a more holistic and adaptive framework to ensure that the scheme continues to support adolescent girls effectively.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study. No funding was received for this research.

Acknowledgements

The author declare that this research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Statements and Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study did not involve human participants, animal experiments, or personal data requiring ethical approval. All procedures performed in this research complied with institutional, national, and international guidelines. As no human subjects were involved, consent to participate was not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. The manuscript does not contain any individual person's data in any form (including images, videos, or personal details).

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, methodology design, data collection, data analysis, writing – original draft.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are openly available at https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_dashboard_report.php

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Evidence-Based Policymaking and Global Governance: An Examination of the Role of the Policy Studies Organization and ECOSOC

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Abstract

Transnational challenges, such as climate change, global inequality, pandemics, digital governance, and institutional legitimacy crises, are becoming increasingly complex, therefore, the demand for evidence-based decision-making has become an important developing normative and practical issue in the area of global governance. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the principal organ of the UN responsible for coordinating policy processes across all areas of economic, social and development issues. However, despite ECOSOC's ability to make decisions concerning how the world addresses these problems, it has been widely criticized for being unable to translate expert knowledge into tangible policy outcomes. Therefore, this paper will examine the role of the Policy Studies Organization (PSO), a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) serving as a knowledge intermediary and its evolving relationships with ECOSOC to provide evidence-based decision-making support. The article makes the case that the relationship between the PSO and ECOSOC represents a paradigmatic shift in global governance in that epistemic actors, policy networks and knowledge brokers are now influencing institutional performance beyond the confines of more traditional state-centric models of governance. To examine the mechanisms through which the PSO supports ECOSOC's policy agenda-setting, facilitates the diffusion of policies across member states and encourages institutional learning within ECOSOC; this research employs theoretical frameworks from institutionalism, policy network analysis and critical political economy. Furthermore, this article identifies structural obstacles to the application of evidence-based policy in multilateral institutions including those created by power disparities, political conflict, and bureaucratic resistance to change. Finally, this research contextualizes the PSO-ECOSOC relationship in terms of existing scholarly debates surrounding the intersection of knowledge and power in global public policy, contributes to scholarship exploring reforms in global governance, and offers evidence-based recommendations to improve the legitimacy, effectiveness, and relevance of multilateral organizations vis-a-vis the SDG Agenda.

Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking, Global governance, ECOSOC, Policy studies organization, Epistemic communities, Policy networks, Institutional effectiveness

Introduction

The world of today's global politics contains a paradox regarding the structure of global governance. Today's global challenges are far more complex, interconnected and dependent on knowledge than those experienced before. Yet, most multilateral institutions that resolve these problems typically cannot systematically incorporate high-quality evidence into their decision-making processes

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Received 6 February 2026 Revised 11 May 2026 Accepted 2 June 2026

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nor make this type of evidence politically meaningful. Specifically, this paradox is evident throughout the UN system. In particular, the normative aspirations of the UN are frequently thwarted by institutional fragmentation, bargaining among members and varying capacities to implement policies (Weiss, 2013; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Therefore, the central question generated from this paradox concerns how global governance institutions may develop policy through an evidence-based process, without being insensitive to the different political, social and cultural realities found around the globe.

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established to be the primary mechanism to coordinate international cooperation in the areas of economics, social affairs and other related matters. The responsibilities of ECOSOC include development finance, humanitarian coordination, social inclusion and oversight of the specialized agencies. Nevertheless, ECOSOC has been frequently criticized for its inability to fulfill its assigned tasks. In particular, Taylor and Groom (2000) along with Hurd (2019) argue that a major deficiency in performance relates to ECOSOC's ability to convert the research, expertise and best practices into sustainable policy outcomes throughout all member countries. The criticism directed toward ECOSOC has increased in relation to the SDGs. As previously noted, the SDGs require the use of data-driven monitoring and evaluation techniques, as well as adaptive governance strategies (United Nations, 2015).

Under current changes in governance structures, non-state actors continue to become significant participants in the development of global policy. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, academic networks and professional associations are participating in agenda-setting, norm diffusion and policy learning processes (Stone, 2008; Slaughter, 2017). Within this group of actors, the Policy Studies Organization (PSO) represents a distinct example. Founded as a mechanism to support scholarship and dialogue relating to public policy, the PSO continues to operate at the intersection of academia, policy practice and international institutions. Through organizational meetings, publication activities, training programs and consultative roles, the PSO functions as a knowledge broker. This allows it to facilitate exchanges of research on public policy across institutional boundaries.

This paper will look at how the interaction between the Policy Studies Organization (PSO) and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) represents a useful model through which to understand the larger evidence-based policy-making process in global governance. It does not view evidence as a politically neutral input to be incorporated into policymaking, rather evidence-based governance, as an inherently political process. As such, the PSO's interactions with ECOSOC represent a political aspect, defining how issues are framed, determining the types of knowledge that have legitimacy, and establishing who participates in the global policy-making process.

In addition to understanding the particular example of the PSO/ECOSOC, this work provides a general framework for comprehending a broader shift in international governance. Authority is being distributed among hybrid networks consisting of states, international organizations, and 'epistemically active entities'. Legitimacy is no longer based exclusively upon an institution's formal mandate. Instead, legitimacy is derived from credibility, inclusiveness, and effectiveness in the decision-making process. In turn, evidence-based policymaking is becoming a necessary component of effective decision-making and an additional means of bolstering legitimacy - especially when attempting to address inequality, developmental failure, or institutional mistrust globally.

That said, there remain many obstacles to evidence-based policymaking in global institutions. Political conflicts among member-states, conflicting development priorities, unequal capacity in knowledge generation between the Global North and South, and institutional inertia due to bureaucracy

all act to limit the ability of researchers to get their findings used (Best, 2014; Haas, 1992). Moreover, the very definition of "evidence" is subject to debate. Is evidence quantifiable data? Qualitative research? Indigenous knowledge? Normative expertise? And if so, whose evidence counts most?

The article adds to three closely linked intellectual debates concerning global governance. In doing so, it also contributes to the literature on non-state policy organizations' ability to increase institutional capacity and effectiveness. The article further expands upon the policy studies literature by investigating evidence-based policymaking beyond the national level where political complexities are exacerbated. The article also relates to debates regarding normative issues such as institutional reform, accountability, and the role of knowledge in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs that relate to strong institutions, reducing poverty, and sustainable development.

Qualitatively, using an interpretive approach supported by document analysis, secondary literature and institutional analysis, the article does not suggest that there is a causal relationship but instead uses process tracing and analytical generalization to identify the mechanisms through which the PSO can facilitate policy learning and influence agenda setting in relation to ECOSOC (George & Bennett, 2005). These approaches allow the authors to demonstrate what is possible and what may be limiting knowledge-driven global governance.

The remaining part of this article is structured as follows. First, the following chapter will provide an integrated analytical framework that includes the problem definition, research questions, hypotheses and methodological considerations. The second part presents a conceptual review of evidence-based decision making in global governance (with explanations of key terminology and current debates). After that, there is a theoretically based review of institutionalism, policy network theories and critically oriented analyses of knowledge and power. The third part provides the results and discussions regarding how the PSO's actions influence the work procedures of ECOSOC, and consequently, how these influence the performance of institutions and coordination of policies at the global level. In the last part, the conclusions reflect on the larger implications of the PSO-ECOSOC case study for reforms to enhance the use of evidence-based policymaking in global governance which are increasingly challenged by complex global issues.

Problem Statement, Research Question, and Hypothesis

Although extensive rhetorical support exists for promoting evidence-based policymaking at the global level, many obstacles impede evidence, data, and expert knowledge from being utilized by policymakers within decision-making processes of global governance. Obstacles are most apparent within the UN system, which has several characteristics that contribute to the limited role that evidence can play in informing policy decisions, including the political negotiation process between sovereign states, the fragmentation and redundancy of bureaucratic entities, and the competing normative values/priorities among various stakeholders. A clear illustration of this issue is represented by ECOSOC, which is the primary coordinating body of the UN charged with the promotion of economic growth, social inclusion, and international cooperation. Despite the breadth of ECOSOC's mandate, it has historically failed to serve as an evidence-based leader and convert discussions during ECOSOC meetings into sustainable changes in behavior/policy by member states (Hurd, 2019; Taylor & Groom, 2000). As a result, there remains a growing chasm between the aspirational nature of global policy - especially as evidenced by the SDGs - and the institutional capacity required to attain these objectives.

Underlying this growing chasm is a structural issue - namely, that the legitimate authority of ECOSOC stems from its representation of the interests of sovereign states while the policy effectiveness of ECOSOC is increasingly dependent upon technical knowledge, specialized expertise, and ongoing learning. As a result of this relationship between legitimacy and effectiveness, a "knowledge authority mismatch" exists between individuals holding formal authority over decision-making processes and those possessing the requisite knowledge to develop/interpret the evidence necessary for effective policy formulation. For example, epistemological actors who have the greatest amount of relevant knowledge may be denied access to authoritative decision-making structures (Stone, 2008; Haas, 1992). Additionally, evidence is typically employed in a selective manner to enable political objectives to be achieved or simply discarded to allow for agreement and lowest common denominator solutions.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges created by evidence being excluded or selectively used for political purposes, the increased engagement of non-state policy organizations in the global governance framework (such as the Policy Studies Organization) creates both opportunities and challenges. Specifically, the PSO provides ECOSOC with research syntheses, cross-disciplinary dialogue, and policy-oriented scholarship that can inform its deliberations. However, relying on external knowledge intermediaries also raises concerns related to accountability, representativeness, and power disparities in global knowledge production - specifically between the Global North and Global South (Bernstein, 2011; Best, 2014). Ultimately, therefore, the critical challenge is not simply one of determining whether or evidence exists but rather how evidence is filtered, legitimated, and assimilated into the decision-making processes of ECOSOC.

The primary objective of the present study has been to explore how the Policy Studies Organization (PSO) can support evidence-based decision-making at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The authors therefore also investigate the implications that their empirical results have for the broader debate regarding whether knowledge-driven reforms are feasible within the context of multilateral governance. A second research question concerns institutional design: under which conditions will epistemically oriented and policy-oriented non-state actors increase the efficiency and legitimacy of multilateral decision-making without diminishing the authority of nation-states?

To address these research questions, the authors develop the following hypothesis: the Policy Studies Organization can best support evidence-based policymaking at ECOSOC by influencing agendas, shaping frames, and promoting learning. However, they do so indirectly – e.g., via the creation of transnational networks; dissemination of findings; and shaping the understanding and prioritization decisions made by ECOSOC member states. Nonetheless, because of existing geoeconomic power dynamics; institutional legacies; and the political interests of its members, there are structural limits to PSO's ability to promote evidence-based policymaking.

Methodological Framework

This research project follows a qualitative research approach that is particularly well suited to analyze the complex interplay between institutions as well as how processes of meaning are constructed. In contrast to quantitative analyses of policy outcomes, this research utilizes an institutional analysis and process tracing approach to determine the mechanism(s) through which knowledge produced by the Policy Studies Organization enters into ECOSOC deliberations (George & Bennett, 2005). The primary source of data includes UN resolutions, ECOSOC reports, PSO publications; conference proceedings; policy statements, along with secondary academic literature related to global governance, policy studies, and international organizations. Using this design enables the ability to achieve

analytical generalizations to allow for broadened applications of findings derived from the PSO/ECOSOC case toward informing discussions on evidence-based policymaking in multilateral settings.

In addition, this section combines the problem statement, research question, hypothesis, and methodology into a comprehensive analytical model which clearly defines the central argument of this article: Evidence-based policymaking in global governance does not occur automatically or neutrally and instead relies heavily on the arrangement of institutional factors and the presence of power dynamics and the role of knowledge intermediaries in shaping decision-making processes.

Conceptual Framework: Evidence-Based Policymaking in Global Governance

Beginning with the development of evidence-based policymaking (EBPM), the past thirty years have seen the establishment of evidence-based policymaking as a standard practice in public policy. Since it first emerged as a technical standard for decision-making in areas such as health and social policy, EBPM has continued to develop. One reason EBPM has grown over time is due to scholars' increasing recognition that evidence does not automatically translate into policy; rather, evidence is socially constructed, subject to political influence, and filtered through the lens of institutions. These developments have important implications for EBPM in global governance, including the lack of centralization of authority for policymaking, the fact that legitimacy is contested, and the existence of competing values (diplomatic, normative, geopolitical) relative to evidence.

Evidence-based policymaking includes the production of credible knowledge, transforming that knowledge into a format relevant to policymakers, and having the institutional capacity to integrate credible knowledge into decision-making processes (Nutley et al., 2007). Typically, evidence-based policymaking occurs within a centralized administrative structure at the level of the nation-state. In contrast, international organizations such as ECOSOC operate under a decentralized administrative environment which is characterized by fragmented jurisdictional authorities, many stakeholders, and little ability to enforce compliance. Therefore, EBPM in global governance cannot simply be conceived of as a linear progression from research to policy. Rather, evidence-based policymaking will occur as an iterative negotiation process among multiple stakeholders based upon their respective authority, expertise, and political capital.

Defining Global Governance

Global Governance is the joint management of transnational issues without an overarching world government (Rosenau, 1995) and can include International Organizations; Non-Government Actors (NGOs); Informal Networks; Private Entities, etc., working together to develop cross-national rules, standards and practices. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) serves as an example of global governance by being both a forum for dialogue and a coordinating agency for the UN's three interconnected areas: economic, social, and developmental. As a hybrid model of governance, ECOSOC has characteristics of Inter-governmental Decision-Making, as well as Consultation with Civil Society; Academia; and Policy Organizations. Therefore, ECOSOC is able to provide a platform for evidence-based Inputs while at the same time creates conflicting interests surrounding Authority; Representation; and Accountability.

There are two primary debates surrounding how one defines Evidence Based Policymaking, first is what makes up the definition of 'Evidence.' Positivism views High Quality Evidence as

Quantitative Data; Randomized Control Trials; and Causal Inference, whereas Constructivist and Critical Perspectives view Qualitative Insights; Contextual Knowledge; and Lived Experience as equal to other types of evidence (Parkhurst, 2017). These definitions become even more difficult when considering Global Governance because there are large Cultural Differences across nations; Different Availability of Data Globally; and Disproportionate Distribution of Power between those who produce knowledge. Research produced in Global North locations tends to be viewed as higher quality than other data sets because these sources are often funded and therefore carried more weight. This leads to concerns over Epistemological Equality and Exclusion of Local/Indigenous Forms of Knowledge Systems (De Sousa Santos, 2014). Considering ECOSOC's mission to advance inclusive and equitable development these Conceptual Debates directly impact Legitimacy and Effectiveness.

Weiss (1979) identified three main forms of evidence use in evidence-based Public Management (EBPM): instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic. Instrumental use of evidence is used as input into making specific policy choices. Conceptual uses of evidence shape actors' perceptions of problems over time. Symbolic uses of evidence legitimate predetermined policy choices. Because global governance institutions require political consensus and negotiation among member states, instrumental uses of evidence are often limited; however, both conceptual and symbolic uses of evidence are very prevalent and often determine the trajectory of policy.

Due to this reality, it is critical to recognize the role of "intermediary" organizations known as "knowledge brokers" or "boundary organizations" in EBPM in global governance (Guston, 2001). These intermediary organizations have the responsibility of translating complex research findings into accessible policy narratives. Additionally, they provide a mechanism to communicate between experts and policymakers. Furthermore, these organizations can help link evidence with the institutional goals and priorities. As an intermediary organization the Policy Studies Organization has established itself as a translator of research into policy narratives. This has been achieved through conferences, journals, policy briefs, and collaborative projects with international organizations. Conceptually, the Policy Studies Organization exists at a node within transnational policy networks linking the production of knowledge within academic communities with policy deliberations within spaces like ECOSOC. The Policy Studies Organization provides value to the development and application of evidence-based public management practices not only through providing evidence but through curating, contextualizing, and legitimizing evidence within a multilateral context.

This discussion raises important questions about how evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) is organized in terms of power and governance. What influences what is considered appropriate evidence or most relevant evidence? Which kinds of expert knowledge are regarded as authoritative? How are different forms of knowledge integrated? Avoids repeating 'argues': Fischer (2009) argues that critical policy scholars view evidence-based policymaking as a technocratic device that masks the normative decisions of policymakers, thereby supporting existing forms of power. Therefore, EBPM should be assessed through its ability to be inclusive, transparent, and reflexive along with measuring its efficiency and effectiveness.

The role of the PSO working with ECOSOC reflects broader conflicts over epistemic authority in the international community. More importantly, EBPM needs to be contextualized in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which promote the use of evidence-driven monitoring, evaluation, and accountability (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs have created high expectations globally for evidence-based decision-making and subsequently, and subsequently, encourage international organizations (such as ECOSOC) to rely on indicators, assessments, and models of "best

practices" (United Nations, 2015). Improvement: However, due to their interconnectedness and interdependence, many of these goals cannot be addressed through simplified approaches to evidence; therefore, they require interdisciplinary and integrative forms of knowledge. This provides conceptual space for entities like the PSO who have an interdisciplinary approach that fits well with the complexity associated with many of the issues related to sustainable development challenges.

In summary, there is no agreement among scholars regarding the conceptual landscape of EBPM at the level of global governance. Rather than being a technical issue, EBPM should be viewed as a form of governance practice that is shaped by institutional design, political incentives, and the distribution of epistemic authority. While ECOSOC presents both possibilities and constraints for evidence-based global policymaking, the Policy Studies Organization exemplifies how non-state actors can function as mediators between knowledge and authority.

Figure 1 Vertical Knowledge Flow from Research Institutions to ECOSOC

Stage	Main Actors	Core Functions	Types of Outputs	Role in Global Governance
Knowledge Production	Universities, research institutes, think tanks, policy analysts, civil society organizations	Generate empirical research, theoretical analysis, policy evidence, and advocacy knowledge	Journal articles, datasets, policy studies, reports, field evidence, impact assessments	Provides the foundational evidence base for international policy discussions
Knowledge Brokerage	Policy Studies Organization, expert panels, international conferences, policy networks, consultants	Translate technical research into accessible policy recommendations; synthesize competing evidence; frame policy narratives	Policy briefs, conference reports, expert recommendations, synthesis papers, strategic assessments	Bridges the gap between researchers and policymakers by making knowledge usable for governance
Policy Decision Areas	ECOSOC, UN Functional Commissions, UN Councils, Member States, diplomatic representatives	Debate evidence, negotiate priorities, formulate resolutions, and coordinate governance initiatives	Resolutions, policy frameworks, development agendas, governance strategies, institutional reforms	Converts evidence and recommendations into formal international governance mechanisms
Policy Implementation and Outcomes (Feedback Loop)	Governments, UN agencies, NGOs, international organizations	Implement adopted policies and evaluate outcomes	Monitoring reports, implementation reviews, policy evaluations, governance indicators	Policy outcomes influence future research agendas and generate new cycles of knowledge production

Note: Author's Compilation

The Conceptual Framework illustrates how to vertically move policy-relevant knowledge produced at research institutions to International Governance Bodies (such as ECOSOC). Research Production is the first step. Universities, Think Tanks, Policy Analysts and Civil Society Organizations are among those who produce empirical data and theoretical insight about Global Challenges. They produce research products like reports, datasets, journal articles, policy studies which provide policymakers with informed decision-making options. Raw Academic Knowledge, however, is typically too specialized and/or fragmented to be used directly in policymaking. Therefore, Intermediary Institutions and Networks are crucial in transforming this raw Academic Knowledge into an understandable policy narrative.

Knowledge brokering is the second stage in the movement of knowledge from the research community to policymakers. Examples include The Policy Studies Organization, Expert Panels and International Conferences all help to turn Evidence-based Research into Policy Briefs/Recommendations/Strategic Assessments which can then be discussed and debated at ECOSOC meetings, UN Commissions and Member State Negotiations. The third and final stage, Decision Areas for Policies converts Evidence into Resolutions/Governance Structures/International Initiatives. Of particular importance in this conceptual framework is the fact that it has identified a Feedback Loop resulting from the implementation of policies and their results. This creates a measurable impact which guides future research directions, thus continuing the loop of generating evidence, adapting to policy requirements and enhancing institutional capabilities within Global Governance Systems.

Theoretical Framework

This section will analyze what theoretical frameworks are needed to develop an operational conceptual framework to assess the contribution of the PSO to evidence-based policymaking within ECOSOC. In order to determine how the PSO can fulfill a useful function as part of a broader evidence-based policymaking system, a theoretically grounded model or framework that is able to examine and describe both formal structures and informal processes associated with International Organizations (IO) will be required. There are several theories attempting to provide insights into how evidence generated in research communities travel through various stages before being considered at multilateral decision-making bodies; however, there is currently no singular theory available that is capable of completely capturing the full complexity of this process. Thus, this section will apply a layered theoretical assessment of the PSO's contribution to EBPM utilizing primarily Institutionalism Theory, Policy Network Theory, Epistemic Community Theory and Constructivism Theory on Knowledge and Power. The conceptual framework developed using all three of these theoretical frameworks will allow for a greater understanding of the mechanisms and limitations associated with EBPM systems used globally.

1. Institutionalism

The institutionalism field of study has been divided into two main subfields: historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism. Historical institutionalism examines the path dependent nature of IOs. Once an organization has been created, it often continues to operate according to established patterns because changing organizational norms and values is difficult (Pierson, 2000). Sociological institutionalism focuses on the role of organizational culture. An organization's culture influences how it interprets information, makes decisions and adapts to change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Based upon the concepts identified above, it would appear that ECOSOC's institutional structure could potentially limit its ability to transform evidence into policy. For instance, the fact that ECOSOC uses consensus-based decision making and does not have any authority to enforce policies, creates

incentives for members to engage in incrementalism and symbolic compliance rather than creating meaningful policy changes (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Additionally, routine organizational behaviors of international organizations favor maintaining diplomatic equilibrium over promoting analytical rigor when evaluating evidence.

Historical and sociological institutionalism provide additional insight into why the PSO is significant to ECOSOC. As stated previously, ECOSOC lacks adequate internal capability to generate and synthesize technical policy research, thus it relies significantly on external sources of scientific expertise. However, institutional theorists have cautioned that simply providing evidence is not enough to ensure that it will be adopted by organizations. If an organization is going to utilize evidence, then that evidence must be compatible with the existing norms and procedural logic of the organization (Krahmann, 2005). Therefore, the success of the PSO in contributing to evidence-based policymaking in ECOSOC depends not only on generating high-quality evidence, but also on generating evidence that corresponds with ECOSOC's institutional priorities, vocabulary, and timing. Compatibility between evidence generated by the PSO and those areas allows for "institutional learning" where an organization learns from new information and slowly begins to modify its behavior without altering its fundamental structural characteristics (Hall, 1993).

Figure 2 Knowledge Flow and Global Governance Networks

Component	Main Actors	Primary Functions	Forms of Interaction	Contribution to Evidence-Based Policymaking
Central Coordinating Institution	ECOSOC	Coordinates dialogue among international institutions, NGOs, academic bodies, and member states	Policy consultations, agenda setting, multilateral coordination, information exchange	Serves as the central intermediary linking diverse actors within the global governance system
International Organizations and UN Agencies	UN agencies, regional commissions, specialized UN bodies	Produce technical expertise, policy guidance, and development frameworks	Reports, expert consultations, interagency cooperation, governance recommendations	Provide institutional legitimacy and technical authority for global policy debates
Academic and Research Networks	Universities, think tanks, Policy Studies Organization, research institutes	Generate research, policy analysis, and theoretical frameworks	Conferences, policy briefs, publications, expert panels	Supply evidence and analytical knowledge for governance processes
Civil Society and NGOs	NGOs with consultative status, advocacy groups, humanitarian organizations	Represent societal interests, provide field data, and advocate policy reforms	Advocacy campaigns, monitoring reports, stakeholder engagement, consultations	Introduce grassroots perspectives and accountability mechanisms into policymaking

Member States	National governments, diplomatic representatives	Negotiate, interpret, and implement international policies and agreements	Diplomacy, negotiations, voting, implementation processes	Translate international evidence and norms into domestic and regional policy action
Knowledge and Normative Flows	All governance actors	Exchange policy ideas, evidence, and governance norms across institutional levels	Horizontal collaboration and vertical policy transmission	Creates interconnected and collaborative evidence-based governance structures

Note: Author's Compilation

The image depicts the interdependent nature of global governance, where evidence is exchanged via ongoing communication amongst various international and national entities. In place of a strictly top-down hierarchy of decision-making, the framework places emphasis upon collaborative, multidirectional relationships leading to evidence-based policy. Evidence-Based policymaking is facilitated by ECOSOC, as the central node for connections with the United Nations (UN) Agencies, Regional Commissions, Research Organizations (such as the Policy Studies Organization), Civil Society Actors etc. By facilitating knowledge flow, policy advice flow, and governance norms flow between these organizational units, ECOSOC facilitates horizontal and vertical information exchange between institutions and other stakeholders.

In addition to highlighting the significance of horizontal and vertical flows of information, the framework also identifies the importance of communication flows occurring horizontally and vertically. Communication flows occurring horizontally take place between institutions operating at equivalent levels of governance e.g. NGO to NGO or Academic Networks to UN Agencies; while vertical flows are characterized by the transmission of evidence and policy guidance between international institutions and sovereign states, where global norms are applied domestically. This interconnectivity illustrates how contemporary forms of global governance rely heavily on multilateralism and transnational collaborations amongst experts, in order to achieve their objectives; thus suggesting that evidence-based policymaking is a dynamic and negotiated process; one influenced by mutual dependence amongst institutions and those who possess common areas of expertise, and are engaged in cooperative problem solving.

2. Policy Network Theory and Epistemic Communities

In addition to examining the structure of the PSO within ECOSOC's broader governance environment using policy network theory and epistemic community theory offer further ways of understanding the function of the PSO. Rhodes (1997) defines policy networks as "relatively enduring sets of relationships among actors involved in the making of public policies" which involve not only government bodies government and government bodies but also non-governmental organizations, academics, and think tanks. As such, the PSO is a key part of a number of such networks allowing for the exchange of information and experience concerning both good practice and policy issues from country to country and institution to institution. According to Haas (1992), epistemic community theory describes policymaking as being influenced by groups of experts who share similar beliefs about what

is desirable (the normative dimension), why certain things occur (the causal dimension), and a body of knowledge related to policy (the knowledge dimension).

Such epistemic communities define what problems exist, and what policy options should be considered acceptable; they shape policymaking across borders and within and between institutions and policy domains (Slaughter, 2004). ECOSOC represents a formal institutional mechanism for the interactions between these epistemic communities and their respective national governments. The PSO exemplifies an epistemic hub because it organizes scholars, practitioners, and policymakers while establishing frameworks of knowledge relevant to ongoing global policy debates through publication and meeting processes. Epistemic community theory identifies how expert advice comes to possess authority in multilateral contexts (Haas, 1992) based upon persuasion rather than coercion. This model is particularly applicable to the UN system due to the lack of formal enforcement mechanisms (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) and corresponds directly with the PSO's consultative role relative to ECOSOC.

Epistemic community theory possesses several positive features. Firstly, it recognizes dimensions of knowledge diffusion and policy learning (Hall, 1993), identifying how knowledge spreads throughout networks rather than top-down hierarchies. The research generated by the PSO contributes to knowledge development influencing ECOSOC discussions in a variety of thematic issue areas. Additionally, the theory identifies informal dimensions of governance that are frequently ignored in institutional analysis (Stone, 2013). Critics of epistemic community theory argue that epistemic communities are exclusive and self-referential (Turnhout et al., 2016); membership is generally limited to individuals with superior academic or professional credentials. Questions regarding democratic accountability in global policymaking are raised when this occurs. When considering the PSO example questions emerge regarding whose knowledge is represented and whose is excluded. The authority granted to the epistemic community limits the range of topics discussed.

The second is that the epistemic community theory has been criticized for neglecting the power differences amongst actors (Sending et al. 2015) since some epistemic communities may possess greater institutional leverage (such as through their membership on an ECOSOC subsidiary body) and/or access to resources such as funding or communications expertise. The PSO's status as a recognized ECOSOC advisory body and the resultant enhanced profile demonstrate how an organization's institutional recognition shapes its capacity for influencing public policy. While the PSO has certainly made important contributions to environmental governance, it acts within a larger web of structural inequities in both resource availability and decision-making authority (Sassen, 2014). In addition, the theory relies upon a degree of consensus among experts which frequently does not occur in areas where there is considerable debate over causality and appropriate action (Pelling, 2011; Sending et al. 2015). ECOSOC therefore finds itself constantly addressing divergent expert viewpoints, while still attempting to maintain credibility as a governing institution. Consequently, the application of epistemic community theory to areas of conflict and multiple perspectives should be done with sensitivity towards complexity of the governance process.

Regardless of these limitations, the Epistemic Community Theory is highly relevant to the analysis of this issue. The theory provides insight into why ECOSOC uses consultative non-governmental organizations (NGOs), like the PSO, as a mechanism to expand the scope of its knowledge base (United Nations, 2023). Additionally, it helps explain how Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM) occurs through networks as opposed to hierarchy (Stone, 2013). Furthermore, the PSO's function exemplifies this network-based model of EBPM by facilitating epistemic community overlap across various disciplines and geographical locations. Lastly, the critical examination of the

theory highlights the need for inclusivity and reflexivity in order to promote epistemic legitimacy (de Sousa Santos, 2014), consistent with the United Nations' principles of fairness and inclusiveness. Therefore, in conjunction with each other, epistemic community theory and EBPM provide a complete theoretical framework to analyze evidence-based global governance.

Finally, the Epistemic Community Theory expands upon the concepts of policy network theory by incorporating shared professional norms and values as mechanisms to shape policy. Haas (1992) defines an epistemic community as individuals who share a set of who shared causal understandings, normative commitments, and validity criteria in regard to claims of knowledge. The PSO seeks to facilitate the development of epistemic communities relative to issues pertinent to ECOSOC's mandate, including sustainable development, good governance reforms, and social policies. As epistemic communities develop and collaborate with one another, they can influence how members of ECOSOC, along with personnel of the Secretariat, perceive policy issues. However, epistemic communities rarely directly dictate the ultimate policy decisions. Rather, they serve as conceptual and long-term influences on the trajectory of policymaking, often without direct input on specific policy decisions at any particular point in time.

3. Constructivist Perspectives on Knowledge and Power

Constructivism adds an additional layer of depth to the study of how power influences knowledge in the context of global governance. Constructivists contend that all knowledge is socially constructed and embedded in discourse that favor certain types of knowledge and ways of thinking over others (Adler, 1997). Thus, when the PSO interacts with ECOSOC it is engaging in a struggle between competing discourses on development, equity, and governance for legitimacy (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In addition to providing evidence to support their views, the PSO is shaping issue areas based upon dominant norms and values of the UN system. As such, the PSO's framing power is a subtle yet important way of determining what can be thought of as "thinkable" or "doable" in policy debates.

The constructivist perspective highlights the inequalities in global knowledge production. Powerful nations and organizations determine research agendas, methodologies, and sources of funding which raises questions about the nature of epistemological dominance (De Sousa Santos, 2014) and (Bourdieu, 1988). While the PSO has a mission to promote inclusive and dialogue; however, it does so from within structurally bounded environments. Thus, the PSO-ECOSOC interaction demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of non-state actors promoting democracy in the realm of global knowledge governance. EBPM therefore needs to be considered as a normative project that could either reinforce or challenge the current hierarchies.

Institutionalist, policy network and epistemic community theory along with constructivist theory demonstrate that EBPM in global governance is a hybrid process of institutional rules, network dynamics and discursive power. The PSO-ECOSOC relationship illustrates this hybridization: the PSO enhances ECOSOC's epistemic capacities while working through institutional constraints and normative expectations. The value of the PSO resides in its role of agenda setting, promoting learning and legitimating evidence in a complex governance structure rather than exercising direct policy authority.

The next section will draw upon these theoretical frameworks to analyze the empirical findings and implications arising from the PSO-ECOSOC relationship. Specifically, this section examines how this relationship works in practice and what it suggests regarding future possibilities for increasing EBPM in global governance.

Findings and Discussion

1. The PSO-ECOSOC Relationship in Practice

The PSO-ECOSOC relationship demonstrates how layers of influence and the complexity of interactions facilitate the practice of EBPM in Global Governance; however, These factors can also limit the ability for EBPM to function effectively. While the PSO does not act as a direct policymaker, the PSO does act as an epistemic facilitator. Therefore, instead of directly influencing the formulation of policies through evidence, the PSO is able to exert an indirect, cumulative, and subtle effect upon new discourses on policy issues over time. In addition, the evidence found in this study supports the idea that evidence is utilized indirectly to create a new discussion around policy issues over time as opposed to directly determining an immediate course of action regarding those same policy issues.

One of the primary implications of this research is related to the role of the PSO in developing agendas. By sponsoring conferences, policy dialogues and publications, the PSO has demonstrated a consistent pattern of aligning its activities with ECOSOC's thematic priorities. These include Sustainable Development, Social Inclusion, Governance Reform and the SDGs. The alignment of these two entities has helped raise awareness and priority regarding evidence-based evaluations, data transparency, and policy coherence during ECOSOC deliberations. It is clear that member states are responsible for establishing the official agenda; nonetheless, the PSO has had a profound influence upon the development of the conceptual framework within which the agenda is established. As an example, ECOSOC members' representatives and secretariat staff frequently utilize research sponsored by the PSO to demonstrate why certain topics need to receive priority attention. This clearly exemplifies what Weiss (1979) describes as "the conceptual utilization" of evidence when he indicates that policymakers both nationally and internationally use knowledge in its conceptual form to provide justification for the actions they want to take.

A second important implication of this research pertains to the role of the PSO in establishing frames for policy and constructing discourse. The multidisciplinary nature of the PSO allows it to develop cohesive policy narratives that reflect ECOSOC's normative positions and incorporate relevant information from fields including political science, economics, sociology, and public administration. Many of the PSO-developed narrative frameworks emphasize the interconnectedness among social, economic and environmental issues that reinforces the integrated logic of the SDGs. Additionally, many of the frames provided by the PSO focus on interdependent systems and long-term effects thereby facilitating movement toward a holistic approach to governance as opposed to a fragmented or siloed approach.

However, it is clear there are many structural limitations to the PSO's potential to influence the path of EBPM through ECOSOC. While the availability of data is increasing in ECOSOC decision-making, other issues including the geopolitical interests of member-states, And the global wealth disparities between the Global North and Global South have consistently been the most dominant in shaping ECOSOC decision-making. In addition, evidence that contradicts the economic interests of powerful states or challenges their respective models of development is typically marginalized and/or re-framed in ways to promote political acceptability. Therefore, while the negotiation of evidence into the formulation of policies may be a form of evidence-based policymaking, it occurs under institutional power dynamics and does not inevitably result in objective, unbiased, or rational policy decisions. As well, this dynamic supports the constructivist critique that evidence cannot be divorced from the politics of legitimacy and authority in global governance (Fischer, 2009).

Furthermore, the PSO-ECOSOC relationship illustrates the value of institutional learning. The repeated exposure to evidence-based research by ECOSOC has contributed to a slow yet incremental shift in how ECOSOC assesses the effectiveness of policy and monitors its progress toward achieving the goals established by global agreements. For example, ECOSOC now places greater emphasis on tracking performance using indicators; uses peer-review mechanisms to evaluate progress toward agreed upon objectives; and establishes follow-up processes regarding the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) among others. Although these developments do not automatically ensure improvements in policy outcomes, they indicate an early institutionalization of evidence-informed practices. From the perspective of an institutionalist, these incremental changes in complex multilateral systems provide a more reasonable and sustainable means of achieving reforms (Hall, 1993).

The relationship of the PSO with ECOSOC also generates important concerns about the inequality of epistemological power. While the PSO has a truly global scope, the majority of the empirical evidence on which ECOSOC bases its deliberations comes from studies carried out by Northern research centers. These conditions risk consolidating existing power relations as regards the production of knowledge and their influences on the policies. In order for ECOSOC to fulfill its objectives concerning inclusion and equality, it is necessary that there be intentional efforts to give greater space to voices from Southern countries and that different forms of knowledge (such as those developed locally or through experience) be recognized.

2. Research Findings and Interpretation

2.1 The Role of Integrated Evidence in Policy Development and Efficacy

This research shows how incorporating high-quality evidence into policy formulation can enhance legitimacy and performance of international governance institutions such as ECOSOC. The diagrams illustrating evidence creation and use show how the inclusion of systematic evidence can inform decision-making processes. The EBPM framework describes how systematically created evidence influences decision-making; however, it also acknowledges the importance of institutional structures to transform research into policymaking (Cairney, 2016; Pawson, 2006). Results from this research show how the PSO performs as an important conduit in the policy process enabling the transformation of complex scientific and policy-related knowledge into formats suitable for utilization by multilateral stakeholders. However, the direct influence of evidence on policy is limited by political negotiation and agenda-setting among stakeholder groups (Finnemore & Barnett, 2004). This is illustrated within the horizontal policy cycle (Fig. 3), where evidence exists alongside agenda-setting, deliberation, implementation, and monitoring. Therefore, the success of EBPM depends on both institutional capabilities and levels of stakeholder engagement. Moreover, as shown in Fig. 2 (the network representation), evidence flows through relationships among actors and represents the important roles that epistemological communities play in defining which sources of evidence are considered legitimate. Overall, when combining the results of EBPM and network analyses, it provides insight that indicates that while evidence quality is necessary for effective policy, it is only one of several factors - namely, accessibility, legitimacy and institutional support that determine whether or not evidence will have meaningful impact on global policy formulations.

2.2 The Function of Epistemic Communities in International Governance

As illustrated in Figure 3, Epistemic Communities perform as crucial intermediary actors for converting knowledge into policy influence inside complex multilateral networks (Adler & Haas, 1992;

Haas, 1992). For example, the Policy Studies Organization represents an Epistemic Community through its assembly of scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners. Consequently, this results in a collective understanding of policy problems and possible solutions. Furthermore, my research illustrates that Epistemic Authority allows actors to determine what issues are relevant, and what evidence is legitimate during ECOSOC discussions. In addition, as has been stated previously (Slaughter, 2004), Epistemic Community Influence is inherently selective and will provide benefits to those actors who have the necessary resources, credibility, and institutional connections. Further, as has been noted by other researchers (Turnhout et al., 2016), Selective Influence may reinforce existing inequalities in power, thus excluding perspectives from the Global South. Additionally, although the diagrams illustrate that there is bi-directional flow of information in terms of knowledge, the nodes with the most connectivity (e.g. the PSO) have greater control over how policy discourse develops and therefore ultimately greater influence on the outcomes. Moreover, it should be noted that the primary role of these communities is not only to provide subject area expertise, but also to interpret complex evidence in accordance with the UN policy framework. Finally, one of the main findings was that global governance is based upon negotiations between two forms of legitimacy. Specifically, epistemological legitimacy and political authority are both critical components. Consequently, as has been noted by previous researchers (Kuhlmann, 2024), understanding the relationships between these two forms of legitimacy is foundational for developing evidence-informed and inclusive intervention strategies in global governance. Therefore, promoting the diversity of Epistemic Communities is equally important to increasing the quality of evidence.

2.3 Interdependent Policy Processes and Feedback Mechanisms

Figure 3, which outlines the horizontal policy cycle demonstrates how the Policy Cycle of Evidence-Based Policymaking (EBPM) is self-referential as it utilizes a recurring loop of feedback from monitoring and evaluation activities in order to influence future policy decision-making processes (Howlett et al., 2020). Findings from this research demonstrate that the Public Services Office (PSO), through the provision of analytical tools, monitoring frameworks and evaluative data, provides the means for the inclusion of feedback into the policy making process thereby ensuring that policies continue to be responsive. ‘According to evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) theory, evidence-based policymaking has the greatest impact when used during all stages of the policy lifecycle and not solely at inception (Head, 2010). The self-referential nature of the policy cycle provides ECOSOC with the ability to address emergent global issues while using knowledge gained from prior policy implementation efforts. However, effectiveness in the use of feedback mechanisms depends upon the level of institutional transparency and whether member states are willing to act based upon evidence (Oliver & Cairney, 2019). Overall, the two figures illustrate that there exists mediation within governance networks regarding feedback where information may experience time delays, filtering or selective selective adoption. Therefore, there exist opportunities for continued improvement; however, the same opportunity also provides avenues for misinterpretation or politicization. Furthermore, the use of a self-referential approach to developing policy promotes a learning culture within international organizations and supports the normative objective of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Moreover, findings from this research suggest that the incorporation of mechanisms for evaluating public policies will increase the resilience and accountability of multilateral policy development. As such, the use of evidence-based approaches to policy development are both technical and political in nature and require thoughtful consideration regarding process design.

2.4 Multi Scalar Governance and Knowledge Flow

The Global Governance Network (see Figure 2) shows the complex relationships and interactions among international organizations, member states, non-governmental organizations, and regional institutions as they work together to formulate policy outcomes. The results of this research provide an example of how Multi-Scalar Governance can expand the reach and legitimacy of Evidence-Based Policy Intervention through inclusion of multiple stakeholders and actors (Stone, 2013, Sending et al., 2015). A Consultative Role for the PSO exemplifies how knowledge flows can be used to link Local, National and Global Levels of Governance, which will enable coordinated policy responses. EBPM Theory identifies that while evidence alone is needed to make a meaningful difference, Translation of Knowledge from one level of governance to another is required as well (Nutley et al., 2007). Communities of Practice play a critical role in developing Coherence and Consistency of Information across levels of governance. However, differences in Resources, Expertise, institutional capacity, among other factors, can prevent or limit Knowledge Flows, thereby creating Inequities in Participation. The Diagrams above clearly identify Connectivity, Trust and Credibility as essential Elements of Effective Networked Governance. These dynamics illustrate that Global Decisions on Policies are not solely made Unilaterally, but through Negotiations, Collaborations and Persuasions. Therefore, it is imperative to develop Inclusive and well-connected networks to achieve Adaptive and Equitable Governance.

2.5 Implications for Adaptive and Inclusive Global Governance

An accumulation of the diagrams, theories and concepts clearly illustrates that globally inclusive, adaptive and evidence-based global governance can be achieved by intentionality, in terms of institutional design. EBPM offers a methodological model that connects high-quality research to policymaking. Epistemic Community Theory illustrates how knowledge gains credibility via social processes (Haas, 1992; Cairney, 2016). Figure 1 demonstrates the need for an established path structure linking evidence generation, deliberative engagement, and resultant policy outputs. The findings of this study illustrate that the bridging function of the PSO enhances both the legitimacy and the technical quality of global governance. However, there is considerable potential for improvement relative to underrepresented voices of marginalized populations and the selective use of evidence as influenced by political agendas. The multi-scalar governance framework illustrates that adaptability occurs when coordination exists across all levels of governance and among all relevant stakeholders. Collectively, the diagrams demonstrate that both strong network connectivity and epistemic diversity provide greater opportunity for reduced knowledge bottlenecks and improved resilience. Findings from this study illustrate that inclusiveness, transparency, and reflexivity are equally as critical as methodologically rigorous approaches to policy development. Ultimately, effective evidence-based global governance requires consideration of knowledge, networks, and politics simultaneously. Integration of these studies' results should enhance ECOSOC's and other international governing bodies' ability to address complex global issues.

Implications of the Findings

Institutional design is key to establishing effective evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) in global governance. The primary focus should be on ensuring there are sufficient formal structures through which knowledge can be integrated and shared across stakeholders. Additionally, both formal and informal incentives must be put into place so that stakeholders do not feel pressured to use evidence to advance narrow political interests.

Non-state actors, including the Policy Studies Organization (PSO), also have significant roles in developing the pathways for EBPM within the systems they operate. Their success in creating these pathways will ultimately depend upon how open formal institutions are to new ideas; and the larger political context in which these relationships exist.

1. Possible Reforms Within the ECOSOC System.

Given the results above, we propose three possible reforms in ECOSOC:

Formalize Mechanisms for Collaboration: Develop and formalize collaborative arrangements based on continuous evidence synthesis and evaluation, between ECOSOC and other relevant policy organizations. These collaborations would allow for continued development of relationships with evidence users who are able to synthesize knowledge.

Increase Transparency: Increase transparency in ECOSOC's deliberative process. By increasing the transparency of its deliberations, ECOSOC can demonstrate a greater level of accountability to both member states and civil society; therefore, increasing the credibility of ECOSOC decisions.

Build Capacity for Evidence Use: Build the capacity of ECOSOC members and the secretariat to effectively utilize and interpret evidence. This can reduce dependence on symbolic or selective uses of evidence.

Conclusion

This study has enhanced our understanding of the interaction between the Policy Studies Organization (PSO) and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The relationship between these two bodies has served as a framework for understanding both the possibilities and limitations of utilizing evidence-based decision-making in international institutions.

By analyzing interactions between states and non-state actors with respect to institutional relationships, epistemic power and strategic actions as well as applying a conceptual framework related to institutional design, evidence interpretations, and state/non-state actor actions toward EBPM within multilateral organizations, the authors have shown that the utilization of evidence-based decision-making processes in international organizations are significantly affected by a complex series of institutional factors including but not limited to: institutional design, evidence interpretations, and actions taken by states and non-state actors.

The main hypothesis of this study was that the PSO affects EBPM in ECOSOC through its indirect influence via mechanisms such as establishing agendas, providing frameworks for policies, and promoting organizational learning while excluding any formal decision-making authority over ECOSOC. Therefore, this study directly challenged the technocratic belief that evidence will inevitably result in better policy decision-making. Instead, evidence will only become useful for policy purposes after being interpreted, legitimized and negotiated within ECOSOC's consensus-driven environment prior to being considered for policymaking. Furthermore, the PSO functions as an intermediary in terms of knowledge that increases ECOSOC's cognitive abilities to process evidence-based policy recommendations. However, whether the PSO can produce any effects on EBPM will depend upon ECOSOC's desire to embrace new forms of knowledge and the extent to which ECOSOC is constrained by its own institutional limitations.

Finally, this study emphasizes the necessity of methodological pluralism when studying EBPM globally. By demonstrating how different theories of governance (i.e., institutional and constructivist theories of knowledge) contribute to our understanding of EBPM at the global level, this study demonstrates how various levels of analysis and theoretical perspectives provide us with a more complete understanding of EBPM. For example, institutional theory explains how the history of ECOSOC as well as its norms, rules, and established practices limit the impact of evidence on policy-making decisions. Likewise, social network theory illustrates how networks facilitate the exchange of ideas regarding best practices across institutional boundaries. Finally, constructivist theories explain how all forms of knowledge (including evidence) are subject to similar political and normative influences that are characteristic of the broader global governance regime.

Nevertheless, the authors identified numerous barriers to improving EBPM at the global level. Some examples include Global North Knowledge Producers' dominance, the selective use of evidence for symbolic purposes, and ongoing geopolitical interests masking their influence on policy decisions. Although the PSO has considerable potential for reducing many of these barriers to EBPM improvement by promoting inter-disciplinary dialogue among stakeholders involved in policy development and increasing stakeholder involvement in policy development, the authors emphasize that there is no guarantee that this potential will be realized unless the PSO takes steps to recognize and address disparities in knowledge production as well as create a platform for recognizing diverse forms of evidence. If these disparities are not recognized and addressed, then EBPM may perpetuate existing hierarchical structures under the guise of objectivity.

To better support EBPM in ECOSOC and other similar institutions, the authors recommend a number of steps. They argue that increasing researcher access to data alone is insufficient to improve EBPM in these contexts. Rather, EBPM improvement depends upon formal incorporation of evidence into decision-making processes at all levels of the institution (including technical working groups); improved transparency throughout the EBPM process; and creation of opportunities for learning. For example, formalized relationships between policy institutions and research institutions, capacity-building programs designed to enhance the ability of researchers and policymakers to work together effectively, and clear accountability mechanisms could help meet these goals. While the authors suggest that reforms such as those described above may be feasible, they also acknowledge that implementing them would require significant political will and would likely depend upon careful consideration of member states' sovereignty concerns.

In addition to offering insights related to reforming EBPM in ECOSOC, the authors note that the lessons from this study have implications for broader reform of global governance. In particular, the authors argue that as challenges facing nations become increasingly transnational (e.g., inequality, climate change, etc.), too will be the demand for credible and inclusive evidence-based approaches. According to the authors, the PSO-ECOSOC relationship demonstrates both the potential benefits and vulnerabilities of evidence-based approaches to addressing global problems. Specifically, the authors illustrate how non-state actors can positively impact global policymaking when they operate within institutional structures that provide a balance of expertise and legitimacy/inclusivity.

Lastly, the authors argue that EBPM in global governance is neither static nor absolute; it is an iterative and adaptive process. Through its examination of interactions between the Policy Studies Organization and ECOSOC relative to knowledge-power relations during global policy agenda formulation, the authors identify areas where additional research is warranted. These areas include comparative studies of EBPM across various types of international institutions; further investigation

into the views and perspectives of policymakers/knowledge producers regarding EBPM in global governance; and assessment of long-term impacts of evidence-informed practice on outcomes of global development.

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The Role of Public Policy in Transforming the Workforce Structure towards an Entrepreneurial Economy: Policy Recommendations at the National, Regional, and Local levels

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of public policy on the transformation of Thailand's labor force structure into an entrepreneurial economy. The aim is to analyze existing policy frameworks, identify structural and institutional constraints within Thailand's entrepreneurial ecosystem, and provide a comprehensive multi-tiered policy framework at the national, regional, and local levels. The study employs a qualitative documentary methodology in conjunction with policy analysis. Data was gathered from national policy documents, economic development strategies, legislation, regulatory frameworks, and academic literature cataloged in both international and national databases. The analysis was guided by the principles of human capital, structural transformation, entrepreneurial economy, and multi-tiered governance. The results demonstrate that although Thailand shows significant entrepreneurial activity, the workforce is mainly defined by informal employment and micro-enterprises, which have limited scalability and productivity. Current policies demonstrate strengths in promoting innovation and entrepreneurship strategically; however, significant challenges persist in policy coordination, institutional integration, access to significant policy with-oriented financing, and the alignment of educational outcomes with entrepreneurial skills. The analysis reveals significant policy shortcomings related to fragmented governance, uneven regional development, and insufficient support for innovation-oriented enterprises. The study promotes a multi-faceted policy framework that emphasizes competency-based entrepreneurial education, legislative and institutional change, funding methods for scaling, and the creation of regionally adapted entrepreneurial ecosystems. The results demonstrate that public policy is crucial for improving entrepreneurial participation and influencing the quality, scalability, and structural influence of entrepreneurship on sustained productivity growth and economic transformation.

Keywords: Public policy, Entrepreneurial economy, Labor force transformation, Human capital, Multi-level governance, Entrepreneurial ecosystem

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Received 2 March 2026 Revised 7 May 2026 Accepted 2 June 2026

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Introduction

Economic development and national prosperity are generally assessed through GDP per capita, reflecting average income, productivity, and living standards. Sustainable growth depends not just on increasing output but also on structural changes that enable the movement of labor and firms to higher-productivity sectors. Entrepreneurship is essential for creating jobs, promoting innovation, diversifying economic activities, and improving national competitiveness (Tripopsakul & Pichyangkul, 2018; Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2025).

The transition to an entrepreneurial economy in Thailand is impeded by numerous social policy issues. Despite considerable entrepreneurial activity, a large portion of the workforce is involved in informal employment, self-employment, and micro-enterprises, which are marked by limited productivity and scalability. This status indicates economic hardship and a social policy challenge, as informality is associated with income instability, insufficient social protection, limited access to credit, and uneven opportunities across regions. Thus, simply increasing the number of entrepreneurs is insufficient unless public policy simultaneously tackles the quality, inclusivity, and structural effects of entrepreneurial activities.

Current data suggests that Thailand's entrepreneurial landscape continues to face institutional and structural limitations. These include insufficient entrepreneurship education, weak links between research and commercialization, regulatory barriers, limited access to growth-oriented financing, and inconsistent regional support systems. Research suggests that Thailand's external entrepreneurial environment, including government policies, educational systems, and innovation assistance, is relatively underdeveloped compared to several other countries (Tripopsakul, 2015). The limitations are further highlighted by the discrepancy between educational outcomes and labor market requirements, marked by a very high unemployment rate among graduates and a constrained rate of business formation relative to the available workforce (Wongtaweelat et al., 2025).

Global literature emphasizes that entrepreneurship can drive economic transformation by promoting job creation, innovation, and productivity improvement (Van Stel et al., 2005). However, the impact of entrepreneurship is heavily dependent on the quality of institutions, the consistency of policies, and the government's ability to harmonize education, finance, regulation, innovation systems, and local economic development. Thus, Thailand's principal policy challenge is not merely to promote entrepreneurship as an alternative to salaried employment, but to create a unified regulatory framework that supports opportunity-driven, innovation-centric, and scalable entrepreneurship.

Despite the growing emphasis on fostering entrepreneurship in Thailand, contemporary research often examines education policy, SME support, innovation policy, and labor market transformation in isolation. Limited research has incorporated these elements into a multi-tiered policy framework that connects national initiatives, regional development frameworks, and local entrepreneurial ecosystems. An intensified analytical focus is necessary on how public policy may address informality, inequality, regional disparities, and institutional fragmentation throughout the transition to an entrepreneurial economy.

This essay advances the field of social policy and development by analyzing the influence of public policy on the structural transformation of Thailand's labor force towards an entrepreneurial economy. It highlights the recognition of policy shortcomings, institutional constraints, and

coordination challenges at national, regional, and local levels. The paper also presents a detailed multi-layered policy framework aimed at improving entrepreneurial human capital, enabling access to finance, reducing regulatory barriers, and promoting adaptable regional entrepreneurial ecosystems. The study argues that public policy should transition from just increasing entrepreneurial participation to enhancing the quality, scalability, and inclusiveness of entrepreneurship to attain lasting structural transformation.

Research Objectives

This study aims to: (1) Examine the influence of public policies on the development of Thailand's labor force in relation to an entrepreneurial economy. (2) Analyze the structural and institutional barriers within Thailand's entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in relation to education, governance, finance, and regional inequalities. (3) Propose a detailed multi-tiered policy framework to promote entrepreneurial development at the national, regional, and local levels.

Literature Review

1. Human Capital, Informality, and Entrepreneurial Capability

Human capital theory explains economic development through investment in education, skills, and training which increases individual productivity and promotes national wealth (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961). In endogenous growth theory, the attainment of knowledge and the cultivation of skills are crucial for sustained improvements in productivity (Lucas, 1988; Romer, 1990). In the context of entrepreneurial transformation, human capital should not be regarded merely as formal education or technical expertise. It should include entrepreneurial competencies such as opportunity identification, risk evaluation, innovation proficiency, resource mobilization, and business administration.

This distinction is crucial for Thailand, as the challenge lies not merely in a lack of educated individuals, but in a dissonance between educational achievement and the skills required for opportunity-driven entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship education can improve entrepreneurial intention and performance by prioritizing experiential learning, mentoring, and real firm engagement above traditional classroom instruction (Martin et al., 2013; Bae et al., 2014). Investigations in Thailand indicate that entrepreneurial intention is affected by attitudes, perceived behavioral control, perceived support, and institutional conditions (Tripopsakul & Pichyangkul, 2018; Sorakraikitikul et al., 2024; Tapachai, 2022; Wongtaweelat et al., 2025; Pithayanukul & Pithayanukul, 2025). Therefore, human capital policy must be linked to social policy concerns, such as disparities in access to quality education, geographical inequities, and the limited ability of informal workers and micro-entrepreneurs to develop their skills.

2. Structural Transformation, Informal Employment, and Inequality

The structural change theory asserts that economic progress occurs when labor and resources shift from low-productivity sectors to higher-productivity activities (Lewis, 1954). Subsequent research indicates that growth depends not only on job creation but also on productivity-enhancing reallocation between sectors, enterprises, and regions (Herrendorf et al., 2014; McMillan & Rodrik,

2011). From this perspective, entrepreneurship may drive structural transformation by introducing innovation, improving productive activities, and creating higher-quality job opportunities.

However, entrepreneurship does not inherently lead to structural improvement. In countries with significant informal sectors, high rates of self-employment may reflect necessity-driven survival rather than productivity-boosting entrepreneurship. This is particularly relevant for Thailand, where informal employment and micro-enterprises are significant. These conditions raise important social policy concerns, as informality is often associated with income volatility, insufficient social security, limited access to credit, and regional inequalities. Thus, the policy issue is not just to increase the number of entrepreneurs, but to shift entrepreneurial activities from low-productivity, necessity-driven ventures to more formal, innovative, and scalable enterprises.

3. Entrepreneurial Economy and the Quality of Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurial economy underscores the importance of entrepreneurship in promoting innovation, commercializing knowledge, improving competitiveness, and creating jobs (Wennekers & Thurik, 1999; Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004; Van Stel et al., 2005). The literature suggests that the relationship between entrepreneurship and economic growth is dependent on specific circumstances. Entrepreneurial activity promotes growth more effectively when driven by opportunity, centered on innovation, and supported by strong institutions (Van Stel et al., 2005; Acs et al., 2018).

Distinguishing between the quantity and quality of entrepreneurship is crucial. A substantial increase in the number of businesses may not enhance GDP per capita if most organizations operate informally, demonstrate low productivity, and lack scalability. High-growth firms, termed "gazelles," are notably important due to their substantial contributions to job creation, innovation, and productivity improvement (Henrekson & Johansson, 2010). For Thailand, this signifies that entrepreneurship policy should extend beyond conventional startup promotion to focus more clearly on business quality, innovation capacity, productivity, and scalability.

4. Entrepreneurial State, Institutional Constraints, and Policy Design

The entrepreneurial state perspective asserts that the public sector can actively shape markets, promote innovation, and undertake risks that the private sector may avoid (Mazzucato, 2013). This viewpoint is advantageous for understanding the role of public policy in promoting innovation-driven enterprises, startup ecosystems, and ongoing investment. The literature warns that state intervention may be ineffective if policy design is deficient, politically driven, misdirected, or disconnected from market realities (Lerner, 2009, 2013).

This tension is substantial for Thailand. Public policy can promote entrepreneurial transformation through educational reform, financial instruments, tax incentives, infrastructure development, and regulatory modifications. These strategies are effective only when incorporated into proficient institutions that have transparent selection processes, clear performance metrics, and strong implementation capabilities. Evidence indicates that while policy support for Thailand's innovation-driven firms and startup ecosystem is there, institutional fragmentation, regulatory obstacles, and inadequate coordination persistently hinder entrepreneurial advancement (Chairatana et al., 2024; Thawesaengskulthai et al., 2024). Access to finance is impeded by the quality of information,

investment readiness, and geographical inequities (Paulson & Townsend, 2004; Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006; Ahmad et al., 2024).

5. Multi-level Governance and Coordination Constraints

Multi-level governance defines the allocation of policy authority and implementation duties across national, regional, and local levels (Bache & Flinders, 2004a; Bache & Flinders, 2004b; Jessop, 2004). This approach is particularly relevant to entrepreneurship policy, as entrepreneurial development requires coordination across education, finance, labor policy, innovation systems, local economic development, and regulatory agencies.

In practice, fragmented governance can reduce policy effectiveness. National policies may establish broad objectives; nevertheless, regional and local institutions often determine entrepreneurs' access to financing, markets, infrastructure, mentorship, and administrative support. Insufficient vertical coordination between central and local agencies, along with inadequate horizontal coordination among ministries and support organizations, may lead to program duplication, inequitable access, and implementation failures. Thus, entrepreneurial transformation should be analyzed not only as an economic event but also as a governance concern.

Regional and local entrepreneurial ecosystems are particularly significant due to the uneven distribution of business possibilities across different areas. The literature on ecosystems emphasizes the importance of networks, institutions, funding, skills, infrastructure, and local culture in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes (Stam, 2015). Regional innovation systems, incubators, accelerators, and local clusters enable entrepreneurs to connect with expertise, investors, and markets (Isabelle, 2013; Pauwels et al., 2016; Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004). Place-based policy should take into account regional capabilities and structural disparities rather than applying homogeneous policy models universally (Duranton & Venables, 2018).

6. Policy Instruments for Entrepreneurial Transformation

The literature outlines multiple policy instruments that can promote entrepreneurial transformation, including entrepreneurship education, financial incentives, venture capital systems, regulatory changes, innovation centers, incubators, and local enterprise development. Nonetheless, these approaches are successful only when integrated into a coherent policy framework.

Education policy ought to emphasize the development of entrepreneurial competencies rather than only fostering entrepreneurial intention (Martin et al., 2013; Bae et al., 2014). Secondly, financial policy must accommodate the diverse stages of firm development, from the formalization of micro-enterprises to innovation-driven growth (Paulson & Townsend, 2004; Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006; Prasannath et al., 2024). Third, regulatory policy should reduce entry barriers, compliance costs, and administrative burdens that impede formalization and corporate expansion (Djankov et al., 2002; Audretsch et al., 2024; Mai et al., 2025). Fourth, regional and local policies must support ecosystems that correspond with local industrial structures, cultural resources, and competitive strengths (Evans, 2009; Stam, 2015).

The literature suggests that entrepreneurship policy should not be viewed as a singular sector intervention. This is an extensive policy framework that encompasses human capital, labor market transformation, social protection, regional development, innovation policy, and institutional reform.

7. Synthesis of the Literature

The examined literature suggests that the shift to an entrepreneurial economy necessitates more than merely augmenting the number of entrepreneurs. The outcome is contingent upon the interplay of human capital development, structural transformation, institutional quality, governance coordination, and regional ecosystem capacity. The primary concern for Thailand is not merely entrepreneurial engagement, but rather the capacity of public policy to convert fragmented, informal, and low-productivity entrepreneurial endeavors into a more inclusive, innovative, and scalable economic framework.

This change must tackle three interconnected barriers from a social policy standpoint. Initially, informality constrains productivity, social protection, and access to formal support systems. Inequality influences disparate access to education, financial resources, networks, and regional opportunities. Third, institutional and governance limitations diminish the efficacy of policy instruments in achieving coordinated and lasting results. A comprehensive examination of the literature underscores the necessity for a cohesive multi-tiered policy framework that aligns national policy formulation with regional and local implementation capabilities.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative documentary research design in conjunction with policy analysis to examine the impact of public policy on the evolution of Thailand's labor force structure towards an entrepreneurial economy. Documentary research was selected for its ability to rigorously examine policy frameworks, institutional structures, development strategies, and scholarly discourse related to entrepreneurship, labor transformation, and economic development. The study analyzed the impact of governmental policies on entrepreneurial ecosystems, labor market structures, and institutional coordination across national, regional, and local levels.

The research utilized an analytical policy framework to evaluate the congruence of policy aims, implementation tactics, and structural outcomes. The analysis emphasized the social policy dimensions of informality, inequality, institutional fragmentation, and governance constraints affecting entrepreneurial advancement.

2. Data Sources and Document Selection

Data were collected from four principal categories of documentary sources.

First, national policy documents were examined, including national economic and social development plans, strategies for promoting entrepreneurship, policies for the development of SMEs and startups, labor market regulations, innovation policies, and educational reform frameworks relevant to entrepreneurial development.

Secondly, an examination was performed on statutes, regulations, and institutional policy instruments. These included measures related to business registration, investment promotion, support for SMEs, taxation, innovation incentives, and administrative reforms affecting entrepreneurial activities and formal business growth.

Third, academic resources indexed in international and national databases were analyzed. International sources were primarily obtained from Scopus-indexed articles and reports from organizations such as the OECD, World Bank, and Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM). Thai academic literature was sourced from the Thai Journal Citation Index (TCI) database and additional peer-reviewed scholarly sources pertinent to entrepreneurship, labor structure, public policy, and regional development.

Fourth, comparative policy reports and international research on entrepreneurial ecosystems, innovation systems, and multi-level governance were utilized to position Thailand's policy environment within broader international discourse.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The research employed clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to enhance methodological transparency and analytical consistency.

Documents were included upon satisfying the following criteria: (1) The topics covered entrepreneurship entrepreneurship, labor force transformation, SME/startup development, innovation policy, education policy, regional development, or governance mechanisms; (2) The content was directly pertinent to Thailand or offered internationally acknowledged comparative frameworks applicable to Thailand's context; (3) The sources were derived from official government agencies, esteemed international organizations, peer-reviewed academic journals, or recognized academic databases; (4) The materials presented a comprehensive discussion on policy design, implementation, institutional structures, or entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Documents were excluded when: (1) They lacked definitive authorship or institutional credibility; (2) They concentrated exclusively on technical business management devoid of policy significance; (3) They were opinion-based without empirical or analytical substantiation; (4) They replicated information already addressed in more authoritative sources.

Recent academic and policy sources were prioritized, although basic theoretical works relevant in entrepreneurship, structural transformation, human capital, and governance studies were preserved.

4. Search Strategy and Time Frame

The document search included a systematic keyword strategy across many databases and institutional repositories. Essential search phrases encompassed combinations of: "entrepreneurial economy," "entrepreneurship policy," "labor force transformation," "human capital," "SMEs," "startup ecosystem," "innovation policy," "multi-level governance," "informal economy," "regional development," and "Thailand."

Academic literature was predominantly sourced from Scopus, TCI, Google Scholar, OECD studies, World Bank publications, GEM reports, and official government websites. The review primarily examined literature produced from 2000 to 2025 to encapsulate recent advancements in entrepreneurship policy and structural transformation. Nonetheless, foundational theoretical works published previously were incorporated due to their enduring conceptual significance, especially those pertaining to human capital theory, structural transformation, endogenous growth theory, and governance studies.

5. Analytical Framework and Operationalization

The research utilized four interrelated theoretical frameworks for analysis: human capital theory, structural transformation theory, entrepreneurial economy/state theory, and multi-level governance.

The human capital theory was implemented to analyze the impact of education policy, skill development, and entrepreneurial competencies on labor force quality and entrepreneurial capacity. Special emphasis was placed on experiential learning, entrepreneurial intent, and the discrepancy between school outcomes and job market requirements.

The theory of structural transformation was employed to examine the migration of labor from low-productivity and informal industries to higher-productivity entrepreneurial ventures. This framework guided the examination of informality, productivity constraints, company scalability, and regional disparity within Thailand's labor system.

The entrepreneurial economy and entrepreneurial state frameworks were utilized to evaluate the influence of public policy on fostering innovation, startup ecosystems, financial instruments, and institutional backing for entrepreneurship. These frameworks were employed to assess the impact of government policies on the amount and quality of entrepreneurial activity.

Theory of multi-level governance was employed to examine policy coordination among national, regional, and local tiers. The approach facilitated the evaluation of institutional fragmentation, governance ability, implementation limitations, and coordination mechanisms among governmental agencies and regional stakeholders.

Collectively, these frameworks offered a cohesive analytical perspective for investigating the interplay between policy formulation, institutional frameworks, and entrepreneurial development.

6. Data Analysis Procedure

The research utilized qualitative content analysis and policy analysis methods to systematically interpret the gathered materials.

The initial phase entailed open coding, during which principal themes and recurring topics were discerned from the materials. The preliminary coding categories encompassed entrepreneurial promotion, human capital development, labor market transformation, informal employment, innovation assistance, SME financing, institutional coordination, and regional development. The second stage entailed axial coding, during which linked codes were consolidated into more comprehensive analytical categories. The categories encompassed entrepreneurial human capital,

governance coordination, financial accessibility, regulatory frameworks, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and methods for structural transformation.

The third stage involved selective coding and interpretive synthesis. At this juncture, the coded themes were linked to the theoretical frameworks and policy aims to discern trends, contradictions, and structural policy deficiencies.

A policy gap analysis was performed to evaluate discrepancies between: (1) policy objectives and implementation mechanisms, (2) entrepreneurship promotion and institutional capacity, (3) educational outcomes and entrepreneurial competencies, (4) national policy strategies and regional/local implementation conditions.

Comparative analysis was employed to investigate how worldwide entrepreneurship policy strategies and governance frameworks can offer pertinent insights for Thailand's situation.

7. Trustworthiness and Validation

Multiple tactics were utilized to enhance the credibility and reliability of the analysis.

Initially, data triangulation was employed by contrasting evidence from policy documents, scholarly literature, and international institutional reports. This diminished dependence on a singular source category and enhanced analytical coherence.

Secondly, source prioritization was employed to enhance reliability. Increased analytical emphasis was placed on peer-reviewed scholarly publications, official government documents, OECD reports, GEM reports, and globally acknowledged institutional sources.

Third, theoretical triangulation was utilized by including many theoretical frameworks instead of depending on a singular explanatory viewpoint. This methodology improved the analytical rigor of the study and facilitated the interpretation of entrepreneurship as both an economic and governance concern.

The coding and interpretation process was consistently evaluated against the study objectives and analytical frameworks to maintain coherence across evidence, interpretation, and results.

Research Findings

The research findings on the role of public policy in transitioning the workforce structure towards an entrepreneurial economy are presented below, including national, regional, and local policy recommendations:

1. Thailand's Labor Force Structure

1.1 Proportion of Employees and Entrepreneurs

Documented evidence repeatedly indicates that Thailand's labor market is defined by a considerable proportion of wage-earning employment with a substantial informal sector and self-employment, rather than a scalable, opportunity-driven entrepreneurial framework. The National

Statistical Office (Labor Force Survey, Q1/2024) reported that about 39.58 million people were working out of a total labor force of 40.23 million. Overall employment numbers suggest that the economy is absorbing workers, but other structural indicators show that job quality and business formalization are still problems.

A key indicator is the proportion of self-employment. An ILO estimate based on the World Bank model indicates that self-employment accounted for 52.1% of total employment in 2023. Furthermore, the OECD's Survey of Thailand (2025) indicates that 52.7% of the workforce is in the informal sector. (The 2024 Informal Employment Survey Report) shows that more than half of the workforce works outside of formal employment protection.

From the standpoint of the entrepreneurship process, GEM data indicate significant engagement in entrepreneurial activities; yet, the quality and scalability of the outcomes are variable. According to the GEM Thailand summary report (linked to OSMEP), 36.4% of adults are entrepreneurs (Repeated phase, improvement: 11.1% are nascent entrepreneurs, 11.3% are new business owners, and 14.2% are running established businesses). The report also points out that there are regional differences, such as more early-stage activity in the Northeast and more established businesses in the Central region. This trend aligns with the existing literature on entrepreneurship development, which cautions that a high market entry rate does not inherently result in enhanced productivity unless the caliber of entrepreneurs and their capacity for business growth are elevated (Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004; Van Stel et al., 2005; Wennekers & Thurik, 1999).

1.2 Structural problems embedded in the composition of the labor force

Correction: From different sources, the primary structural flaws can be summarized as follows: (1) A lot of people work for themselves or informally, which is generally linked to low productivity and little social security. This makes it hard to keep per capita GDP growth going; (2) Unequal possibilities for entrepreneurship across regions, corroborated by studies indicating that financial limitations and ecological deficiencies exert a more significant influence in economically disadvantaged areas (Paulson & Townsend, 2004); and (3) A significant quantity of micro-enterprises that do not achieve scalability, a phenomenon frequently linked to insufficient external investment, capacity deficiencies, and institutional discord (Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006; Thawesaengskulthai et al., 2024).

2. Analysis of Current Policy Directions

This document analysis indicates that Thailand's business-related policy directions are strategically ambitious but lack systematic tools and implementation at various management levels.

2.1 Policy Strengths

2.1.1. Clear acknowledgment of entrepreneurship as a fundamental driver of progress. National and ecosystem reports focus on encouraging innovation, making it easier to get funding, and boosting business skills. This is in line with the idea of an "entrepreneurial economy/state," where public policy may change markets and make new ideas possible (Mazzucato, 2013).

2.1.2. Increasing attention is being given to create an ecosystem. Documents about the Thai startup ecosystem show that institutions are becoming more interested in ecosystem parts, including

incubation, innovation assistance, and ecosystem mapping. International literature substantiates the notion that the quality of the ecosystem is essential for converting entrepreneurial endeavors into economic results (Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004).

2.1.3. More attention is being paid to Innovation-Driven Enterprises (IDEs). Recent research on IDEs in Thailand underscores regulatory initiatives and processes designed to enhance the investment ecosystem and mitigate obstacles for innovation-driven enterprises. (Thawesaengskulthai et al., 2024)

2.1.4. The Use of Government Support Tools (Both Financial and Non-Financial): International evidence suggests that government support policies can directly and indirectly enhance SME efficiency by fostering an entrepreneurial spirit, although the quality of the design is crucial (Prasannath et al., 2024; Lerner, 2013).

2.2. Weaknesses of Policy

2.2.1. Overemphasis on “More Entrepreneurs” versus “Better Entrepreneurs”: Research highlights that regulations, finance, and institutional structures contribute to both the quantity and quality of entrepreneurship (Audretsch et al., 2024; Van Stel et al., 2005). Policy documents often focus on participation and the number of startups, but scaling and productivity enhancement do not appear to be systematically integrated into the operational design.

2.2.2. Segmentation and Coordination Problems: Research on multi-level management warns that when responsibility spans agencies and levels, failures in coordination can reduce policy effectiveness. This is evident in the fragmented roles in education, SME support, finance, and local economic development, which often lack a single, integrated transition framework linking educational pathways to entrepreneurship and scaling (Bache & Flinders, 2004a; Jessop, 2004).

2.2.3. Operational Risks and Underperforming Programs: Entrepreneurship policy documents have documented the frequent failures of government initiatives when incentives, target setting, and management mechanisms are weak, underscoring the need for evidence-based program design (Lerner, 2009, 2013).

2.3 Policy Gaps: This study identifies three key policy gaps:

Gap 1: Educational pathways to entrepreneurship are not sufficiently “competency-based.” Meta-analysis evidence shows that entrepreneurship education can improve outcomes, but the magnitude of the impact depends on program design and experiential learning (Martin et al., 2013; Bae et al., 2014). Specific studies in Thailand have repeatedly shown that entrepreneurial intent is determined by attitudes, perceived control, and perceived support, including education and government support. (Sorakraikitikul et al., 2024; Wongtaweelat et al., 2025; Tapachai, 2022; Pithayanukul & Pithayanukul, 2025). However, the system continues to prioritize functionality as an initial outcome.

Gap 2: Scaling-oriented financing and investment readiness remain constrained. Evidence from Thailand shows that access to external funding depends on information quality and investment readiness (Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006), while household/regional constraints impact entrepreneurial startup and expansion (Paulson & Townsend, 2004). This highlights the need for stronger linkage

mechanisms, including credit/investment products aligned with the SME lifecycle, investment readiness support, and region-aware access to funding.

Gap 3: Regulatory and administrative barriers persist. Research indicates that regulatory administrative procedures and costs impact entrepreneurial outcomes (Audretsch et al., 2024), and excessive regulatory burdens may diminish entrepreneurship by increasing transaction costs and risks (Mai et al., 2025). Further policy evidence highlights the need to simplify regulations and improve incentives to promote formal registration.

3. Structural Limitations

3.1 Limitations of the Education System

Studies show that entrepreneurship education is only useful when it teaches people how to see opportunities, run a business, and network, not just facts. Meta-analysis substantiates a positive correlation between entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial intention/outcomes (Martin et al., 2013; Bae et al., 2014). Numerous studies in Thailand, particularly those associated with TCI, demonstrate that entrepreneurial intention is markedly affected by perceived behavioral controls, attitudes, and educational characteristics (Sorakraikitikul et al., 2024; Tapachai, 2022; Wongtaweelat et al., 2025; Pithayanukul & Pithayanukul, 2025). Consequently, the structural constraint is less about a "lack of education" being a major problem and more about the disparity between educational performance and the cultivation of entrepreneurial skills.

3.2 Limitations of Bureaucracy and Management

From a management perspective, multi-level coordination is critical because policies in education, finance, innovation, and labor management all affect support for entrepreneurship. and the growth of the local economy (Bache & Flinders, 2004a; Jessop, 2004). However, the difficulty of following rules and procedures may reduce entrepreneurial entry rates. This could lead to more informal and necessary forms of entrepreneurship instead of scalable investments (Audretsch et al., 2024; Mai et al., 2025). Policy sources also stress that making rules easier to understand is an important way to formally start a firm and boost efficiency.

3.3 Limitations on Access to Capital

Evidence from Thailand shows that financial problems change the way people start businesses and make regional inequities worse (Paulson & Townsend, 2004). Research at the company level indicates that the quality of information and readiness for investment have a substantial effect on SMEs' ability to get outside capital, which in turn affects how well they run their businesses (Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006). Research on innovation and entrepreneurship in Thailand also reveals obstacles within the investment ecosystem, underscoring the necessity for integrated processes that link enterprises with investors and suitable funding instruments. (Thawesaengskulthai et al., 2024) Moreover, a TCI-based study investigating financial accessibility and SME performance highlights the significance of funding as a predictor of business results (Ahmad et al., 2024).

3.4 Culture of Risk and Fear of Failure

GEM-based documents report that Thai adults exhibit significant hesitation due to fear of failure, which may hinder entrepreneurship and opportunity-driven business expansion. Further academic evidence suggests that fear of failure can stifle innovation and may require gender and context-sensitive training and support designs (Guelich, 2022). Overall, the constraints are not solely due to "risk avoidance," but rather the interaction between fear of failure and limited safety nets, informality, and limited access to funding and mentorship.

4. Policy Recommendations

This section proposes evidence-based policy approaches at the national, regional, and local levels to strengthen Thailand's transition from an employment-centric workforce to a high-quality entrepreneurial economy. These recommendations are designed to address the structural limitations identified in Section 4 and align with international best practices.

4.1 National Level

4.1.1 National Curriculum Reform to Enhance Entrepreneurial Capacity

Recommendation: National education policy should integrate entrepreneurial education at all levels of education (secondary to tertiary), emphasizing experiential learning, business creation, and market validation.

Rationale and Evidence: Empirical studies consistently show that traditional curricula focused on technical knowledge and employment limit students' entrepreneurial readiness. Meta-analysis evidence has found a positive correlation between entrepreneurial education and both entrepreneurial intention and outcomes when curricula emphasize experiential and problem-solving learning (Bae et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2013). In Thailand, research shows that entrepreneurial attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and a supportive environment are significant predictors of entrepreneurial intention. (Sorakraikitikul et al., 2024; Wongtaweelat et al., 2025)

4.1.2 Recommend tax incentives targeted at entrepreneurs and growing businesses.

Recommendation: Design tax policies that incentivize early-stage startups and growing businesses, including tax exemptions on reinvested profits, R&D credits for innovative activities, and tax breaks for high-growth companies.

Rationale and Evidence: International evidence shows that well-structured tax incentives can mitigate risk and improve resource allocation for innovative ventures (Lerner, 2013). Tax breaks linked to specific performance benchmarks can balance the need to stimulate entrepreneurship while avoiding unnecessary losses or exploitation.

4.1.3 Establish a national startup and scaling fund.

Recommendation: Create dedicated public funding mechanisms and venture capital funds that provide long-term funding and investment-readiness support for early-stage and scaling firms.

These should be designed to attract private sector funding, provide consultation, and connect companies with global markets.

Rationale and Evidence: The “entrepreneurial state” framework emphasizes the role of public sector actors in taking risky investments to stimulate private sector participation (Mazzucato, 2013). Comparative research shows that public sector initial funding and venture capital promote business establishment and expansion when combined with management structures that ensure merit-based allocation (Lerner, 2009; Prasannath et al., 2024).

4.1.4 Business Law and Management Framework Reform

Recommendation: Simplify business registration, reduce bureaucratic barriers to company formation, and modernize bankruptcy and contract enforcement systems to lower transaction costs for entrepreneurs.

Rationale and Evidence: Regulatory barriers and compliance costs have been repeatedly identified as obstacles, particularly for new and small companies, reducing the incentive to establish and expand businesses (Mai et al., 2025). OECD analysis also indicates that regulatory complexity is a significant hindrance to productivity and formality (OECD, 2025).

4.2 Regional Level

4.2.1 Establishing Regional Economic Zones Focusing on Specific Sectors

Recommendation: Develop regional economic zones based on comparative advantages, such as agro-industry clusters, digital technology clusters, and creative industries, to attract investment, promote expertise, and coordinate skills training with key sectors.

Rationale and Evidence: Literature on structural transformation emphasizes the expertise and impact of industry clusters as drivers of productivity and innovation (Herrendorf et al., 2014). Regional industry clusters facilitate the sharing of infrastructure, labor integration, and knowledge transfer that support the scaling of entrepreneurs.

4.2.2 Creating Regional Innovation Hubs

Recommendation: Establish regional innovation hubs that bring together universities, research institutions, local companies, government agencies, and investors to collaboratively design innovation agendas and facilitate their commercialization.

Rationale and Evidence: Research on regional innovation systems highlights that coordinated networks enhance the flow of knowledge and increase the success rate of startups (Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004). Regional hubs serve as platforms for implementing best practices at the local level and integrating education with industry needs.

4.2.3 Promoting Spatial Industrial Development

Recommendation: Adapt industrial development policies to the specific potential of regional economies. Taking into account the dynamics of local supply chains and labor strengths.

Rationale and Evidence: Spatial policy approaches recognize that institutional, geographical, and socio-economic contexts contribute to development outcomes. Comparative policy studies have shown that area-adapted industrial strategies yield stronger results than a one-size-fits-all approach (Rodríguez-Pose & Hardy, 2021).

4.3 Local Level

4.3.1 Community-Based Entrepreneurship Development Programs

Recommendation: Support community-based entrepreneurship initiatives that assist local small businesses, service businesses, and small-scale innovation projects, linking these projects to opportunities for accessing regional markets.

Rationale and Evidence: Local entrepreneurship programs can build social capital and stimulate untapped local resources while promoting the formalization of informal sectors (Stam, 2015). Programs emphasizing networking and mentoring will enhance resilience and gradual innovation.

4.3.2 Establishing Local Incubators and Collaborative Workspaces

Recommendation: Invest in local incubators, accelerators, and collaborative workspaces that provide mentoring services, prototyping facilities, business support services, and connections with investors.

Rationale and Evidence: Evidence from the entrepreneurial ecosystem shows that incubators and accelerators increase the survival and growth rates of startups by providing systematic support, formal networks, and market exposure (Isabelle, 2013; Pauwels et al., 2016). These facilities can be adapted to the local economic base and talent pool.

4.3.3 Supporting the Creative and Cultural Economy

Recommendation: Promote creative industries and cultural enterprises at the municipal level through grants, festivals, and branding campaigns that increase market visibility for local producers.

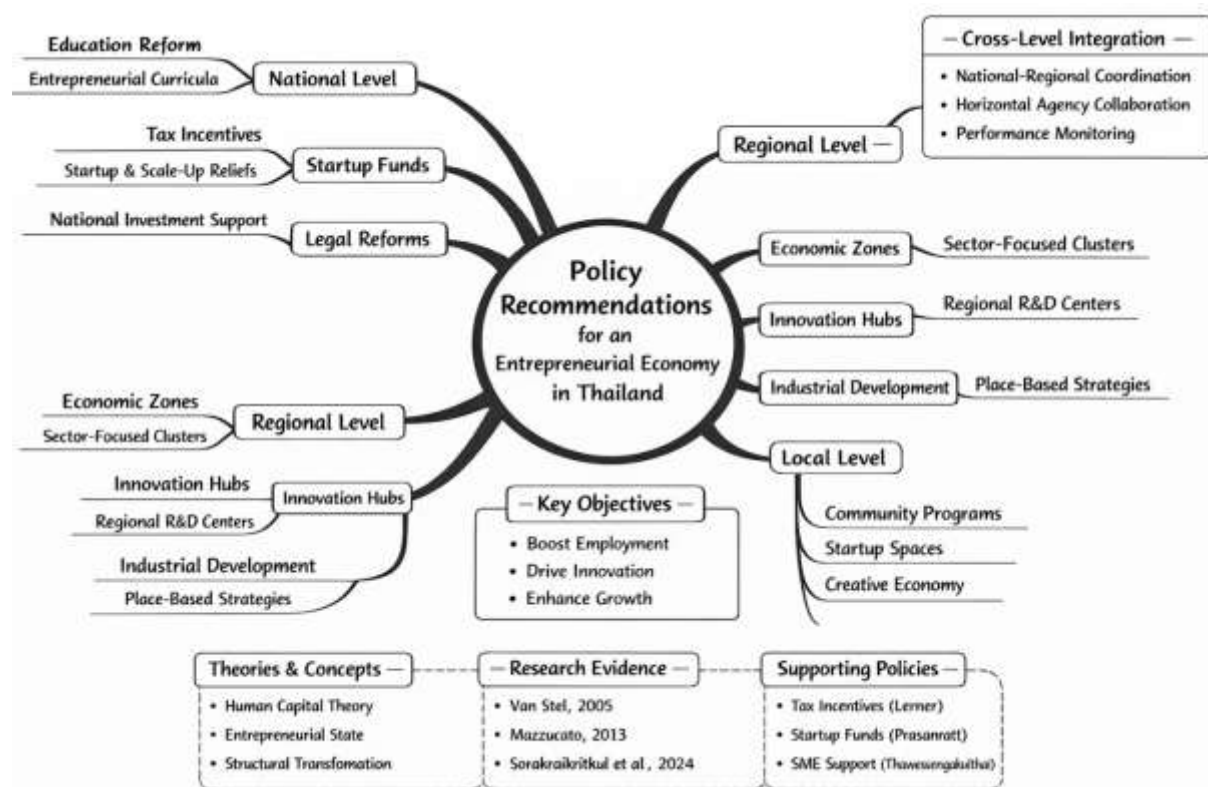
Rationale and Evidence: The creative economy is increasingly recognized as a driver of economic diversification and inclusive job creation. Research on creative sectors has found that municipal support can mobilize cultural funds for sustainable economic activities (Evans, 2009).

Table 1 Synthesis of Key Findings on Public Policy and Workforce Transformation toward an Entrepreneurial Economy

Analytical Dimension	Key Findings	Policy Gaps Identified	Implications for Workforce Transformation
Labor force structure	Thailand has high entrepreneurial participation, but a large share of workers remains in informal employment, self-employment, and micro-enterprises.	Entrepreneurship remains concentrated in low-productivity and necessity-driven activities.	Workforce transformation requires upgrading entrepreneurial quality, not merely increasing business entry.
Human capital and education	Existing education systems insufficiently develop entrepreneurial competencies such as opportunity recognition, innovation, risk management, and business scaling.	Educational outcomes are weakly aligned with entrepreneurial capability and labor market transformation.	Competency-based and experiential entrepreneurship education is needed to support opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.
Finance and scalability	Access to growth-oriented finance remains limited, especially for SMEs, startups, and regional entrepreneurs.	Financial support mechanisms are fragmented and insufficiently linked to firm life cycles and investment readiness.	Scaling-oriented finance is necessary to move firms from micro-level survival to productivity-enhancing growth.
Regulatory and institutional environment	Policies acknowledge entrepreneurship and innovation, but regulatory complexity and administrative burdens persist.	Business formalization and expansion are constrained by compliance costs and institutional inefficiencies.	Regulatory simplification can encourage formalization, investment, and business growth.
Governance coordination	National strategies are ambitious, but implementation across national, regional, and local levels remains fragmented.	Weak vertical and horizontal coordination reduces policy coherence and effectiveness.	Multi-level governance mechanisms are needed to align education, finance, innovation, and regional development policies.
Regional and local ecosystems	Entrepreneurial opportunities and support systems vary across regions.	Regional inequality limits access to finance, networks, innovation infrastructure, and institutional support.	Regionally adaptive entrepreneurial ecosystems can reduce spatial inequality and strengthen local economic transformation.
Quality of entrepreneurship	Current policies tend to emphasize increasing the number of entrepreneurs	Limited focus on high-growth and innovation-driven enterprises.	Policy should shift from quantity-based entrepreneurship

Analytical Dimension	Key Findings	Policy Gaps Identified	Implications for Workforce Transformation
	rather than improving innovation, productivity, and scalability.		promotion to quality- and productivity-based entrepreneurial development.

Figure 1 Model for the transformation from a multi-level labor force to an entrepreneurial economy (MWEET)



The model demonstrates how Thailand can transform its labour force into a high-quality entrepreneurial economy through coordinated public policies across three interrelated governance levels: national, regional, and local.

The model underscores structural policy instruments at the national level, including improvements in entrepreneurial education, support for startups and scale-ups, tax incentives, and legal reforms. These policies seek to enhance entrepreneurial human capital, diminish institutional obstacles, and facilitate innovation-driven corporate expansion.

The approach underscores the significance of sector-specific economic zones, regional innovation centers, and localized industrial development plans at the regional level. These methods aim to link regional resources, research institutions, and industries to enhance productivity, specialization, and regional competitiveness.

The model emphasizes community entrepreneurial initiatives, startup incubators, and the creative economy at the local level. These efforts enhance entrepreneurial engagement, fortify local ecosystems, and promote inclusive economic development.

The model underscores cross-level integration, encompassing national-regional coordination, horizontal collaboration across agencies, and performance evaluation. This integration is crucial for diminishing policy fragmentation and enhancing implementation efficacy across government tiers.

The framework is based on three principal theoretical perspectives: human capital theory, entrepreneurial state theory, and structural transformation theory. It additionally relies on empirical studies about entrepreneurship, innovation policy, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The approach posits that workforce transformation necessitates more than only augmenting the quantity of entrepreneurs. Sustainable change relies on synchronized multi-tiered policies that enhance entrepreneurial capacity, innovation potential, institutional backing, and regional inclusivity.

Discussion

This research aims to study the influence of public policy on the transformation of Thailand's labor structure towards a high-quality entrepreneurial economy. The study found that, despite Thailand's relatively high rate of entrepreneurial participation, structural obstacles remain, particularly the informal economy, limitations on scalability, fragmented management practices, and a skills shortage. These continue to hinder productivity growth and the sustainable increase of GDP per capita. The following sections will analyze these findings through the lens of relevant theories, examine the feasibility of policies, assess long-term macroeconomic impacts, and identify key factors necessary for success.

1. Comparison with Theoretical Frameworks

1.1 Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory explains that access to education and skills increases productivity and supports sustainable economic growth (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961). Meanwhile, internal growth models indicate that the accumulation of knowledge drives sustained GDP per capita growth (Lucas, 1988; Romer, 1990). This research partially supports this concept. Specifically, while Thailand has expanded educational opportunities, the mismatch between educational outcomes and entrepreneurial skills reflects that human capital development is still focused on salaried employment rather than opportunity-driven entrepreneurship. This also aligns with evidence that “entrepreneurial education” is most effective when it emphasizes competencies and real-world experience (Martin et al., 2013; Bae et al., 2014). Furthermore, entrepreneurial human capital, such as opportunity recognition, risk management, and innovation potential, is crucial for increasing productivity (Unger et al., 2011). Therefore, policy reforms towards experiential learning, mentoring, and entrepreneurial-focused curricula are necessary. The structural transformation of the labor force is still incomplete.

1.2 Structural Transformation Theory

Structural transformation theory proposes that the shift of labor from low-productivity sectors to high-productivity sectors accelerates development (Lewis, 1954; McMillan & Rodrik, 2011;

Herrendorf et al., 2014). In the case of Thailand, the prevalence of informal economic activity and a large number of small enterprises reflects limited structural progress. Furthermore, increasing market entry does not automatically mean increased productivity. This aligns with transnational research which found that entrepreneurship often has a significant impact on growth in innovation-driven countries (Van Stel et al., 2005). The study therefore reinforces the difference between "quantitative" and "qualitative" entrepreneurship (Wennekers & Thurik, 1999) and indicates that structural transformation depends more on policies that support innovative and scalable businesses than on subsistence employment.

1.3 Entrepreneurial Economy and Entrepreneurial State (Entrepreneurial Economy & Entrepreneurial State)

The entrepreneurial economy concept emphasizes the role of knowledge transfer and the creation of new companies in driving growth (Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004). Meanwhile, the entrepreneurial state concept suggests that the state can direct innovation through mission-based investment (Mazzucato, 2013). Thailand's policy approaches show discourse alignment with these concepts, but there are significant gaps in implementation. Empirical assessments warn that if public-private partnerships or public investment projects lack structure and management quality, they may lead to distortions and underperforming outcomes (Lerner, 2009, 2013). Therefore, this research supports a more appropriate "entrepreneurial state" model, emphasizing missions, performance indicators, and clearly defined oversight institutions.

1.4 Multi-level Management

Entrepreneurial policies are designed and implemented at multiple levels, from national and regional to local (Bache & Flinders, 2004b; Jessop, 2004). Research confirms that the fragmentation between ministries and management levels leads to inconsistency and reduced policy effectiveness. An entrepreneurial ecosystem functions best when there is coordination between education, finance, management, and regional specialization (Stam, 2015). Thailand's limitation, therefore, does not lie in "intention" but rather in "integration," both vertically (between management levels) and horizontally (between agencies). For this reason, the multi-level management concept provides a suitable framework for explaining the policy implementation problems encountered and serves as a rationale for developing clearer coordination and accountability mechanisms.

2. Policy Feasibility

The feasibility of a policy depends significantly on its institutional potential, fiscal sustainability, and political coherence. Even the most carefully designed entrepreneurship policy may fail to achieve its goals if its implementation system is inefficient or disconnected. Therefore, feasibility assessments must consider both the quality of the policy design and the capabilities of management and implementation.

Educational reform can only succeed when integrated into the national curriculum framework and supported by a systematic teacher development system. International evidence indicates that effectively scalable entrepreneurial education models are often based on competency-based and experiential learning (Martin et al., 2013). However, significant change requires indicators of success

that go beyond enrollment numbers, measuring skills, entrepreneurial outcomes, and sustained participation in entrepreneurial activities.

Tax measures and financial incentives are powerful policy tools if designed and implemented correctly. Empirical research shows that structuring tax credits for research and development (R&D) and performance-linked incentives can significantly stimulate innovation and promote private sector investment (Bloom et al., 2019). However, fiscal discipline and mechanisms to prevent misuse are essential to avoid inefficient resource allocation and ensure that such incentives generate genuine productivity increases.

Public venture capital funds are more likely to succeed when designed to attract private sector investment rather than replace market mechanisms (Lerner, 2013). Transparent management, merit-based selection processes, and clear exit mechanisms are crucial for building investor confidence and mitigating political risk.

Regulatory reforms are often quick to implement and yield short-term results. Simplicity of administrative procedures, efficient business registration systems, and integrated digital service platforms can reduce transaction costs and promote formalization (Djankov et al., 2002). Such measures are typically less expensive than financial subsidies but can quickly create a positive impact on the business environment.

In summary, the feasibility of reforms aimed at an entrepreneurial economy is moderate to high, depending on strengthening coordination mechanisms, establishing clear accountability systems, and implementing transparent and effective governance to ensure continuous and sustainable policy consistency at all administrative levels.

3. Long-Term Impacts on Per Capita GDP

Firstly, entrepreneurship impacts per capita GDP through interconnected mechanisms at both the organizational and macroeconomic levels. It plays a crucial role in the reallocation of resources based on productivity. As new businesses enter the market and highly efficient organizations expand, labor and capital are shifted from less productive to more productive businesses. This process enhances the overall efficiency of the economy, supports structural transformation, and raises the average national income (McMillan & Rodrik, 2011). In this dimension, entrepreneurship acts as a dynamic adaptive mechanism accelerating the transition to more competitive and productive economic sectors.

Secondly, entrepreneurship plays a role in stimulating innovation and knowledge transfer. Entrepreneurial businesses often adopt and commercialize new ideas, technologies, and business models from universities, research institutions, or large corporations. This process of transforming knowledge into economic value strengthens regional development and increases the overall productivity of factors of production through “entrepreneurial capital” (Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004). The diffusion of innovation from one business to another has ripple effects at the industrial and macroeconomic levels.

Thirdly, although most businesses are small-scale, a group of rapidly growing businesses, known as... “High-growth businesses” plays a crucial role in job creation and productivity growth

(Henrekson & Johansson, 2010). The expansion of these businesses increases the average size of businesses, enhances export potential, and improves overall economic efficiency.

However, the impact of entrepreneurship on per capita GDP significantly depends on the “quality” and “motivation” of the entrepreneurs. Comparative international research has found that opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, especially that focused on innovation, tends to have a positive impact on income levels in innovation-driven countries. Conversely, entrepreneurship driven by necessity or subsistence may have a neutral or even negative impact on per capita GDP (Van Stel et al., 2005; Acs et al., 2018). Therefore, the role of entrepreneurs in sustainable economic development depends not only on their numbers, but also on their productivity levels, scalability, and focus on innovation.

For Thailand, if a transition from necessity-driven informal sector businesses to businesses with high scalability and driven by innovation is possible, long-term per capita GDP growth will be supported through the dynamics of domestic productivity (Romer, 1990). Conversely, if policies focus only on increasing market entry rates without improving quality, the impact on per capita GDP will be less significant. The resulting macroeconomic benefits are limited and unsustainable.

4. Conditions for Success

The transition to an entrepreneurial economy does not automatically occur through an increase in business registrations or new startups alone. Rather, it requires deeply interconnected and mutually supportive structural factors comprising four key components: (1) competency-based education reform, (2) inter-institutional collaboration, (3) access to risk-tolerant funding sources, and (4) a culture of social risk tolerance. Without integrated strengthening of these components, policy measures may yield inconsistent results and fail to bring about sustainable structural change.

Firstly, competency-based education reform is crucial. Traditional education systems in many countries, particularly those with primarily employment-oriented labor, often focus on the transmission of theoretical knowledge and preparation for the labor market. However, an entrepreneurial economy requires different skills, such as the ability to identify opportunities, solve problems in uncertain situations, mobilize resources, work in teams, and continuously experiment and improve. Empirical research shows that entrepreneurial education yields significant results when focusing on experiential learning and competency development rather than theoretical instruction alone (Martin et al., 2013). Therefore, reform should encompass curriculum restructuring, teaching methods, faculty capacity building, industry linkages, and assessments that measure actual competencies. Beyond measuring participation rates, evaluation should focus on entrepreneurial competencies, venture creation, and long-term entrepreneurial outcomes.

Secondly, inter-institutional coordination is a crucial mechanism for ensuring system consistency. Entrepreneurial policies often involve multiple sectors, such as education, finance, innovation, labor law, regional development, and industrial strategy. Lack of coordination—both vertically at the national, regional, and local levels, and horizontally between ministries and agencies—leads to duplication and fragmentation of projects, reducing policy effectiveness (Bache & Flinders, 2004b). An entrepreneurial economy requires a continuous development pathway, from education and incubation to access to capital and market expansion. If institutions operate in isolation,

promising projects may falter during crucial growth phases. Therefore, an integrated management mechanism is needed to combine policy tools across levels and sectors, within a clear framework of roles, responsibilities, and information systems.

Thirdly, access to risk-adjusted funding dictates the entrepreneurial potential for growth beyond subsistence levels. While many countries have high proportions of self-employed individuals or small businesses, the expansion of innovative businesses requires a financial system aligned with risk tolerance and growth potential. Research shows that entrepreneurial performance is significantly influenced by access to financial resources and the ability to manage those resources (Unger et al., 2011). A comprehensive financial system should encompass small investors. Venture capital, growth funding, credit guarantee mechanisms, and public venture capital funds, coupled with investment readiness programs and transparent allocation criteria, are crucial to preventing inefficient resource utilization. Without a deep and diversified financial structure, the entrepreneurial economy could be dominated by businesses driven by necessity and with low productivity.

Finally, social risk culture and acceptance influence the psychological and institutional environment of entrepreneurship. Fear of failure can stifle opportunity-driven business initiatives, especially in contexts where failure severely impacts social status and financial burdens (Cacciotti et al., 2016). If business failure leads to long-term debt, reputational damage, or limitations on re-entry into the market, opportunities for innovation are reduced. Therefore, cultural shifts must be coupled with institutional reforms, such as fair bankruptcy laws, second-chance policies, and social security systems that mitigate severe risks, to create space for rational risk-taking, which is fundamental to innovation.

The four components—competency-based education reform, institutional collaboration, access to risk capital, and a risk-acceptance culture—reinforce each other. Education builds skills for innovation; coordinated institutions create infrastructure for new business growth; financial systems drive expansion; and a risk-acceptance culture reduces psychological and economic barriers. If any one component is missing, the entire systemic transition process may falter.

Therefore, the transition to an entrepreneurial economy should not be viewed as merely a reform of a single policy area, but rather as a comprehensive restructuring of human capital development, management mechanisms, financial systems, and social attitudes. Under such an integrated environment, entrepreneurship can move from broad participation to qualitative growth, high productivity, and the development of a sustainable and dynamic economy in the long term.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the influence of public policy on the transformation of Thailand's labor force structure towards an entrepreneurial economy from a multi-level policy viewpoint. The results reveal that while Thailand exhibits considerable entrepreneurial engagement, a significant portion of this activity is confined to informal, low-productivity, and small-scale companies with restricted scalability. Consequently, entrepreneurship has not yet significantly contributed to sustainable productivity enhancement or enduring structural transformation.

The research additionally revealed that Thailand's entrepreneurial shift is hindered by interrelated structural and institutional obstacles. This encompasses discrepancies between educational

results and entrepreneurial skills, restricted access to growth-focused financing, regulatory and administrative obstacles, fragmented governance frameworks, and inconsistent regional development. The findings indicate that entrepreneurial transformation is not merely an economic concern, but also a social policy matter intricately connected to informality, inequality, social protection, and disparate access to opportunities among various areas and socioeconomic groups.

This study theoretically enhances the literature by amalgamating human capital theory, structural transformation theory, entrepreneurial economy/state views, and multi-level governance into a cohesive analytical framework for comprehending entrepreneurial transformation. The study reframes entrepreneurship policy from a limited economic intervention to a comprehensive process involving institutional coordination, workforce reorganization, and inclusive development. The suggested MWEET framework additionally demonstrates that entrepreneurial transformation relies on the coordinated interaction of national, regional, and local policy frameworks.

The study underscores that effective entrepreneurial transformation requires more than simply increasing the number of startups or self-employed individuals. Public policy should prioritize enhancing the quality, innovative potential, productivity, and scalability of entrepreneurial endeavors. This necessitates comprehensive reforms in education, finance, regulation, regional development, and government coordination. The report emphasizes the significance of competency-based entrepreneurial education, scalable funding mechanisms, regionally tailored entrepreneurial ecosystems, and enhanced cooperation across governance levels.

This article enhances the field of social policy and development by illustrating that workforce transformation towards an entrepreneurial economy relies not only on market dynamics but also on the state's ability to mitigate structural inequality, bolster institutional integration, and foster inclusive opportunities for sustainable economic engagement.

Recommendations

1. Policy Recommendations

The government should adopt an integrated, multi-level strategy, shifting the focus from increasing the number of entrepreneurs to improving the quality and scalability of entrepreneurial activity. Key actions include integrating competency-based entrepreneurship education into national curricula, strengthening inter-ministerial and administrative cooperation, expanding access to risk-weighted capital through transparent venture capital mechanisms, and simplifying administrative processes to reduce market entry costs and regulatory compliance expenses. Policies should be results-driven, fiscally accountable, and aligned with long-term productivity enhancement rather than short-term numerical targets.

2. Operational Recommendations

Educational institutions should adopt experiential learning models such as investment-based projects, industry mentoring, and incubation partnerships. Government agencies and financial institutions should strengthen investment readiness programs and provide appropriate support throughout the company lifecycle. Regional and local authorities should develop sector-specific clusters and innovation centers that leverage local comparative advantages. Practitioners should focus

on measurable outcomes such as company survival, scalability, innovation intensity, and productivity growth, rather than just participation rates.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should include empirical field studies to examine the impact of policies at national and regional levels. Quantitative analysis using panel data is needed to assess the long-term relationship between entrepreneurial quality and GDP per capita. Comparative studies between countries would also be valuable in identifying institutional factors that differentiate successful entrepreneurial ecosystems from less efficient ones. Such research would strengthen evidence-based policymaking and improve the design of multi-level entrepreneurial strategies.

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