



# Surveying youth in Tanzania: challenges and solutions

laterite  
DATA | RESEARCH | ANALYTICS

# Youth in Tanzania: an introduction

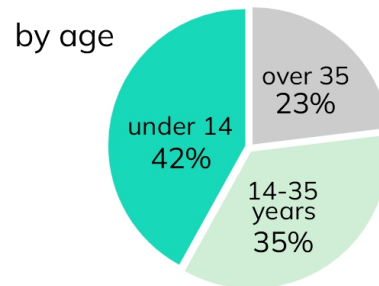
Tanzania is a nation shaped by its young people. According to the 2022 Census, over three quarters of the population is under the age of 35, with children up to 14 years old making up 42% of the total and youth (those aged 15–35) accounting for 35%.

Youth are crucial to Tanzania's economic, social, and political landscape. They contribute to the labor force in agriculture, manufacturing, technology, and services. As drivers of innovation with increasing use of digital tools among urban youth, they are creating new economic pathways. Yet, this progress is uneven. Barriers include limited digital literacy, especially in rural communities, and limited access to loans and land ownership, which constrain their participation in the formal economy. Youth are also active agents in civic engagement and political discourse, even if their representation in formal decision-making structures remains low. Their level of political participation also varies across regions, with urban youth often more vocal, sometimes cautiously, compared to rural youth whose awareness might be shaped more by traditional authorities or local political loyalties.

## Same aspirations, diverse identities

The diversity of Tanzania's youth is shaped by factors such as employment status, geographical location, ethnicity, culture, education levels, and language use. The intersection of these factors profoundly influences youth's daily lives, opportunities, and interactions. Tanzania's rich ethnic landscape, home to over 120 groups

**Total population:** 61,741,120  
125 ethnic groups  
100+ languages  
65% rural population



Data: 2022 Population and Housing Census

including the Sukuma, Maasai, Chaga, and Haya, adds another layer of diversity. While Kiswahili serves as a unifying national language, local languages remain crucial for daily life and cultural expression, particularly in rural areas. This linguistic diversity is important to note, as fluency in Kiswahili can vary, which might present communication nuances when engaging with youth from different regions and backgrounds.

## Surveying Tanzania's youth

Laterite Tanzania has extensive experience collecting data among youth in diverse contexts of the country. We have conducted household surveys, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews across Tanzania. Through this work, we have gained valuable experience in working with youth who are very aspirational, mobile and may not be interested in participating in surveys. We would like to share some of the key lessons we have learned.



# Finding youth to survey

## Recruiting youth to participate in surveys and interviews can be a challenge.

**Mobility.** One obstacle to consistent youth engagement is their frequent mobility. Young people, particularly in rural areas, are driven by the search for better economic opportunities and often migrate away from home. This makes them hard to recruit for local initiatives or evaluations that require continuity. Moreover, while many youth programs exist, they sometimes fail to meet short-term expectation, leading to disengagement and further complicating efforts to track them for follow-up surveys, especially if they have relocated.

**Lack of records.** A significant logistical challenge is the lack of accurate, up-to-date demographic records on youth at the local level. Although local authorities keep data on residents, poor documentation practices and outdated information result in gaps and inconsistencies. Compounding this, frequent staff reassignments at local government offices can lead to a loss of institutional memory and disrupt continuity in data management and community relationships, making the identification and location of youth time-consuming and inefficient for researchers.

**Cultural norms.** Parental influence can also pose a barrier to gaining access and consent for interviewing youth, particularly those who are still in school or living at home. In some regional contexts, parents may be hesitant or even discourage their children's participation in programs, driven by concerns that exposure to new ideas



could challenge traditional cultural or moral beliefs. Gaining trust and explicit permission from parents is a necessary step before any interviews with youth, especially minors, adding a layer of complexity to the recruitment process.

**Different priorities.** Youth are highly entrepreneurial, often engaging in small-scale ventures like motorcycle taxi operation (bodaboda), food vending, or tailoring, or many other types of informal work. They may view activities requiring time commitment without quick monetary return, like participating in an interview, as less valuable than pursuing their daily activities. This preference requires researchers to carefully consider the perceived value and timing of participation.

## Tips to effectively engage youth for research

Addressing these challenges in identifying and engaging youth for interviews requires strategic approaches that leverage local structures, build trust, and acknowledge the practical realities of young people's lives in Tanzania.

**Invest in local coordination.** It's essential to engage with local government officials, elders, and trusted youth leaders from the start. Working with community members allows researchers to understand the local calendar, seasonal work patterns (like farming seasons), and typical times when youth are most accessible, enabling the scheduling of interviews at times that minimize disruption to their economic activities or daily responsibilities.

**Make the most of household outreach.** Establishing direct communication channels and building trust at the household and community level is vital. Personal outreach, potentially involving local authorities or trusted community members, to visit youth households and inform families about the research purpose and benefits can help build credibility. This personal approach, coupled with clear communication about how the data will be used, helps alleviate parental concerns, fosters trust, and significantly increases the likelihood of gaining consent and encouraging youth participation.

**Organize interviews in accessible meeting points.** In rural communities, where sometimes people live dispersed around the countryside, it's important to organize interviews around easily reachable locations such as local government offices, schools (outside of class hours), or village health centers. This is key to facilitate attendance.

**Compensate participants for their time.** Providing appropriate incentives, such as transport allowances (e.g., bodaboda fare), can help offset the cost and time burden of participation, demonstrating respect for their time and effort without creating undue influence.

**Leverage youth's interests for research design.** Designing research that aligns with youth interests and activities is the first step to enhance participation. When research topics are relevant to young people's concerns and aspirations, youth are more likely to have the motivation to engage. Identifying and engaging youth through existing youth-centered groups or activities, including those focused on entrepreneurship or sustainable projects, can also provide established networks for recruitment.





# Addressing sensitive topics

## Best practices for respectful interviewing

Engaging youth on sensitive topics requires careful ethical consideration and practical planning to ensure their comfort, protect their wellbeing, and obtain reliable insights. Laterite Tanzania suggests the following best practices acquired through our work on gender roles, sexual reproductive health, gender-based violence, and intrahousehold conflict.

**Clear language.** Using clear language is important to ensuring that youth fully understand the interview process and questions. Avoiding jargon, overly formal terms, or complex phrasing helps youth to easily grasp what is being asked, and

allows them to make an informed decision on if they want to provide be part of the survey or not. This is why consent forms must clearly explain the study's purpose, any potential benefits or risks, and last but not least, should spell out the confidentiality and security of responses. Participants should also be explicitly told that they are free to skip any question or end the survey at any time if they feel uncomfortable.

**Right team, strong rapport.** Selecting the right survey team is essential for navigating sensitive discussions effectively. The enumerators must have strong interpersonal skills, including the ability to build rapport, demonstrate flexibility, and show empathy. Most importantly, they need a nuanced



## Approvals and permits: what is required?

In Tanzania, all research projects involving interviews and other means of data collection from human subjects require an ethics approval and a research permit. The exact type of the permits required will depend on the topic of the research. For social science projects, researchers are required to obtain:

- > **Ethics approval** from an accredited review board
- > **Research permit** from the Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH)
- > **District approvals** where the research will be conducted

understanding of the local cultural and social context. In many settings, matching the gender of the enumerator and the youth participant (female enumerator with female youth, male with male) can help create a safer environment and facilitate open communication. It is also important to acknowledge that individual preferences may vary and to be ready to accommodate the option that makes the most sense for the the interviewee.

**Location, location, location.** We find that the interview location impacts a youth's willingness to speak openly on sensitive matters. The setting must be quiet, private, and free from potential distractions or interruptions. The location must be isolated from the hearing of family members, peers, or other community members. A secure and comfortable environment allows youth to feel at ease, reducing the fear of being overheard or judged, and thereby fostering a more open and honest conversation about personal or sensitive topics.

## Regional variations

Tanzania is a culturally diverse country, and how youth will respond to questions about certain topics can vary significantly across the country due to norms, religious beliefs, and social practices shaped by geography and community structure. What might be openly discussed in one area could be considered taboo in another.

For example, coastal groups such as the Makonde, Ngindo, Mwera, and Makua often discuss gender topics openly. Young women receive education around puberty that includes guidance on marriage, family and reproductive health. This upbringing makes them generally more open when these topics arise in interviews.



In stark contrast, pastoral communities like the Maasai, Sukuma, and Mang'ati, see discussions around reproductive health, especially for young unmarried women, as highly sensitive and culturally discouraged or taboo. Addressing these topics requires extreme caution and respect for traditional norms. We do this by, for example, opting to use wording and questions approved by government surveys, instead of creating new ones.

## Personal income is always a sensitive topic

Despite regional differences, one topic consistently seen as deeply private and confidential and often avoided across the country is personal income. Many young people are reluctant to disclose details about their earnings. For this reason, asking direct questions about income is unlikely to yield useful answers. Instead, we strongly recommend estimating income through indirect methods, for example with survey questions from the well-established the Poverty Probability Index (PPI), or with modules designed to gauge asset ownership or purchasing power.



# The issue of confirmation bias

Confirmation bias poses a significant challenge in collecting genuine data from youth. This occurs when participants feel pressure, conscious or unconscious, to provide the responses they believe are expected to align with socially acceptable viewpoints, fulfill perceived survey goals, or to avoid expressing controversial opinions. This tendency can lead to inaccurate or skewed data, ultimately undermining the relevance and sustainability of the programs and policies based on that biased information. Here are a few strategies we have implemented to mitigate bias throughout the research process:

**Building trust and rapport.** Spending time with potential participants before formal data collection begins, and consciously setting aside preconceived expectations as researchers, helps create a more relaxed and open atmosphere. Actively involving local facilitators who deeply understand the community's cultural dynamics and social nuances can significantly support this process, making youth feel more at ease and fostering an environment where they are more likely to share their honest perspectives.

**Cross validation of findings.** Combining qualitative approaches such as focus group discussions and individual interviews with other methods provides a more holistic picture. Furthermore, intentionally including participants from diverse backgrounds (gender, age range within the youth definition, geographical location, ethnicity, education, etc.) helps ensure that findings are not skewed by the perspectives of a

Using a third-person scenario, hypothetical situations, or encouraging storytelling will allow youth to project ideas from a safer distance.

narrow subgroup. Creating safe spaces tailored to different comfort levels, and offering alternative response methods beyond verbal sharing (like written notes, drawing, or using pre-coded cards) further encourages participation and encourages shy or hesitant youth to provide more authentic input.

**Indirect line of questioning.** A way to alleviate fear of exposure or judgement is to deploy research tools and methods that protect participant identity. For example, rather than asking direct questions, using a third-person scenario, hypothetical situations, or encouraging storytelling will allow youth to project ideas from a safer distance. From our experience we can say that a direct question such as "How many children do you plan to have in your marriage?" is not as effective as asking, "In an ideal world, if a young person like you could make all their own decisions about family size, how many children might they choose to have?" The latter eases the pressure on the self and reduces the incentive to provide socially desirable or guarded answers.



## Why capturing true beliefs matters

Collecting data that reflects the beliefs and experiences of youth, free from bias, is not just a methodological ideal - it is also critical for achieving meaningful outcomes.

**Capturing genuine opinions improves program relevance.** Data that reflects young people's real needs, priorities, challenges, and aspirations allows program designers to move beyond their own assumptions. This is important to ensure that interventions are grounded in reality, and more likely to be effective, adopted, and sustainable within the communities they aim to serve.

**Unbiased data is crucial for informing evidence-based policy.** Policies built on inaccurate or biased information can miss the mark, fail to address root causes, or inadvertently create negative consequences.

Culturally grounded and evidence-based interventions, informed by youth's authentic perspectives, are essential in a globalized world to ensure policies are responsive, impactful, and equitable.

**Understanding true beliefs reflects and addresses the nuanced diversity of youth experiences.** By capturing honest perspectives across different subgroups (defined by gender, ethnicity, religion, economic status), researchers and implementers can avoid making broad generalizations that don't hold true for everyone. This understanding prevents program failure due to misunderstood needs or motivations and ensures that interventions are tailored to address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by different youth populations.



## Collecting data in Tanzanian schools

Surveying youth enrolled in schools can yield impactful insights, but also comes with the risk of disrupting teaching and learning. Data collection needs to be quick and efficient, without compromising on ethical considerations. From our experience in Tanzanian schools, we find that this can be achieved with careful planning and close collaboration with educational authorities.

**The permission process.** The first step is obtaining formal authorization from local government education officials. Following this initial clearance, the next step is to get an approval letter by the District Education Officer (DEO). Once the DEO is briefed and agrees to support, we request them to talk directly with Ward Education Officers and headteachers before the formal approval letter arrives. This ensures schools are aware of the upcoming visit and provides an opportunity to gather updated information crucial for data collection logistics, such as current headteacher contact details, school timetables, and the most practical transportation routes to the school. Skipping any part of this process chain is very likely to lead to delays. Teams should also be aware that headteachers may ask to observe interviews to ensure the appropriateness of the questions and process.

**Aligning research to school routine.** The typical school day runs from around 8:00 am to 3:00 pm, with tightly scheduled periods. Research teams must be mindful of this timetable. We recommend to:

- > Arrive early, ideally around 7:00 am, to allow for sufficient time to meet with the headteacher, finalize arrangements, and prepare before classes begin.



- > Nominate a Field Coordinator to liaise with the headteacher (or an assigned teacher) for on-the-ground logistics and student coordination.

**Best practices for interviewing.** Conducting interviews in parallel allows the team to speak with multiple students, each assigned to a different enumerator, speeding up data collection while minimizing disruption to the school schedule. It is also good practice to bring a team large enough to complete all surveys before the lunch break. This is especially important in schools where students have longer lunch breaks and/or practical lessons in the afternoon.

**Providing incentives.** While in general participants should be compensated for their time, some headteachers are hesitant to encourage student compensation. Their considerations often center on the potential for creating perceived inequity or bias among students who were not selected for participation, and a concern that incentives might foster an expectation that they should be paid for sharing information. Understanding and respecting the perspective of the headteacher in every school visited is essential.

# Overview of survey instruments

## Which survey instruments do we find useful when surveying youth?

Established national surveys are good places to start: they are widely recognized, their methodologies are tested, and their questions have often been refined over multiple iterations to be culturally appropriate within the Tanzanian context. Examples include the **Government of Tanzania's Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)** and the **Household Budget Surveys (HBS)**. Using questions or modules from these familiar sources can lend credibility to the research in the eyes of participants and local authorities. This approach also allows for potential comparison with data at national-level.

The **Gender Equitable Men's Scale** can be useful when exploring attitudes related to gender roles and norms among young men and women. While the original scale needs to be adapted to fit specific age ranges and cultural nuances, using a tool based on an established framework provides a structured and validated way to approach potentially sensitive discussions around gender equality, relationships, and power dynamics, helping to elicit more thoughtful and less biased responses than direct questioning might.

For sensitive health-related topics, such as sexual and reproductive health, we find the **menstrual and contraceptive knowledge questions directly adapted from the DHS** very useful. While sensitivity around these topics varies regionally, the DHS questions are designed to be asked at a national level and have undergone rigorous testing



for clarity and cultural appropriateness. Using this established phrasing can make youth feel more comfortable discussing these subjects, as the questions may feel less intrusive or awkward compared to newly formulated ones. Another advantage is that the topic itself is framed within a recognized public health context.

Finally, to address personal income (which is a highly-sensitive issue), we recommend deploying an indirect measure such as the **Poverty Probability Index (PPI)**. The main advantage is that the PPI, instead of asking for specific income figures, uses a set of simple, verifiable household characteristics (e.g. assets, dwelling materials, education levels) to estimate the likelihood of a household being below a poverty line. This allows researchers to understand the economic standing of the participant without asking intrusive questions about personal finances.





## About Laterite

Laterite is a firm rooted in Africa and specialized in research for social impact. Our approach is structured, data intensive and embedded in the local context.

Laterite was founded in Rwanda in 2010 and has since expanded to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Sierra Leone, with a support services office in the Netherlands. In 2024 Laterite took its first steps in Latin America and opened an office in Peru.

Our core sectors of expertise are agriculture, education, gender, livelihoods and public health. [www.laterite.com](http://www.laterite.com)

**Authors:** Neema Rwebembela and Ravina Pattni

**Editing and layout:** Sara Coelho

**Suggested citation:** Laterite, 2025. Surveying youth in Tanzania: challenges and solutions (Authors: Neema Rwebembela and Ravina Pattni)



# laterite

DATA | RESEARCH | ANALYTICS

**From data to policy**

Ethiopia | Kenya | Rwanda | Sierra Leone | Tanzania | Uganda | Peru | Netherlands

[www.laterite.com](http://www.laterite.com)