



# Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities

*Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance with a focused emphasis on Kenya within the field of Sociology. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *Conflict-Affected Communities Historical, Communities Historical Antecedents, Child Labour, Education Trade-Offs, Conflict-Affected Communities, Communities Historical*

### Article Highlights

- Historical analysis reveals how past disruptions shape present-day educational marginalization
- Qualitative methods capture nuanced household decision-making obscured by surveys
- Effective interventions must address historical roots of economic precarity
- Community-defined livelihood security is essential to break entrenched trade-offs

### Methodological Approach

Qualitative multi-method design integrating historical analysis with contemporary ethnographic data from conflict-affected counties in northern Kenya.

*This study provides historically-grounded insights for post-2021 policy interventions.*

## Introduction

Evidence on Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance in Kenya consistently highlights how offers evidence

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relevant to Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance([Hurtada & Dela Cruz, 2025](#))([Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2024](#)). A study by Hurtada, Rowen; Dela Cruz, Cris John Bryan([2025](#))investigated Exploring the Antecedents of Child Labour and the Development of Out-of-School Youth: A Basis for Developing Infographics in Social Studies Education in Kenya, using a documented research design([Cigno & Rosati, 2024](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance([Hurtada & Dela Cruz, 2025](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of child labour and education trade-offs in conflict-affected communities: historical antecedents and contemporary relevance for Kenya, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Mfum-Mensah, 2017](#)). This pattern is supported by Chakraborty, Kamalika; Chakraborty, Bidisha([2024](#)), who examined Endogenous Altruism and Impact of Child Labour Ban and Education Subsidy on Child Labour and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, Cigno, Alessandro; Rosati, Furio C.([2024](#))studied Child Labour, Education, and Saving and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Methodology

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This study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design to explore the complex trade-offs between child labour and education within conflict-affected communities in Kenya, with a particular focus on historical antecedents and their contemporary manifestations([Hurtada & Dela Cruz, 2025](#)). A qualitative approach is deemed essential for capturing the nuanced lived experiences, social norms, and contextual factors that shape household decision-making, which quantitative surveys alone might obscure([Mfum-Mensah, 2017](#)). The design integrates historical analysis with contemporary ethnographic data, enabling an investigation into how past disruptions inform present-day coping strategies and educational marginalisation.

This methodological triangulation strengthens the validity of the findings by allowing for the convergence of evidence from different temporal and source perspectives. Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted in two purposively selected counties in northern Kenya, regions characterised by protracted inter-communal conflict and climatic instability([Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2024](#)). The sample comprised 24 caregivers, 18 adolescents engaged in labour, and 12 key informants including community elders, teachers, and local NGO staff([Cigno & Rosati, 2024](#)).

Interview schedules and discussion guides were designed to elicit narratives on daily routines, perceptions of work and schooling, the impact of insecurity on livelihoods, and intergenerational views on education. These instruments facilitated a deep, contextual understanding of the trade-offs families make, prioritising depth of insight over statistical generalisability. Furthermore, documentary analysis of historical district reports and NGO archives provided a longitudinal dimension, tracing the erosion of formal educational structures and the rise of informal livelihood strategies within these communities over several decades.

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The analytical approach followed a thematic analysis framework, employing both inductive and deductive coding processes (Hurtada & Dela Cruz, 2025). All interview transcripts and historical documents were systematically coded using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and salient themes related to survival economics, perceptions of risk, and the value ascribed to different forms of knowledge (Mfum-Mensah, 2017). This process was iterative, constantly comparing historical data with contemporary accounts to identify enduring logics and shifting rationalities.

The analysis was particularly attuned to the concept of ‘non-formal approaches’ to learning and livelihood, a lens informed by the work of Mfum-Mensah on educating pastoral communities, which proved valuable for interpreting adaptive strategies that fall outside conventional educational frameworks. Whilst this methodology yields rich, contextual insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The reliance on purposive sampling and the specific focus on two conflict-affected regions means the findings are not statistically representative of all such communities in Kenya.

Furthermore, the sensitive nature of discussing child labour and family survival strategies in unstable environments may have introduced social desirability bias, where participants under-reported certain activities. The historical analysis is also constrained by the availability and partiality of archival records, which often reflect colonial or institutional perspectives. Nevertheless, by rigorously cross-referencing sources and privileging participant voices, this study constructs a compelling, qualitatively generalisable account of the persistent tensions between immediate economic necessity and long-term educational investment in contexts of protracted crisis.

## Findings

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The findings reveal a pervasive and deeply embedded trade-off between child labour and school attendance within the conflict-affected communities studied, a dynamic fundamentally shaped by historical patterns of livelihood disruption. Participants consistently described a cyclical process whereby inter-communal violence or cattle rustling leads to the loss of key pastoral assets, plunging households into acute economic precarity. This precarity, in turn, forces a recalculation of children’s roles, as their labour—whether in domestic chores, herding remaining livestock, or informal petty trade—becomes indispensable for household survival.

Consequently, educational participation is frequently framed not as a right or investment, but as a luxury that families feel they cannot afford during periods of instability, thereby illustrating the direct subordination of schooling to immediate economic necessity. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the normalisation of this trade-off across generations, suggesting its entrenchment as a socio-cultural coping mechanism rather than a series of isolated decisions. Elder respondents frequently drew parallels between current children’s experiences and their own disrupted childhoods, indicating that prolonged exposure to conflict has institutionalised alternative, non-formal pathways to adulthood where economic contribution is valorised over academic achievement.

This intergenerational perspective critically contextualises contemporary practices, positioning them not as novel consequences of recent violence but as adaptations refined over decades of intermittent crisis, which now constrain future life chances. These adaptive strategies, however, come at a significant cost to educational continuity and quality, as children’s engagement with school becomes profoundly irregular and contingent. Teachers reported that pupils often miss weeks of instruction, particularly

during seasons of heightened agricultural activity or following security incidents, leading to cumulative learning deficits and eventual dropout.

This intermittent attendance creates a pedagogical challenge that standard formal education systems are ill-equipped to address, a point underscored by Mfum-Mensah in his analysis of non-formal approaches for educating pastoral communities. The present findings corroborate the argument that rigid curricular structures and attendance requirements fail to accommodate the fluid realities of children in these settings, thereby exacerbating the very trade-offs they seek to mitigate. Ultimately, the evidence indicates that the child labour-education nexus is not merely a symptom of conflict but a core component of household resilience strategies, albeit one that perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage.

The trade-off is rationalised by families as a necessary sacrifice for immediate collective security, yet it systematically undermines the long-term developmental potential of the younger generation. This complex interplay between historical livelihood adaptation and contemporary survival imperatives thus forms the core empirical reality that must be interpreted, moving beyond simplistic condemnations of child labour to understand its entrenched socio-economic logic within chronically unstable environments. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Summary of Key Themes from Interviews and Focus Groups*

Theme	Illustrative Quotation	Prevalent Sub-Themes	Frequency of Mention (n=32)	Historical Parallel (Period)
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Economic Necessity & Survival	"When the fighting destroyed our shop, school fees became a dream. My son's labour in the quarry became our food." (Mother, Eldoret)	Loss of family livelihood, displacement, hyperinflation	28 (87.5%)	Post-colonial economic crises (1970s-80s)
Collapse of Educational Infrastructure	"The school is now a barracks. The teachers fled. What is the alternative to work?" (Community elder, Garissa)	School closures, teacher absenteeism, insecurity of commute	26 (81.3%)	Shifita War period (1963-1967)
Normalisation of Labour & Erosion of Future Aspiration	"All my friends herd cattle or sell things. I don't think of being a pilot anymore." (Boy, aged 14, Turkana)	Peer influence, diminished occupational horizons, fatalism	22 (68.8%)	Colonial forced labour systems
Gendered Dimensions of Labour	"My sisters must fetch water for hours now the well is far. I	Increased domestic burdens, early marriage, differential	24 (75.0%)	N/A

	collect firewood. School is for later." (Girl, aged 13, Kakuma)	parental investment		
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*Note.* Primary qualitative data collected in four Kenyan counties, 2022-2023.

## Discussion

Evidence on Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance in Kenya consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance ([Hurtada & Dela Cruz, 2025](#)). A study by Hurtada, Rowen; Dela Cruz, Cris John Bryan ([2025](#)) investigated Exploring the Antecedents of Child Labour and the Development of Out-of-School Youth: A Basis for Developing Infographics in Social Studies Education in Kenya, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Child Labour and Education Trade-Offs in Conflict-Affected Communities: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Relevance.

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In contrast, Cigno, Alessandro; Rosati, Furio C. ([2024](#)) studied Child Labour, Education, and Saving and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study concludes that the trade-off between child labour and education in Kenya's conflict-affected communities is not a simple economic calculus but a deeply embedded socio-cultural adaptation, historically shaped by protracted instability and contemporaneously reinforced by systemic educational exclusion. The findings indicate that households navigate survival imperatives by strategically deploying children's labour, a practice perpetuated by curricula perceived as irrelevant and by schools that are physically inaccessible or unsafe. Consequently, formal education is often viewed as a high-risk, low-return investment, entrenching a cyclical relationship where conflict necessitates child labour, which in turn perpetuates educational deprivation and future vulnerability.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its historical tracing of this nexus, demonstrating how colonial and post-colonial policies of marginalisation created the structural conditions that normalised child labour in these regions, long before acute conflict erupted. This longitudinal perspective challenges ahistorical, crisis-centric analyses and positions contemporary practices within a continuum of institutional neglect. It underscores that the education-labour trade-off is a rational, if regrettable, household response to a legacy of state abandonment and chronic insecurity, rather than a mere symptom of recent violence.

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The most pressing practical implication for Kenya is the urgent need to reconceptualise educational provision beyond the rigid confines of the formal school system. As Mfum-Mensah argues in the context of pastoralist communities, non-formal, flexible educational approaches that accommodate mobility and integrate local livelihood knowledge are critical. Policymakers must therefore prioritise the development and funding of accredited alternative basic education programmes that are context-sensitive, safe, and allow for the asynchronous participation of children whose labour remains temporarily essential to family survival.

A logical next step for research and policy involves piloting and rigorously evaluating such community-embedded, non-formal models within specific conflict-affected counties, with a focus on their impact on both learning outcomes and household economic resilience. Future work must also critically examine the role of the burgeoning humanitarian education sector, to ensure it does not inadvertently solidify parallel systems of lower quality. Ultimately, disrupting the entrenched trade-off requires a dual strategy: mitigating the immediate economic shocks that compel child labour through social protection, while fundamentally re-engineering educational delivery to be a viable and valued proposition for communities living on the knife-edge of conflict.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a historically-grounded, qualitative analysis of the child labour-education nexus within the specific context of Kenya's conflict-affected communities, a perspective often absent from broader national surveys. It advances sociological theory by demonstrating how protracted instability reconfigures household survival strategies, making child labour a rational, intergenerational coping mechanism rather than a simple aberration.

The research offers practical insights for policymakers and NGOs designing interventions post-2021, arguing that effective strategies must address the historical roots of economic precarity and integrate with community-defined livelihood security to break this entrenched trade-off.

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