

Strategic Planning Practices for Non-Formal Education in Tanzania Since Independence

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution and effectiveness of strategic planning practices for non-formal education (NFE) in Tanzania from independence to the present. NFE has long served as a vital pathway for promoting literacy, skills development, and inclusive learning, particularly for marginalised populations. Despite its significance, the sector faces persistent challenges related to coordination, financing, and implementation. Using a qualitative historical-descriptive approach, the study draws on document analysis, key informant interviews, and field observations across national and local levels. It traces the development of strategic planning practices through four major phases: early post-independence mobilisation, structural adjustment and decentralisation, sectoral consolidation, and the contemporary era of digital integration and inclusive education. The findings reveal that while Tanzania has established comprehensive policy frameworks and strategic plans, their translation into effective local implementation remains uneven. Variations in institutional capacity, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement significantly influence outcomes across regions. Although recent strategies increasingly emphasise digital learning, inclusion, and lifelong education, practical constraints particularly funding limitations and weak monitoring systems continue to hinder progress. The study highlights a persistent gap between policy ambition and implementation reality, underscoring the need for stronger coordination mechanisms, sustainable financing, and enhanced local capacity. It concludes that strategic planning can significantly improve the effectiveness of NFE if it is supported by context-responsive approaches, robust monitoring systems, and meaningful stakeholder participation. Strengthening these elements is essential for ensuring that NFE contributes effectively to Tanzania's socio-economic development and lifelong learning agenda.

Keywords: Non-Formal education (NFE), Strategic Planning, Lifelong Learning, Inclusive Education

1. Introduction**1.1. Background to the Chapter**

Non-formal education (NFE) has been a cornerstone of Tanzania's socio-economic development strategy since independence [1]. Accordingly, it encompasses adult literacy, life skills training, second-chance basic education, vocational short courses, and community-based learning initiatives [2-4]. It serves as a flexible and inclusive pathway for learning, particularly for rural populations, out-of-school youth, women, and marginalised groups, especially in contexts where formal education cannot meet the needs of all citizens [5]. In fact, the NFE encompasses diverse programmes designed to meet specific community contexts, age groups, and learning objectives. Due to its distinct nature from formal education which follows a standardised curriculum and

structure, NFE becomes complex in systematically addressing the complex and evolving educational needs of Tanzania's diverse population. One of the advanced means to address the complex nature of NFE is strategic planning [6-8]. Strategic planning (SP) is critical to the success and sustainability of NFE initiatives by providing a structured framework for setting priorities, aligning resources, and ensuring effective and responsive programmes that address learner needs and national development goals [9].

It offers a deliberate process for aligning different initiatives with national education policies, socio-economic development priorities, and resource availability [10]. The SP enhances resource efficiency under significant budget constraints, improves NFE programme relevance and responsiveness, serves as a

mechanism for accountability and performance measurement, and it makes NFE reflect a broader commitment to inclusive and equitable education [1,5,9]. Generally, the rationale of SP for NFE is both practical and strategic as it (SP) capitalizes on efficiency, relevance, accountability, and reinforces equity. In this way, the NFE remains powerful in contributing meaningfully to Tanzania's long-term development goals and socio-economic development at large. In the Tanzanian context where education is intertwined with wider socio-economic reforms, SP facilitates to integrate NFE into all-encompassing policy frameworks. The SP helps set clear objectives, define performance indicators, and assign responsibilities, which, in turn, reduce duplication, enhance coordination among stakeholders, and enable a more efficient use of limited resources in NFE. In the current era, the SP has grown in importance due to shifting labour markets, digital transformation, and the need for lifelong learning. Effective SPs ensure NFE programmes remain relevant, adaptable, and measurable in their impact. It allows policymakers and implementers to forecast trends, anticipate resource needs, and continuously improve delivery models [11,12]. Generally, the SP acts as both the compass and the engine for NFE by administer its direction while driving its implementation in alignment with Tanzania's educational and development aspirations [10]. Since its independence in 1961, Tanzania has faced the challenge of addressing high illiteracy rates, limited access to schooling, and socio-economic disparities across regions [13].

The SP in NFE emerged as a thoughtful tool to deal with the given challenges by linking literacy and skills training to community development, employment, and civic participation [1]. The early initiatives of SP in NFE, such as the *Education for Self-Reliance* policy and the 1970 Adult Education Year, demonstrated the value of coordinated national campaigns that were grounded in clear goals, mobilisation strategies, and monitoring mechanisms. Tanzania has been strongly emphasizing NFE as a tool for fostering literacy, civic participation, and socio-economic transformation [4,14]. Early post-independence literacy campaigns achieved impressive outcomes, but the momentum has not been steady over time, with participation and literacy outcomes showing mixed progress. Over time, the Government has introduced a sequence of policy and planning frameworks, and more recently, strategies for digital and inclusive education, which indicate a renewed commitment to making NFE more accessible, relevant, and inclusive [10].

1.2. Justification of this Chapter

Since independence, Tanzania has taken some initiatives to develop NFE, however, some challenges remain notable [1,13]. The SP in NFE emerged as a thoughtful tool to deal with the given challenges Since independence, some SP practices in NFE have been demonstrated in the country. Despite these advances in SP practices, NFE implementation remains disjointed. Responsibilities are spread across several institutions, and challenges persist in funding, monitoring, and coordination across national, regional, and local levels [15,16]. Emerging priorities, including the integration of digital technologies, skills training, and inclusive

learning approaches, have currently shaped both opportunities and pressures to modernise SP in NFE processes [17,18]. Yet there is little clarity on whether existing SP practices are agile enough to respond to technological shifts, changing labour market demands, and diverse learner needs [10]. In this view, there is a lack of systematic evidence on how SP practices for NFE in Tanzania have evolved since the independence period to the present, and whether current practices are delivering the coherence, resourcing, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement necessary to keep NFE relevant, equitable, and sustainable [14,19,20]. Existing studies (e.g. Kavula) and policy reviews identify numerous areas that remain underexplored [1,13]. While historical accounts address the scale and ambition of early literacy campaigns, little is unknown how SP practices for NFE have changed across different socio-economic and political eras. Furthermore, the translation of national policies, programmes, strategies and other frameworks into actionable plans at regional and district levels has not been studied in depth. The empirical evidence reveals uneven implementation with rare systematic investigations into sub-national planning processes, coordination mechanisms, and local adaptations [15].

Additionally, there is a limited understanding of how NFE is financed, monitored, and evaluated through SP practices. While policies mention resource mobilisation and results-based monitoring, data on the adequacy of funding, budgeting practices, and NFE-specific monitoring systems are scarce [11,19]. Besides, there is little knowledge on how frequently stated integration of NFE with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), digital learning, and inclusive education strategies are linked and reflected in SP practices [16,21]. One of the practices of SP is stakeholder engagement, which has been under-examined in Tanzania since independence. Although effective SP depends on the participation of learners, communities, civil society, and the private sector, few studies have documented the nature and depth of this involvement in Tanzania's NFE context [5,15]. Conclusively, there is a lack of empirical evidence linking specific SP practices to measurable NFE outcomes, which poses a challenge to establishing openly best practices that deliver lasting impact for the socio-economic development of the country. Following the above-mentioned research problems and gaps, this chapter maps SP practices for NFE in Tanzania since independence by considering the following specific objectives:

- To document the historical evolution of SP practices for NFE in Tanzania from independence to the present
- To identify key SP frameworks that have guided NFE in Tanzania from independence to the present
- To analyse how SP frameworks for NFE have been translated into sub-national and community-level implementation practices in Tanzania from independence to the present
- To examine the role of stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms in shaping NFE strategic planning outcomes in Tanzania from independence to the present
- To assess the extent to which contemporary SP practices address emerging priorities in Tanzania

- To draw the cross-cutting synthesis and implications of SP practices for NFE in Tanzania from independence to the present

2. Theoretical Underpinnings of the Chapter

The achievement of this chapter's objectives is guided by some essential theories, which together facilitate the reader's understanding of how SP practices for NFE in Tanzania have developed and functioned since independence. These theories are Results-Based Management (RBM), Institutional Theory, Multi-Level Governance Theory, Integration Theory, and Theory of Change.

- **The RBM:** Focuses on setting clear goals, tracking progress with measurable indicators, and using what is learned to improve programmes [11,19]. It is popularized by Kusek and Rist and originally influenced by management thinker Peter Drucker [22]. It relates to this study because it helps evaluate how well Tanzania's NFE plans turn big-picture ideas into real results on the ground.
- **Institutional Theory:** Sheds light on how both formal rules and unwritten social norms shape organizations' behavior and decision-making. Originating from scholars like Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell, and based on Weber's classic work on bureaucracy, this theory helps to explain how political and social changes, such as decentralization and the involvement of donors, have shaped the ways NFE strategic plans have been created and sometimes fragmented over time [23-25]. Because Tanzania operates under decentralized governance, Multi-Level Governance Theory is key to understanding how responsibility for planning and decision-making is distributed across national, regional, district, and local levels [26]. This theory highlights how complex it is to coordinate plans that must work smoothly across all these layers and with many different stakeholders. To understand how various policy areas like NFE, vocational training, digital learning, and social welfare work together (or don't).
- **Integration Theory:** Offers a useful perspective. Drawing on the work of Haas, Vedung, Weick, and March and Olsen, this theory stresses the need for systems that can talk to each other, shared funding approaches, and governance that cuts across sectors, moving beyond isolated planning toward better collaboration [27-30].
- **Theory of Change:** Developed by Weiss, guides this study in critically examining whether the strategies for NFE make logical sense by connecting day-to-day activities with the long-term goals of improving learning and livelihoods [31]. Generally, these theories provide a solid foundation for mapping how SP in Tanzania's NFE sector has evolved, how it works in practice and how it might be improved, covering policy development, financing and monitoring and how all these pieces fit together.

3. Methodology

This chapter used a qualitative historical-descriptive approach by combining an in-depth review of documents with interviews

and field observations. This design was selected in order to trace how SP for NFE in Tanzania has changed over time, understand the frameworks that have guided it, and explore how those plans have been implemented from the national level down to communities. The approach also allowed for comparing multiple sources in order to ensure the findings are accurate and well-rounded. This study was conducted on the Tanzanian mainland by collecting insights from both the national policy-making arena and local implementation-level institutions. These are the MoEST and the President's Office-Regional Administration and Local Government, as they are responsible for formulating and implementing education plans. Other surveyed institutions include community settings such as Community Learning Centres (CLCs), literacy groups, and non-formal vocational training initiatives. The regions selected for the study represent different realities. These regions are Dar es Salaam, representing an urban area with many NFE providers and policy actors, Morogoro, representing a semi-urban/rural mix with a strong history of literacy campaigns, and Dodoma, centrally located and hosting key government offices and active decentralised planning processes.

The study participants were in three groups: policy makers and planners (current and retired government officials and representatives from development partners), education officers (who manage and oversee NFE implementation), and community actors (facilitators, CLC managers, and local leaders who directly work with learners). This study used a hybrid sampling technique, including purposive, stratified and snowball sampling. The purposive sampling technique was used to select three contrasting regions (urban, semi-urban/rural, and a central government hub). The stratified sampling technique was used to identify earlier-state participants across different administrative levels. Finally, the snowball technique was used to ask interviewees to recommend others with valuable historical or implementation knowledge. The data were collected using two methods: document review and key informant interviews. The document review examined a wide range of national and local documents, helping trace the history of NFE and its planning frameworks. These frameworks include National Education Policies (1967, 1995, 2014, and updates), Education Sector Development Plans, National Literacy Strategies from the 1970s onward, LGA planning guidelines, Donor and NGO strategic plans, programme evaluations and relevant academic studies. Each document was examined for the period it covered, its thematic focus, and how it addressed or influenced NFE. The key informant interviews were conducted with 52 informants. These are 12 at the national level (policy-makers, donor programme leads, former directors of adult education), 20 at the sub-national level (regional and district education officers, NFE coordinators), and 18 at the community level (facilitators, CLC managers, community leaders). The interview guides were administered to each group to elicit insights on historical changes, key frameworks, implementation processes, stakeholder involvement, resource allocation, and responsiveness to emerging issues related to NFE in Tanzania since independence. The data analysis was done using the thematic analysis method. This method involved three steps: grouping the historical period, thematic coding and triangulation.

The historical period organised the information into four eras. These eras are post-independence (1960s–70s), transition (1980s–90s), consolidation (2000s–2010s), and contemporary (2015–present). Regarding thematic coding, the obtained data were coded using both the research objectives and any new themes that emerged from the field. The triangulation was performed by comparing findings from documents and key informant interviews in order to confirm patterns and identify inconsistencies. The given inconsistencies were clarified through follow-up contacts or further document review. Some considerations were taken to ensure quality and accuracy, to maintain the research's trustworthiness. These considerations include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was established by comparing findings across sources and checking interpretations with some participants. The dependability was ensured by keeping detailed records of sources, coding methods, and decisions made during analysis. Confirmability was facilitated by using direct quotes and extracts from policy documents to support the interpretations. The transferability was done by giving rich descriptions of contexts and conditions, making it possible for others to judge how the findings might apply elsewhere.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Historical Evolution of SP Practices for NFE

4.1.1. Early Post-Independence Period (1960s–1970s)

When Tanzania gained independence in 1961, the country was faced with an acute shortage of skilled personnel. Historical records show that at the time, there were only two Tanzanian lawyers, sixteen doctors, and a very limited number of trained teachers to serve a population of more than ten million [32]. The new government quickly recognised that ignorance, disease, and poverty were the most pressing development challenges. To address these, it launched wide-ranging literacy and adult education campaigns, which soon became central to the nation's development vision. Because most Tanzanians lived in rural areas, the campaigns were designed to reach these communities directly. They went beyond basic reading and numeracy, also teaching practical skills in areas such as hygiene, nutrition, and agriculture, which were viewed as essential for improving everyday life and rural productivity [33]. A major turning point came in 1967 with the Arusha Declaration, through which President Julius Nyerere articulated the Ujamaa ideology of African socialism and self-reliance [34]. Education was placed at the heart of this agenda through the policy of Education for Self-Reliance (ESR). This approach redefined schooling not just as preparation for white-collar jobs, but as a collective process of building a cooperative, self-sustaining society [35]. ESR linked classroom learning with rural life and social responsibilities, ensuring that education served the broader purpose of nation-building. The results were striking. Literacy, which had been as low as 20 percent in the mid-1960s, rose to almost 90 percent by the early 1980s. Similarly, primary school enrollment increased significantly as the government expanded access to education in rural communities [36].

These achievements, however, were shaped by a strongly top-down

approach. Non-formal education (NFE) initiatives were centrally planned and coordinated by the government and the ruling party, TANU, rather than being community-driven [35]. Campaigns were closely tied to broader nation-building efforts, relying on party cadres, radio broadcasts, and large-scale mobilization exercises to involve citizens in learning activities [37]. The establishment of Ujamaa villages illustrates how education was woven into daily life. Early experiments, such as the Litowa village, combined literacy classes with communal farming, craft-making, and civic participation, aiming to produce both educated and politically conscious citizens [34,38]. At the same time, secondary education remained restricted and elite-focused, as the state promoted primary education as both a practical endpoint and a tool for mass civic training [36]. In this period, therefore, non-formal education was never just about literacy. It was equally about shaping national identity, mobilising communities for development, and embedding the values of Ujamaa into everyday life [33].

4.1.2. 1980s–1990s Transition: Structural Adjustment, Decentralization and the Emergence of Plural NFE Providers

By the 1980s, Tanzania was grappling with serious economic challenges, and this ushered in a new era of reforms. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the government adopted structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which shifted the country away from the Ujamaa model of centralized socialism toward a market-oriented economy. These reforms also emphasized decentralization, reducing the state's direct control over education and other social services [37,39,40]. As the state withdrew, new actors quickly moved into the education sector. Civil society organizations, faith-based groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) became increasingly visible in running schools and community programmes [41,42]. For example, the number of NGO-supported schools grew rapidly from just 85 in 1984 to 258 by 1992 highlighting the extent to which non-state providers began filling the gaps left by government. This expansion reflected a broader trend in Tanzanian society: while there were only about 224 registered NGOs in 1993, by 2000 the figure had surged to almost 8,500. This diversification meant that non-formal education (NFE) was no longer a government monopoly. Instead, it became a pluralistic space where NGOs, faith-based organizations, and donor-backed projects played leading roles in providing literacy, skills training, and other community-based education programmes [43].

Strategic planning for education also changed during this period. Instead of large, uniform national campaigns, education initiatives became more project-oriented, designed around short- and medium-term donor funding cycles [40,44]. The introduction of cost-sharing policies meant that parents and local communities were now expected to contribute to building classrooms, paying fees, and maintaining schools breaking with the earlier Ujamaa principle of free universal education [45]. This reliance on external support also reshaped the country's education priorities. Donors played a significant role in determining the scope and direction of programmes, effectively tying Tanzania's educational strategies to

international development agendas [39]. In short, the 1980s–1990s marked a turning point: NFE moved from a state-led system to one in which NGOs, churches, and donors became central actors, and in which education planning increasingly reflected projectised, donor-driven models rather than purely national priorities.

4.1.3. 2000s–2010s Consolidation: Lifelong Learning, Skills Training & TVET Linkages

By the early 2000s, Tanzania began formally recognizing non-formal education (NFE) as an essential part of lifelong learning, placing greater emphasis on literacy, practical skills, and pathways into formal technical and vocational education [46]. The 2003 IMF country report highlighted the need to expand opportunities beyond traditional schooling, setting ambitious targets such as reducing adult illiteracy from 31 percent in 2009 to 16 percent by 2015, while strengthening the connection between NFE and the formal TVET system [47]. In 2004, the government launched a dedicated Adult and Non-Formal Education Strategy, designed to improve access for adults and out-of-school youth, enhance curriculum relevance, and promote infrastructure development, with strong encouragement for public–private partnerships [48]. At the same time, major sectoral programmes like the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) and the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) began integrating NFE into a broader continuum of lifelong learning [49]. Although these initiatives initially focused on primary education, they gradually acknowledged the importance of complementary basic education programmes such as COBET and ICBAE, creating pathways for adult learners and out-of-school youth. The programmes also aimed to link NFE with vocational training, reflecting a growing awareness that adult education needed to equip learners with skills relevant to the labor market. Despite these well-formulated policies, implementation remained a challenge. Delays, administrative weaknesses, and insufficient capacity often hindered program effectiveness. Budgetary constraints further limited progress: for example, early phases of PEDP were underfunded by roughly 28 percent relative to planned targets, restricting the expansion of NFE and complementary basic education. In summary, the 2000s and 2010s marked a consolidation phase in Tanzania’s NFE landscape. While strategic documents clearly outlined the vision of integrating NFE into lifelong learning and linking it with TVET, persistent gaps in funding, capacity, and execution continued to challenge the realization of these goals [46].

4.1.4. Recent Decade (2015–Present): Digital Integration, Community Learning, and Inclusive Access

There has been a trend toward integrating digital tools and community learning centres, and toward an emphasis on inclusive access (for women, rural populations, and people with disabilities). Contemporary SP documents show more explicit monitoring targets and multi-stakeholder language, though practical resourcing remains constrained. Since 2015, Tanzania has made notable strides in integrating digital tools into education. The Draft National Digital Education Strategy (2024–2030) envisions a system in which ICT supports teaching, learning, and administration at all levels, aiming to enhance both quality

and accessibility [21]. Alongside digital innovations, Community Learning Centres (CLCs) have become central to expanding education for out-of-school youth and adults. These centres offer literacy, vocational training, and life skills programmes, carefully tailored to meet the needs of local communities [20]. A strong focus on inclusive access has also characterized this decade, emphasizing the educational needs of women, rural populations, and people with disabilities. The National Strategy for Inclusive Education sets out clear goals and strategies to remove barriers, ensuring broader participation in learning opportunities [50].

Strategic planning in this period reflects a more structured and accountable approach. The Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2025/26–2029/30 articulates explicit monitoring targets and stresses multi-stakeholder collaboration, highlighting the importance of shared responsibility among government, communities, and development partners [10]. Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Persistent resource constraints, including limited budgets, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient teacher training, continue to hamper the full implementation of digital and inclusive education initiatives. Generally, the recent decade represents a phase of consolidation and innovation for Tanzania’s NFE sector, where technology, community engagement, and inclusive approaches are increasingly central, even as practical limitations slow the realization of these ambitious goals [21,50]. In the general discussion of the historical evolution of SP practices for NFE, the historical arc reflects a shift from ideologically driven mass mobilisation to pluralized, policy-oriented planning shaped by decentralization and donor agendas. Patterns seen in Tanzania mirror broader East African trajectories: early national campaigns, later project-based diversity, and recent attempts to institutionalize NFE within lifelong learning architectures. The persistence of implementation gaps, particularly financing and local capacity, suggests that formal adoption of strategies has not always translated into durable, scaled practice.

5. Key SP Frameworks Guided NFE

5.1. National Education Policies and Sector Plans

NFE features explicitly or implicitly within core education policy documents and sector plans that set medium-term targets and priority areas. Since gaining independence, Tanzania has steadily integrated non-formal education (NFE) into its broader education framework, reflecting a long-term commitment to inclusive and lifelong learning [51]. The Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 1995 laid the foundation for improving access, quality, and equity in education, explicitly recognizing non-formal and vocational pathways as crucial for achieving national development objectives. Building on this, the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) 1997–2007 sought to reform the education sector, emphasizing NFE as a tool to reach marginalized populations and enhance equitable learning opportunities [52]. During the early 2000s, the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP 2002–2009) expanded access to primary schooling while acknowledging NFE as a key avenue for educating out-of-school children and adults [53]. Similarly, the Secondary Education Development Plan (SEDP) 2004–2009 promoted alternative pathways to secondary

education, integrating non-formal programmes to accommodate diverse learner needs [54]. The Technical Education and Training Policy of 1996 further emphasized skills development for youth and adults, highlighting the role of non-formal settings in enhancing employability and supporting economic participation [55].

National development strategies, such as the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP/MKUKUTA) 2005, reinforced the role of education in poverty reduction and included provisions to expand non-formal education opportunities, particularly for women, rural populations, and other marginalized groups [56]. In 2017, the National Strategy for Inclusive Education specifically addressed equitable access for children with disabilities and other underserved populations, ensuring that inclusive education principles extend across both formal and non-formal systems [57]. In recent years, the National Digital Education Strategy (2024–2030) has introduced ICT integration to enhance learning outcomes and expand non-formal education opportunities, thereby bridging the digital divide and promoting inclusive access [21]. Finally, the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2025/26–2029/30 outlines a comprehensive roadmap for education development, focusing on improving quality, expanding access to NFE, and targeting marginalized groups through measurable strategies and clear monitoring mechanisms [10]. Jointly, Tanzania's national education policies and sector plans reflect a continuous evolution, gradually institutionalizing NFE within the education system. While challenges such as resource limitations and implementation gaps remain, these frameworks underscore a strategic and enduring commitment to lifelong learning and inclusive education for all [51].

5.1.1. Literacy and Adult Education Strategies

Government and partner literacy strategies provided the most direct SP instruments for NFE programming, often with quantified targets and timelines. From independence to the present, Tanzania has consistently used literacy and adult education strategies as some of the most direct tools for advancing non-formal education (NFE). Over time, these strategies have been reshaped to respond to changing political priorities, economic realities, and international agendas. In the early years after independence, literacy was seen as a foundation for national development. The National Literacy Campaign of 1971–1981 and the Adult Education Act of 1975 mobilised communities across the country to fight illiteracy. These initiatives were closely tied to the Ujamaa philosophy, which viewed literacy not only as a skill but also as a means of empowering citizens to participate in building the new nation [58,59]. By the 1980s and 1990s, literacy programmes became linked with global movements such as Education for All (EFA). At this time, adult education strategies emphasised “functional literacy,” meaning people were expected to gain practical skills that could be applied in farming, health, and income-generating activities. The government worked alongside NGOs, faith-based organisations, and international partners to extend literacy opportunities, especially in rural communities [60,61].

In the 2000s, adult literacy was no longer treated as a stand-alone

campaign but was instead integrated into wider education and development frameworks. For example, the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP 2001–2015) and the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (MKUKUTA I & II) explicitly recognised literacy as central to reducing poverty and improving livelihoods [62,63]. More recently, Tanzania has developed a more structured and targeted approach through the National Adult Literacy and Mass Education Rolling Strategy (NALMERS) 2020/21–2024/25. This strategy introduced clear goals, financing mechanisms, and stronger monitoring systems to ensure literacy efforts deliver measurable results [64]. At the same time, innovative programmes such as MEMKWA (Complementary Basic Education), IPOSA (Integrated Post-Literacy and Skills Training), and the Alternative Education Pathway (AEP) have broadened the scope of adult education. These initiatives link literacy with vocational training, digital skills, and lifelong learning, making adult education more relevant to today's learners' needs [65]. Generally, Tanzania's literacy strategies from the mass campaigns of the 1970s to the digitally inclusive programmes of today show a strong and continuous commitment to adult learning. However, challenges in funding, implementation, and sustainability persist, leaving the gap between policy ambition and practical outcomes evident.

5.1.2. Decentralization & Local Government Planning Frameworks

Local Government Authorities (LGAs) received planning mandates that include community learning programmes, however, alignment between national SP frameworks and LGA planning units varies widely. Since the late 1990s, Tanzania has pursued a decentralization-by-devolution (D-by-D) approach, giving Local Government Authorities (LGAs) greater responsibility for local service delivery and development planning, including education and community learning initiatives [66,67]. To support this shift, the President's Office–Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) introduced the Opportunities and Obstacles to Development (O&OD) methodology, designed to capture community voices and translate them into village, ward, and council plans. This framework has enabled activities such as adult literacy classes, community learning centres, and skills development programmes to be included in local budgets [68,69,70]. Within the education sector, successive Education Sector Development Plans (ESDPs) have reinforced this mandate, formalizing the role of LGAs in delivering non-formal education (NFE) and linking local planning to national goals and monitoring systems [10,20].

Despite this formal alignment, implementation on the ground has varied. Some LGAs have demonstrated strong integration of national strategic-planning (SP) priorities, while others have struggled due to limited resources, capacity constraints, and, at times, unclear mandates [67,71]. Evidence from the implementation of the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) and later ESDPs suggests that LGAs played an important role in mobilizing communities and expanding access. However, their ability to fully respond to NFE needs often

depended on financial transfers from the central government and adherence to strict spending guidelines, which reduced flexibility [72,73]. Similarly, reviews of the O&OD approach highlight that while many councils embraced participatory planning tools, challenges persisted in translating community priorities into funded projects and in sustaining trained facilitators to manage the process [68,69]. Generally, decentralization has opened up space for LGAs to plan and implement community-based learning and adult literacy programmes. Yet the degree of alignment between local and national strategies remains uneven. In areas with stronger financial resources, skilled staff, and clear guidance, local planning frameworks closely mirror national objectives. By contrast, in weaker contexts, NFE is often delivered as fragmented projects rather than as part of a coherent, long-term strategy [66].

5.1.3. Donor/NGO Strategic Frameworks

Donor-funded initiatives introduced results-based frameworks, M&E templates, and competency standards that influenced national and sub-national planning practices. Over the past two decades, donor-funded programmes in Tanzania have played a pivotal role in promoting results-based approaches in education, introducing logframes, time-bound targets, and verification protocols that shaped how outcomes are defined and tracked in both formal and non-formal education (NFE) [74,75]. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has been particularly influential. By linking grants to sector results frameworks and joint annual reviews, GPE helped diffuse standardized monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools and outcome-oriented planning practices across national and subnational institutions [15,19]. Its support explicitly required results chains, disbursement-linked indicators, and routine performance reporting, which aligned Ministry and LGA planning with measurable outputs and outcomes [71,76]. Similarly, the World Bank reinforced results-based planning through Program-for-Results initiatives and results-based financing mechanisms. These approaches codified targets, required independent verification, and introduced payment-for-results modalities that further shaped planning and accountability. In the skills and TVET sector, donor and multilateral programmes accelerated the adoption of competency-based standards. Notably, VETA's competency-based assessment and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) frameworks linked skills assessments to national qualifications, ensuring relevance and standardization [77,78].

Complementary initiatives from the ILO and bilateral partners promoted modular certification, micro-credentials, and formal recognition pathways, embedding competency language across curricula and assessment tools [77,78]. Bilateral programmes, such as Switzerland's Skills for Employment (SET), strengthened vocational systems by focusing on M&E, labor-market-aligned competencies, and learning feedback loops, reinforcing evidence-based planning across institutions [79]. In adult and non-formal education, DVV International contributed by supporting baseline needs assessments, practitioner competence frameworks, and improved M&E practices, standardizing planning tools for literacy and community learning programmes that ministries and LGAs could adopt [80,81]. Likewise, UNICEF programmes, including

budget and delivery studies and data-use pilots, encouraged evidence-driven planning routines and common reporting formats, which were integrated into national and council education plans [82]. Collectively, these donor and NGO frameworks have mainstreamed results-based planning, M&E tools, and competency standards throughout Tanzania's education sector. Their influence is evident across national Education Sector Development Plans (ESDPs), TVET standards, and LGA-level literacy and skills initiatives, leaving a lasting imprint on both policy and practice [71,74]. In general discussion of the key SP frameworks guided NFE, multiple overlapping frameworks, national policy, sector plans, LGA plans, and donor strategies create both opportunity and complexity. Where alignment exists (e.g., shared literacy targets), coordination yields better resource leverage, where frameworks conflict or lack specificity for local contexts, the result is fragmentation. This underscores the need for harmonized SP instruments that specify roles across levels and incorporate flexible implementation modalities for community contexts.

6. Translation of SP Frameworks into Sub-National and Community-Level Implementation

6.1. Variable Translation across Regions

Regions and districts with stronger institutional capacity and active civil society partners more fully translated national SP goals into functioning community programmes (literacy circles, vocational short courses, community learning centres). In contrast, weaker LGAs showed limited uptake. The effectiveness of translating national SP goals into concrete NFE programmes has varied widely across Tanzania's regions and districts. Since independence, areas with strong institutional capacity, motivated local leadership, and active civil society involvement have generally succeeded in implementing community-based initiatives, while weaker local government authorities (LGAs) have struggled to move beyond policy intentions [67,70,82]. In the early post-independence era (1960s–1970s), regions with active local party structures and engaged regional officials were able to implement literacy campaigns, such as the National Literacy Campaign (1971–1981), resulting in widespread participation in literacy circles and civic education initiatives [58,83]. During the 1980s–1990s, structural adjustment and decentralization reforms increased the role of NGOs and faith-based organizations in NFE.

Regions that successfully partnered with these organizations, such as Coast, Kilimanjaro, and Morogoro, were able to roll out functional literacy programmes, vocational short courses, and community learning centers, closely aligning with national SP goals [60,61]. In the 2000s–2010s, donor-supported programmes under the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) and Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) helped regions with higher institutional capacity, including Arusha and Dar es Salaam, integrate literacy, skills training, and post-literacy follow-ups into local planning frameworks. Participatory planning tools, such as the O&OD methodology, were widely used to operationalize national targets at the ward and village levels [20,69,70]. More recently, from 2015 to the present, regions that embraced digital literacy tools, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and community

learning centers have been most successful in translating national SP goals into actionable programmes. Examples include Dodoma, Mwanza, and Mbeya, where ICT initiatives, mobile literacy programmes, and modular vocational courses have improved access for women, rural populations, and persons with disabilities [81,82]. In contrast, weaker LGAs, particularly in remote or under-resourced areas, often face limited human capacity, scarce funding, and minimal civil society engagement. As a result, NFE programmes in these areas frequently remain sporadic or isolated rather than integrated into coherent local strategies [67,71]. Generally, these patterns demonstrate that while national SP frameworks provide critical guidance and targets, the success of NFE delivery depends heavily on local capacity, leadership, and partnerships with civil society and development actors. Regions that combine institutional strength with supportive networks are better able to turn strategic objectives into functional, community-level programmes that reach the most learners [70].

6.1.2. Role of Community Structures

Village councils, women's groups, and religious bodies played key roles in mobilising learners and co-managing programmes, these actors often adapted formal plans to local priorities (seasonal timing, language of instruction). Community structures have been essential in bringing non-formal education (NFE) programmes to life across Tanzania. Village councils, women's groups, religious organizations, and local associations have consistently helped recruit learners, organize venues, and co-manage activities, effectively bridging the gap between national or LGA plans and local realities [67,70,80]. Since independence, these actors have adapted formal plans to local contexts, taking into account seasonal agricultural cycles, the language of instruction, and the specific needs of communities [81,83]. In the 1960s–1970s, for example, village councils and women's groups played a central role in the National Literacy Campaign (1971–1981) by organizing literacy circles and civic education sessions that reached remote households. Religious bodies such as churches and mosques also facilitated evening or weekend classes, making programmes accessible to adults who were busy during the day [58,60]. During the 1980s–1990s, as NGOs and donor-supported projects became more prominent, community structures remained pivotal. Faith-based organizations in the Kilimanjaro and Morogoro regions helped deliver vocational short courses and adult literacy classes, while women's groups organized peer-learning circles and follow-up sessions. These actors ensured continuity and participation even in areas with limited LGA support [61]. In the 2000s–2010s, community structures were key partners in implementing programmes under the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) and donor initiatives like the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP). Village councils and local committees coordinated enrollment, monitored attendance, and organized venues in ways that reflected local calendars and priorities [20,69,70]. From 2015 to the present, these structures have continued to influence programme delivery, particularly by integrating digital literacy, modular vocational courses, and inclusive education initiatives. In regions such as Dodoma, Mwanza, and Mbeya, women's groups, youth associations, and religious bodies have helped adapt

national curricula to local contexts, encourage participation among marginalized populations, and co-manage community learning centers [82]. Generally, community involvement has made NFE programmes more culturally relevant, accessible, and sustainable, demonstrating that local ownership and participatory governance are critical for translating national strategies into effective, community-centered education programmes [70,80].

6.1.3. Capacity Constraints

Non-formal education (NFE) programmes in Tanzania have long faced significant capacity challenges that limit the effective implementation of strategic plans. A persistent issue has been the shortage of trained facilitators, which affects both the quality and consistency of instruction across regions [67,70]. In addition, many programmes struggle with insufficient instructional materials, such as textbooks, learning aids, and teaching tools, which hampers learner engagement and the smooth delivery of curricula [84,85]. Financial constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Many NFE initiatives rely heavily on short-term project funding, often tied to donor cycles, making it difficult to sustain activities beyond the life of a project [69,80]. The combined effects of limited human resources, inadequate materials, and unstable funding have hindered the faithful implementation of strategic plans, resulting in intermittent program delivery and uneven coverage across regions [71,83]. Efforts to mitigate these constraints have included facilitator training programmes, community-driven resource mobilization, and donor-supported provision of learning materials. However, these measures alone have not fully overcome structural limitations. Achieving sustainable, high-quality NFE programming requires long-term investment in capacity building, institutional support, and stable financing, ensuring that strategic objectives are consistently met and that programmes reach underserved populations [70].

6.1.4. Innovations and Good Practices

In some locales, integrating NFE with livelihood support (agricultural extension, micro-enterprise training) and digital learning pilots improved relevance and learner retention, suggesting promising pathways for scaling. Since Tanzania's independence, a range of innovative approaches has helped make non-formal education (NFE) more relevant, accessible, and engaging for learners [70,81]. In the 1960s and 1970s, literacy campaigns were often combined with civic and agricultural education, enabling learners not only to develop reading and writing skills but also to gain practical knowledge for farming and community participation [83,84]. This early integration highlighted the potential for linking education directly to livelihood outcomes. During the 1980s and 1990s, as NGOs and donor-supported initiatives grew, programmes increasingly offered vocational and micro-enterprise training alongside literacy instruction [85]. In areas such as Kilimanjaro, Morogoro, and Coast regions, learners were trained in sewing, carpentry, and small business management, allowing them to immediately apply skills to income-generating activities [60]. In the 2000s and 2010s, community learning centers under programmes such as the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) and the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP)

further integrated literacy education with agricultural extension and entrepreneurship training, particularly in Arusha, Dodoma, and Mwanza [20]. These integrated programmes increased both practical relevance and learner motivation [69]. From 2015 to the present, digital innovations have expanded learning opportunities even further [82]. Pilot projects in Mbeya, Dodoma, and Mwanza have used mobile learning platforms, e-learning modules, and community digital centers, making literacy, vocational, and life skills education more accessible for rural populations, women, and persons with disabilities [80]. These examples show that linking NFE to practical livelihood skills and using digital technologies can boost learner engagement, improve retention, and create scalable models for expanding education access [70]. They also highlight the importance of tailoring programmes to local economic, social, and technological contexts, ensuring that NFE initiatives remain both relevant and sustainable across Tanzania [81]. In the general discussion of translating SP frameworks into sub-national and community-level implementation of NFE, translation from national strategy to community practice is mediated by LGA capacity, local leadership, and the availability of partners/resources. Strategic plans that are overly generic or that assume uniform local capacity fail to produce consistent outcomes. Conversely, plans that allow local adaptation and explicitly invest in facilitator training and material flows show stronger implementation fidelity. This points to the importance of nested planning, national goals translated into district implementation plans with explicit resource and capacity transfer mechanisms.

7. Role of Stakeholder Engagement, Resource Allocation, and Monitoring Mechanisms

7.1. Stakeholder Engagement

Meaningful stakeholder engagement improves plan relevance and uptake. Where stakeholder consultations were real (not perfunctory), NFE plans reflected local labour market needs and social priorities. However, stakeholder engagement mechanisms were unevenly institutionalised. Since Tanzania gained independence, actively involving stakeholders has been vital for making non-formal education (NFE) programmes relevant, practical, and sustainable [67,70]. In the 1960s and 1970s, early literacy campaigns benefited from the participation of village councils, women's groups, and local civic leaders, who helped shape learning schedules and content to fit agricultural cycles, cultural norms, and local priorities [83]. This participatory approach demonstrated the value of aligning education with community needs and livelihoods. During the 1980s and 1990s, as NGOs and donor-supported programs expanded, faith-based organizations, cooperative societies, and private-sector actors were consulted to ensure that adult education and vocational programmes addressed emerging labour-market and livelihood demands [60,85].

For instance, in Kilimanjaro and Morogoro regions, stakeholders guided the integration of literacy with micro-enterprise and skills training, increasing the programs' practicality and relevance [60,85]. In the 2000s and 2010s, formal consultation mechanisms were embedded in Local Government Authority (LGA) planning frameworks through initiatives such as the Education Sector

Development Programme (ESDP) and the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) [20,69]. LGAs regularly engaged community committees, NGOs, teachers' associations, and private sector representatives to ensure that local plans aligned with both national priorities and local economic realities. From 2015 to the present, stakeholder engagement has expanded further, incorporating digital platforms, online consultations, and multi-stakeholder workshops, which allow broader participation from rural communities, women's groups, and persons with disabilities [80,82]. In Dodoma, Mwanza, and Mbeya, these processes have helped ensure that NFE strategies are more responsive to local labour markets, social needs, and inclusive education objectives. Despite these advances, engagement mechanisms are still unevenly institutionalized, with some districts having well-structured consultation systems, while others rely on ad hoc or superficial meetings [71,83]. Strengthening consistent and formalized stakeholder participation across all levels remains essential for translating national NFE strategies into locally relevant, effectively implemented programs [70,81].

7.1.1. Resource Allocation

Public budgeting for NFE remains modest compared with formal schooling and TVET, leading many NFE programmes to rely on donor funds and short-term grants. Where LGAs allocated local funds or mobilised cost-sharing, programmes showed better continuity. Since independence, funding for non-formal education (NFE) in Tanzania has generally been limited compared with formal schooling and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) [70,83]. Public budgets for NFE programs have often been modest, leading to a strong reliance on donor support, NGO contributions, and short-term project grants to sustain literacy, vocational, and community learning initiatives [60,85]. Nevertheless, some Local Government Authorities (LGAs) have been able to allocate local resources or mobilize cost-sharing arrangements with communities and partners, which have helped improve the continuity and stability of NFE programmes [20,69]. For example, in regions such as Arusha, Dodoma, and Mwanza, programmes that combined national policy frameworks with locally mobilized funds were better able to maintain learning cycles and withstand fluctuations in external funding [80,82]. The ongoing underfunding of NFE highlights the need for sustainable financing strategies that integrate these programmes into core public education budgets while continuing to leverage donor and community support. Strengthening financial planning at both national and local levels is essential to ensure that NFE initiatives are not only well-designed but also feasible and enduring over time [71].

7.1.2. Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)

Many strategic plans include M&E frameworks in principle, but in practice, data systems for tracking NFE participation, learning outcomes, and employment linkages are weak. Where donor-sponsored M&E systems were introduced, data quality improved, but was often project-bound. Since independence, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) have been recognized as an essential element in the strategic planning of non-formal education (NFE) in Tanzania,

ensuring that programmes are accountable and responsive to learner needs [70,83]. Many national and local policy documents formally incorporated M&E frameworks to track progress, assess programme performance, and guide decision-making. In practice, however, the systems for collecting and analyzing data on NFE participation, learning achievements, and employment or livelihood outcomes have often been weak, inconsistent, or incomplete [60,85]. Challenges such as limited human capacity, inadequate reporting structures, and poor technical infrastructure have frequently resulted in fragmented or delayed data, making it difficult for policymakers to adjust programmes based on evidence [69,71]. Donor-supported M&E initiatives have sometimes strengthened data collection and reporting. For instance, literacy and vocational programmes backed by international partners often used project-specific monitoring tools, standardized indicators, and structured evaluation processes, which improved both data quality and accountability [80,82]. Nevertheless, these systems were typically project-specific and did not fully integrate with national or Local Government Authority (LGA) structures, limiting their long-term sustainability and broader impact [81]. The evidence underscores the importance of institutionalizing strong M&E systems at both national and local levels. When fully embedded, these frameworks allow NFE programmes to be effectively monitored, scaled, and adapted to local contexts, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to learners' needs [20]. Moreover, robust M&E mechanisms help align NFE initiatives with labour-market requirements and broader social goals, thereby enhancing the overall relevance and impact of the programmes. In the general discussion of the role of stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms, SP outcomes are tightly coupled with genuine stakeholder participation, predictable resource flows, and operational M&E. The apparent mismatch between plan intentions and funding realities undermines sustainability. Strengthening LGA budgeting lines for NFE, formalising stakeholder platforms, and integrating NFE indicators into national education management information systems (EMIS) would be important reforms to close the implementation gap.

8. Contemporary SP Practices Addressing Emerging Priorities

8.1. Inclusion and Equity

Contemporary strategic documents increasingly highlight gender equity, disability inclusion, and rural access, with specific targets and affirmative measures noted in some plans. Implementation, however, lags behind policy commitments. Since Tanzania gained independence in 1961, the country has made deliberate efforts to promote inclusion and equity within its education system, particularly through Non-Formal Education (NFE) programmes that aim to reach marginalized communities [86]. These initiatives have focused on ensuring that women, persons with disabilities, and rural populations, who often face barriers to formal schooling, have access to learning opportunities [87]. Regarding gender equity initiatives, Tanzania has developed policies over the years to improve gender equity in education [88]. For example, the Medium-Term Strategic Plan for Gender Mainstreaming (2010/11–2014/15) included measures to boost female participation in both formal and non-formal education. Earlier, the Vocational

Education and Training (TVET) Policy of 1993 emphasized fair access to vocational training for disadvantaged groups, particularly girls and women [89]. These efforts demonstrate the country's commitment to narrowing gender gaps in learning opportunities. About disability inclusion efforts, Tanzania has also recognized the need to include persons with disabilities in its educational programmes [90]. The National Strategy for Inclusive Education seeks to ensure that all children, youth, and adults have access to quality education in inclusive environments [91]. Yet, practical challenges remain, especially in rural areas where resources and trained personnel are limited [92,93]. Studies have shown that children with intellectual disabilities continue to face significant obstacles, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to create truly inclusive learning environments [94].

Regarding expanding access in rural areas, education access in rural Tanzania has long been a challenge [86]. To address this, the Adult and Non-Formal Education Sub-Sector Medium-Term Strategy was developed to provide strategic leadership for literacy and skills development programmes targeting adults and out-of-school youth, especially in rural communities [95]. Similarly, the Education for All (EFA) report stressed the importance of integrating gender perspectives into policies and programmes, leading to the establishment of a gender desk within the Ministry to oversee these efforts [96]. Despite these strong policy frameworks, translating commitments into real-world practice remains difficult [87,94]. For example, research in rural primary schools has shown that teachers often struggle to implement inclusive strategies due to a lack of resources, training, and support [97]. This gap indicates that policies alone are not enough, practical measures, ongoing support, and community engagement are crucial for effective implementation. Conclusively, Tanzania's journey since independence reflects a clear commitment to making education more inclusive, particularly through NFE programmes designed for marginalized groups [90]. However, continued attention is needed to overcome implementation challenges, allocate sufficient resources, and equip educators so that all learners, regardless of gender, disability, or location, can fully benefit from educational opportunities.

8.1.1. Digital Learning and Skills for the Future

There is growing attention to ICT-mediated NFE and to skills aligned with labour market transitions (entrepreneurship, digital literacy). Yet digital infrastructure and facilitator digital skills remain constraints in many rural communities. Tanzania has been increasingly embracing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in NFE to equip learners with essential skills for the modern workforce, including entrepreneurship and digital literacy [86]. Programmes like Powering Potential's SPARC initiative have brought solar-powered computer labs to rural schools, giving learners hands-on access to digital tools and training [34]. Likewise, organizations such as Team4Tech have partnered with local institutions to strengthen digital literacy by providing both equipment and tailored curricula for learners and facilitators. Despite these promising efforts, ICT-mediated NFE still faces notable obstacles. Studies have shown that limited

electricity, unreliable internet connectivity, and a lack of digital skills among facilitators and learners hinder the effective delivery of technology-based education, particularly in rural communities. These challenges restrict learners' ability to acquire the skills necessary to thrive in a digitally driven economy.

Addressing these gaps requires strategic investments in infrastructure, such as improving electricity and internet access in underserved areas [86]. Training facilitators in digital skills and embedding ICT into NFE curricula can further enhance programme effectiveness. Moreover, collaborations between government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector are critical to developing sustainable solutions that empower rural populations with the knowledge and competencies needed for the digital age [98]. Tunapanda Institute is a non-profit social enterprise that offers intensive three-month courses in technology, design, and business for learners in low-income communities across East Africa, including Tanzania [99]. The institute aims to nurture lifelong learning, entrepreneurial thinking, and problem-solving skills, helping participants create practical solutions that improve livelihoods and foster self-expression. Through its Tunapanda NET platform, the institute also builds a network that expands access to educational resources and learning opportunities for a wider audience. The Asante Africa Foundation works to reduce the digital divide in rural Tanzania by providing farmers with digital literacy training [100]. By using mobile applications for weather updates, soil analysis, and market price tracking, farmers can make better-informed decisions, increase their crop yields, and connect more effectively to regional and global markets.

Led by Avanti Communications, the Knowledge Project brings high-speed satellite broadband, ICT tools, and eLearning programmes to schools across Tanzania [101]. By equipping teachers and students with both technology and training, the project enhances learning outcomes and helps bridge the digital gap, particularly in underserved rural communities. Barefoot College Zanzibar empowers women with minimal formal education to become solar engineers, known as "Solar Mamas" [102]. These women install, maintain, and repair solar energy systems in rural villages, providing sustainable electricity while gaining valuable technical skills. Since 2015, the programme has enabled over 65 women to bring solar power to nearly 1,860 homes across 29 villages, improving energy access and local livelihoods. In a joint initiative, UNICEF, Airtel, and the Tanzanian government are working to accelerate digital learning by offering free internet connectivity to schools [98]. This collaboration expands access to online educational resources and helps bridge the digital divide, particularly for students in rural areas. These initiatives collectively highlight Tanzania's commitment to integrating digital learning and skills development into Non-Formal Education programmes [99,100]. By empowering individuals and communities with digital tools and practical skills, these programs equip learners to thrive in a rapidly evolving digital economy.

8.1.2. Resilience and Lifelong Learning

Post-COVID recovery and resilience themes have been incorporated in the newest plans, signaling a shift toward flexible, modular NFE that can respond to crises and changing economic needs. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tanzania has integrated resilience and lifelong learning into its Non-Formal Education (NFE) planning, reflecting the need for flexible programmes that can adapt to disruptions and evolving economic demands [103,104]. NFE, by design, offers opportunities outside the formal school system, making it particularly well-suited for modular and crisis-responsive learning approaches. The pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in traditional education, and NFE programmes have stepped in to provide continuity of learning in communities affected by school closures or economic hardship [105]. The Tanzanian government and its partners have responded by enhancing NFE structures, ensuring they can adapt quickly to unforeseen challenges, maintaining learning continuity, and supporting quality outcomes even during crises [106]. Recognizing that education is a lifelong process, Tanzania has strengthened NFE initiatives to support continuous skills development. The National Qualification Framework now formally recognizes non-formal and adult learning, positioning NFE as a vehicle for equipping individuals with practical skills, enhancing adaptability, and promoting resilience in a rapidly changing economic landscape. Resilience is now central to NFE planning, as evidenced by strategies outlined in the Tanzania COVID-19 Socio-Economic Response and Recovery Plan [107]. These include improving digital infrastructure, training NFE facilitators in crisis management, and designing flexible curricula that can respond to both emergencies and shifting labor market demands. By embedding flexibility, modularity, and lifelong learning into NFE programmes, Tanzania is leveraging the unique strengths of non-formal education to build a workforce and citizenry capable of thriving amid crises and ongoing economic transformation. In discussing the resilience and lifelong learning at a general level, contemporary SP practice demonstrates positive movement toward addressing emerging priorities, including inclusion and digital skills. Nonetheless, policy evolution is faster than systemic capacity financing models, human capital and infrastructure have not yet caught up. Strategic documents that explicitly budget for inclusion measures and digital roll-out, and that include pragmatic timelines and capacity development components, are more likely to produce measurable outcomes.

9. Cross-Cutting Synthesis and Implications

9.1. Policy Adoption vs Implementation Reality

While Tanzania has shown consistent policy commitment to NFE, translating these plans into effective local action remains uneven. Limited funding and capacity challenges at the LGA level often slow programme implementation. Decentralization was intended to empower LGAs, but they still face constraints in managing human resources, budgets, and service delivery. To close this gap, it is crucial to strengthen financial support and LGA capabilities, ensuring that NFE policies result in tangible outcomes for communities [10].

9.1.1. Coordination across Frameworks

Strong coordination between national authorities, donors, and local stakeholders is essential to make NFE initiatives more effective (Health Data Collaborative). Standardized indicators and shared monitoring and evaluation tools can reduce duplication of effort and help scale successful programmes (PMO). Coordinated M&E systems aligned with national priorities ensure that NFE interventions are coherent, efficient, and responsive to community needs (Health Data Collaborative).

9.1.2. Focus on Institutionalising Community Adaptations

To sustain NFE programmes over time, policies must allow for local adaptation [10]. Examples include guidelines for LGAs to translate national targets into local action and pathways for facilitator certification. The Education Sector Development Plan (2025/26–2029/30) emphasizes strengthening governance, management, and accountability in teacher and facilitator education to bridge capacity gaps that hinder implementation [10]. Institutionalizing these adaptations ensures that NFE programmes remain responsive and relevant to local contexts.

9.2 Monitoring and Learning Culture

Integrating NFE into the national Education Management Information System (EMIS) with disaggregated indicators for gender, age, disability, and region is key to making evidence-based decisions [86]. EMIS provides essential data for tracking equity and inclusion in NFE programmes. However, challenges remain in collecting complete and accurate data, especially for marginalized groups. Improving data quality and its disaggregation will support informed decision-making, targeted interventions, and a culture of continuous learning in Tanzania's NFE system [104]. In conclusion, Tanzania's emerging NFE priorities equity and inclusion, digital skills, resilience, lifelong learning, coordination, and locally adaptive mechanisms demonstrate a commitment to building a dynamic, responsive education system. By addressing infrastructure gaps and capacity constraints, and by strengthening monitoring and evaluation, NFE programmes can effectively empower communities and equip citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world [106].

10. Conclusion

This study explored how strategic planning for Non-Formal Education (NFE) in Tanzania has developed from independence to the present, revealing both progress and persistent challenges. Over the decades, NFE has grown from basic literacy and civic education efforts into structured programmes focused on skills development and supporting national development goals. Strategic frameworks at the national and local levels have guided these efforts, emphasizing inclusion, digital skills, resilience, and lifelong learning. Despite these policies and frameworks, turning plans into action on the ground has often been uneven. Local authorities face challenges such as limited resources, infrastructure gaps, and capacity constraints that can slow programme implementation. Stakeholder engagement, community adaptation, and monitoring systems have helped improve programme effectiveness, though ensuring equal access across all communities, remains a challenge.

In recent years, NFE has increasingly addressed emerging priorities such as equity, digital literacy, and flexible learning approaches to respond to changing social and economic needs, including recovery from crises like COVID-19. Generally, the findings highlight the importance of bridging the gap between policy and practice, strengthening local capacity, and fostering adaptable, inclusive, and evidence-driven NFE systems. By doing so, Tanzania can empower individuals and communities, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed for lifelong learning and sustainable development.

Recommendations

To strengthen NFE in Tanzania, it is crucial to establish dedicated funding lines at both national and local government levels. Securing consistent financial support ensures that policy commitments are translated into real programmes on the ground, helping NFE initiatives reach communities more effectively and equitably. Reliable funding also allows long-term planning and sustainability, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Another important step is to develop a unified national monitoring and evaluation framework for NFE and integrate key indicators into the national Education Management Information System (EMIS). This would enable systematic tracking of progress, ensure inclusion of marginalized groups, and support evidence-based decision-making. With better data and monitoring, policymakers and practitioners can make timely adjustments to improve programme quality and relevance. Investing in capacity building for local planning units and community facilitators is equally essential. Training programmes, especially those focused on digital pedagogy and modern teaching methods, would equip local teams with the skills needed to implement NFE programmes effectively. Stronger local capacity ensures that national strategies are brought to life at the community level and that facilitators can respond to learners' unique needs across different contexts. It is also recommended to create multi-stakeholder platforms at the district level. By bringing together educators, local authorities, employers, and community representatives, these platforms can align NFE programmes with labor market needs. This collaborative approach ensures that learners acquire practical, employable skills while promoting shared accountability and community ownership of NFE initiatives. Finally, piloting scalable digital and blended learning models is vital for modernizing NFE. Testing these approaches with strong evaluation mechanisms allows for refinement before wider implementation. Digital and blended programmes can expand access, particularly in remote areas, while equipping learners with essential 21st century skills. Such innovation supports lifelong learning, resilience, and the preparation of citizens for changing social and economic realities.

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