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BRIDGING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED REGIONS OF NIGERIA

¹ Terlumun Mark Ijov (Ph.D) & ² Hemen Terkimbi Manasseh (Ph.D)¹ Human Capital Policy Department, Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), Ibadan, Oyo State, NigeriaPhone: +2348032890031/+2348096998267, E-Mail: markijov@gmail.com /tm.ijov@niser.gov.ng² Department of Educational Foundations and Management, College of Education, Katsina-Ala, Benue State, NigeriaEmail: terkimbihemen@gmail.com +2347058170834

Abstract

This paper examines the persistent educational disparities in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria through a political economy lens, highlighting how governance structures and socio-political dynamics influence access to quality education. It draws on recent literature to analyze the assumptions underpinning educational policies in fragile contexts and identifies systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including girls, rural populations, and children with disabilities. The findings underscore that unequal educational access perpetuates social and economic inequalities, hindering Nigeria's broader development goals. The paper outlines key strategies for reform, emphasizing equity-focused policies, inclusive teaching practices, and community engagement. It advocates for data-driven planning, sustainable financing, and the alignment of national education strategies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of fostering political will, cross-sectoral collaboration, and innovation, especially in leveraging technology to overcome geographic and infrastructural challenges. By proposing a comprehensive theory of change, this study provides actionable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to close the educational gap in Nigeria's most vulnerable regions. Addressing these disparities is not only essential for individual empowerment but also for achieving long-term stability, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Education, Disparities, Conflict, Regions, Inclusive Education, Sustainable Development Goals, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is a fundamental right and a powerful tool for social and economic development. However, in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria, access to quality education remains a significant challenge due to insecurity, displacement, and the destruction of educational infrastructure. Insurgent attacks, communal clashes, and farmer-herder conflicts have forced many schools to shut down, leaving millions of children without formal education. This situation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, exacerbating poverty and limiting future opportunities for young people. Education in Nigeria has long been challenged by regional disparities, but conflict-affected areas especially in the North-East and North-West face even greater obstacles. Insurgencies, banditry, and communal clashes have disrupted schooling, worsened poverty, and displaced millions. Bridging these disparities requires a multi-dimensional approach involving government policy, community engagement, international support, and innovative education delivery models.

Nigeria's educational landscape is marred by a complex interplay of challenges, particularly in conflict-affected regions, necessitating a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to bridge the existing disparities (Odia & Omofonmwan, 2007). The nation's diverse ethnic and developmental disparities, inherited from its colonial past, often fuel power struggles, social unrest, and violent conflicts, which significantly disrupt educational access and quality. Addressing educational disparities in conflict zones requires a deep understanding of the underlying factors that exacerbate these inequalities (Olanrewaju et al., 2021). These factors include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and pervasive socioeconomic disparities that hinder effective implementation of educational standards. Students' exposure to war, robbery, or assault can create a significant barrier to accessing quality education (Zickafoose et al., 2024). Diminished or unequal access to education can also drive conflict. Education can be used to reinforce division, intolerance, and prejudice, further exacerbating conflict. The ongoing conflicts in Nigeria have inflicted profound damage on the educational system, resulting in widespread school closures, dilapidated facilities, and a scarcity of essential resources (Alzoraiki et al., 2024). In the northern region, incessant ethno-religious conflicts, disputes over land rights, identity issues, and the Boko Haram insurgency have ravaged communities and peoples, disrupting educational activities. The consequences of these disruptions extend beyond immediate academic setbacks, leading to long-term developmental challenges.

Bridging these educational disparities requires a multi-faceted approach, including policy interventions, community engagement, and innovative learning solutions. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international partners must collaborate to rebuild schools, provide alternative learning platforms, and ensure the safety of students and teachers. Additionally, leveraging technology, implementing flexible curriculums, and integrating peace education can help mitigate the impact of conflict on education. Addressing these disparities is crucial for fostering stability, promoting national development, and ensuring that no child is left behind in Nigeria's pursuit of progress.

In recent years, the alarming educational disparities in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria have garnered significant attention, underscoring the critical need for targeted intervention. Historical neglect, compounded by ongoing violence and instability, has resulted in a fragmented educational landscape where access to quality learning opposes the universal right to education. Addressing these disparities necessitates a multifaceted approach whereby both targeted and universal measures are implemented concurrently. Evidence suggests that countries successfully minimizing inequalities have employed strategies that not only focus on addressing discrimination in educational access but also engage political discourse grounded in equity. Additionally, the examination of social, economic, and political dimensions of inequality in educational access can inform more effective public policy solutions that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, the journey toward bridging educational disparities in Nigeria requires a comprehensive understanding of the roots of inequality and strategic implementation of innovative, inclusive educational policies.

Overview of educational disparities in Nigeria's conflict-affected regions

In Nigeria, educational disparities are exacerbated in conflict-affected regions, where instability significantly interrupts the learning process and limits access to quality education. Many children in these areas contend with not only the psychological effects of violence but also the practical challenges of displacement and inadequate school infrastructure. The historical context of these regions reveals a persistent neglect of educational resources, which is further compounded by socio-economic factors such as poverty and gender inequality. For instance, Cramer, Oya & Sender (2004), highlights that the intersectionality of conflict and education leads to a cycle of deprivation that predominantly affects

marginalized communities. Additionally, sociocultural dynamics, such as early marriage, significantly impact educational outcomes for girls; research indicates that delaying marriage correlates positively with longer schooling, suggesting that addressing these underlying issues is crucial for bridging educational disparities in Nigeria's conflict zones.

Theoretical Framework

There are numerous social theories that attempt to explain the issue of insecurity. This paper adopts Structural Functionalism and the Queer Ladder Theory (QLT) as its guiding analytical frameworks.

Structural Functionalism

Structural Functionalism, a classical sociological theory, traces its roots to Auguste Comte (1798–1857), with contributions from Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and Robert Merton (1920–2003). The theory likens society to a living organism composed of interrelated parts such as the family, political system, economy, religion, education, technology, industry, and security institutions. These components function collectively and depend on one another to maintain societal stability and cohesion (Ritzer, 2014; Olabisi et al., 2017).

The core idea is that society operates as a system, with each institution serving as a subsystem that plays a specific role—either manifest or latent in sustaining the whole. If any institution fails to fulfill its function, it leads to dysfunction and ultimately "anomie," or a breakdown of social norms. In the context of this study, insecurity can be attributed to the failure of social control institutions (such as the police, courts, and correctional facilities) to effectively protect lives and property. The overlap and confusion in the responsibilities of these agencies exacerbated by corruption and inefficiency create vulnerabilities that foster crimes like kidnapping, terrorism, armed robbery, and trafficking. Critics of the theory argue, however, that insecurity has inadvertently become a source of employment and career advancement within security agencies, despite the distress it causes in society.

Queer Ladder Theory (QLT)

Developed by American sociologist Daniel Bell (1919–2011), the Queer Ladder Theory explores organized crime as a route to socioeconomic advancement and upward mobility. According to the theory, criminal acts such as kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and banditry are not merely senseless violence, but strategic behaviours aimed at achieving wealth and power.

QLT posits that organized crime flourishes in environments marked by weak governance, high corruption, and limited opportunities for lawful economic advancement (Rosenje & Adeniyi, 2022). When legitimate pathways to success are blocked or inadequate, individuals may resort to crime as an alternative means of survival and social progress, especially when the perceived rewards outweigh the risks involved.

This perspective helps explain the rise of insecurity in Nigeria's North-Central and North-East regions, where economic hardship and weak institutions have created fertile ground for criminal activities. According to Mustapha (2019), in places like Niger State, such crimes are driven by desperation and a quest for empowerment, particularly in settings where government responses are inadequate or indifferent. Thus, QLT highlights how insecurity can be a product of distorted patterns of social mobility, where crime becomes a deliberate and calculated path to financial and political gains.

The impact of conflict on education

Conflict, particularly in regions like Nigeria affected by violence and instability, severely disrupts educational systems. The increase in conflict leads to displacement, which not only reduces school enrollment but also deepens existing educational inequalities in marginalized communities. As families flee their homes, children miss critical years of schooling, limiting their future prospects and reinforcing the cycle of poverty. Additionally, the loss of qualified teachers and damage to educational infrastructure further diminishes the quality of education available to displaced children. Migration due to conflict highlights the extreme instability that forces communities to adapt, often leading to greater vulnerability for the poorest sectors. Addressing the disruptions in education is crucial to rebuilding not only individual futures but also societal cohesion in these conflict-affected areas of Nigeria.

The ongoing activities of bandits have created a climate of fear and insecurity, directly impacting economic development in the region. The frequent kidnappings have deterred foreign direct investment, disrupted interstate travel, and hindered the movement of goods and services. This loss of income and economic opportunities exacerbates the difficulties faced by the population. The livestock sector, in particular, is heavily affected, as many bandits come from pastoral communities. The instability has also led to an inconsistent academic calendar in educational institutions across the North-East, North-West, and South-East regions of Nigeria. School closures, due to insecurity, have become commonplace, with many institutions shut down because of attacks by bandits. In the North-West alone, over 4,000 public primary and secondary schools have been closed.

The kidnapping of over 300,000 to 400,000 students and pupils, such as the infamous Chibok abduction, further exacerbates the situation, leaving many students at home and interrupting the internal management of schools. The continuous attacks on schools have forced state governments to close educational institutions. For example, the Kaduna State government announced in August 2021 that the resumption of schools would be indefinitely postponed due to rising insecurity. Kaduna is one of the states most affected by banditry, with many people, including students, kidnapped for ransom. As reported in July 2021, the Kaduna State Schools Quality Assurance Authority closed 13 schools in areas vulnerable to attacks, further disrupting the education system.

The consequences of these continuous school closures include poor learning outcomes, a decline in the quality of education, a loss of interest in education, and a disruption of the academic calendar. The persistent closure of schools in Northern Nigeria due to attacks on educational institutions has led to unstable academic schedules, particularly for secondary schools. Educational institutions rely on a structured academic calendar to plan their sessions, terms, and teaching schedules. However, these plans are often poorly implemented due to the frequent school closures, which disrupt teaching, learning, and other academic activities, hindering the overall development of the education system.

Investment from both private and public institutions in Nigeria has significantly declined due to the widespread insecurity across the country. This insecurity has hindered the completion of various projects in educational institutions, with many contractors abandoning sites due to fear of attacks and kidnappings by criminal groups. As a result, private investors have been discouraged from investing in the education sector, impeding its development. According to Financialnigeria.com (2020), insecurity can make a nation appear worse to outsiders than it actually is, leading to reduced confidence from foreign investors, especially when the government's response to security issues is ineffective. Data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) indicates that foreign direct investment (FDI) to Nigeria averaged \$5.3 billion annually from 2005-2007, but dropped to \$3.3 billion

from 2015-2019, a period marked by increasing insecurity. Insecurity has become one of the major reasons Nigeria has become less attractive for foreign investment, alongside other factors like policy dysfunctions, such as the Central Bank of Nigeria's multiple exchange rates (Financialnigeria.com, 2020).

The Cable (2023) reports that Adejare Bello, Nigeria's ambassador to Mexico, emphasized that restoring security is essential for attracting productive investment. Many Mexican investors are interested in investing heavily in Nigeria, but the prevailing security situation deters them. The Nigerian embassy frequently receives inquiries about possible areas of collaboration, but these efforts are thwarted by insecurity. The ongoing security challenges are severely affecting Nigeria's development and economy. Lives are lost, properties are destroyed, and businesses collapse, with non-indigenous businessmen often fleeing affected states. The displaced locals are forced into refugee camps, which increases government expenditure. James (2024) highlighted that the northern region of Nigeria, particularly affected by the Islamist jihadist group Boko Haram, faces significant insecurity that discourages business activities. The lack of security has caused many companies and schools to halt operations, particularly in the northern part of the country, where the insurgency continues to severely impact commercial activities.

Insecurity in Nigeria has significantly impacted student enrolment, retention, and completion of education. Repeated attacks on schools have forced many children to drop out, while fear of abduction has led numerous parents to withdraw their children from school altogether. In Northern Nigeria, frequent incidents of banditry and the kidnapping of students for ransom have caused many families to lose faith in the education system. In a single month, several cases of teacher and student abductions were reported in Zamfara, Niger, and Kaduna States. Ogunode, Godwin, and Unoaku (2021) observed that persistent attacks by Bandits and Boko Haram in the North are deterring parents from sending their children to school out of fear for their safety. According to Seun Bakare of Amnesty International, the surge in attacks and school closures poses a serious threat to education in the country.

The ongoing wave of kidnappings is exacerbating the already dire educational crisis in Northern Nigeria—a region that already struggles with low literacy and enrolment rates and accounts for over 70 percent of the country's school dropouts. UNICEF reports that 2.8 million children in the Northeast require emergency education support due to the ongoing violence. Experts warn that if the situation is not urgently addressed, even more children face a bleak future. Abdullahi (2022) notes that attacks on schools make the learning environment unsafe, discourage parents and caregivers from enrolling their children, and instill fear in students. Furthermore, the psychological trauma inflicted by these attacks has deep and lasting effects on the victims' mental well-being.

Conflict and education in Northeast Nigeria

Nigeria has long been considered a country vulnerable to conflict, largely due to its diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural composition (Bertoni et al., 2019). In the Northeast region, persistent violence and instability are primarily driven by three groups: (i) the terrorist group Boko Haram, (ii) its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa (ISWA), and (iii) criminal gangs taking advantage of the region's fragile state. Boko Haram, Nigeria's most infamous extremist group, gained global attention in April 2014 after abducting 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State. While its name is often interpreted as "Western education is forbidden," the group formally known as *Jamā'at Ahl as Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād* ("The group dedicated to spreading the Prophet's teachings and jihad") claims it refers to the

rejection of Western civilization. Founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno, Boko Haram exploited northern Nigeria's poverty, widespread political and police corruption, and its economic disparities compared to the predominantly Christian south to promote its agenda.

By 2014, Boko Haram had become notorious for its extreme violence, earning the title of the world's deadliest terrorist group according to the Global Terrorism Index in 2015 (IEP, 2015). The group later splintered, giving rise to ISWA in 2015, though the two are often confused. Borno State remains the main hotspot of their operations, though their attacks have spread throughout Northeast Nigeria, the Lake Chad region, and even the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Their violent campaigns have caused massive casualties and destruction. Boko Haram's ideology has made the education sector a primary target particularly because schools tend to be poorly protected, with predictable schedules and high concentrations of students and staff. Many students, especially in boarding schools, are highly vulnerable.

The conflict has led to the deaths and abductions of students and teachers, as well as the destruction of numerous schools. The disruption to community life and economic survival has made it increasingly difficult for families to access education. Although former President Muhammadu Buhari declared Boko Haram "technically defeated" in 2019, the group and ISWA have continued to launch attacks, including school assaults across the northern region and neighboring countries. Reports indicate that by 2022, Boko Haram was responsible for killing over 530 teachers, orphaning more than 50,000 children, and destroying more than 5,000 educational institutions (Fatunmole, 2022), with some estimates placing the number of teachers killed above 2,300 (Tijani, 2018).

The distinction between terrorism and organized crime in this region is often unclear. Boko Haram has used kidnapping and ransom as a means of funding its operations. Similarly, criminal groups have taken advantage of the instability in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (BAY) States-regions most affected by insurgency. While some of these gangs initially worked with terrorist groups for strategic reasons, many now operate independently in what has come to be known as the "bandit conflict." Kidnapping, particularly targeting schools, has evolved into a lucrative business. As of the end of 2022, approximately 3.6 million people were internally displaced in Nigeria, mostly due to attacks by terrorists and armed gangs (IDMC, n.d.). Ultimately, both ideological and criminal violence severely hinder access to education in Nigeria. The destruction of school infrastructure and ongoing insecurity continue to deny many young Nigerians their right to learn.

Analysis of how violence and instability disrupt educational access and quality

Violence and instability have a profound effect on educational access and quality, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Nigeria. As schools become targets in the midst of social unrest, the resulting environment fosters fear and insecurity among students, teachers, and families, subsequently leading to increased dropout rates and diminished academic performance. The lack of consistent parental involvement, a situation exacerbated by the disintegration of familial structures due to violence, further compounds these challenges, as children lack essential emotional and academic support (Aringo, Mikwili, Njihia, 2024). Furthermore, the psychological stress caused by exposure to violence disrupts cognitive development and learning processes, thereby jeopardizing students' future opportunities. To bridge these educational disparities, it is crucial to establish secure learning environments, encourage community engagement in educational initiatives, and provide psychological support for affected individuals, each of which can help restore stability and improve educational outcomes in these regions.

Strategies for improving educational access

Addressing educational access in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria necessitates multi-faceted strategies that encompass both immediate interventions and long-term reforms. One effective approach involves fostering community engagement in educational governance, which ensures that local needs and perspectives inform decision-making processes. As evidenced in the literature, the political economy of education in conflict settings illustrates the importance of adapting educational frameworks to reflect local contexts and realities (Higgins, Sean, Novelli, Mario, Ugur, Mehmet, Valiente, 2014). Furthermore, investing in infrastructure and resources tailored to the unique challenges faced by these communities is crucial. For instance, mobile schools and flexible learning environments can accommodate displaced populations while maintaining educational continuity. Simultaneously, enhancing teacher training and support systems is vital to develop a resilient educational workforce capable of navigating the complexities of teaching in conflict zones (Higgins, Sean, Novelli, Mario, Ugur, Mehmet, Valiente, 2014). Ultimately, these combined strategies can significantly bridge educational disparities and promote equitable access to learning opportunities.

Access to quality education matters a lot, and it matters everywhere in the world. It gains even greater significance for disadvantaged individuals and communities who have always had limited access to quality education. To make sure challenges and identified gaps are addressed, governments, educational institutions, families, and other stakeholders need to work together to invest in early childhood programs, infrastructure development, use of technology, and coordination collaboration. Ensuring equality and inclusion must be a priority, which is going to have huge benefits for disadvantaged communities as well entire societies writ large.

Examination of community-based initiatives and partnerships aimed at enhancing educational opportunities.

In the context of bridging educational disparities in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria, community-based initiatives and partnerships play a critical role in enhancing educational opportunities. These initiatives often harness local resources and engage community members, creating a supportive environment for learners who have been impacted by conflict. Such partnerships can effectively integrate youth into the decision-making processes surrounding education, thereby empowering them as pivotal agents of change. The involvement of young people is crucial, as their participation can catalyze progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Ashton, Melanie, Bartlett, Richard, Davila-Ortega, Luis, Farmanesh, 2025). Furthermore, fostering collaborations between local governments, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions can facilitate the development of tailored programs that address specific community needs. By prioritizing youth engagement and practical action, these initiatives can significantly contribute to sustainable educational development in regions characterized by conflict and instability (Berry, Chris, Forder, Ali, Moreno-Torres, Magui, Sultan, 2025).

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing educational disparities in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the political economy influencing educational governance. The intricate relationship between conflict dynamics and education policies highlights pressing challenges and opportunities for reform. Insights from recent literature emphasize the importance of evaluating the assumptions that underpin education systems in these contexts, as suggested in the reviews of political economy research since 1990. By identifying strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots within

existing frameworks, policymakers can outline a theory of change that not only addresses immediate educational needs but also fosters long-term stability and growth. Future research is essential to fill gaps in knowledge and inform strategies that empower local communities and ensure equitable access to quality education for all children, thus bridging the educational divide in Nigeria's most vulnerable regions.

Summary of key findings

Summary of key findings and the importance of addressing educational disparities for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Addressing educational disparities in Nigeria is paramount for achieving sustainable development, particularly in conflict-affected regions. Key findings reveal that unequal access to quality education exacerbates social and economic inequalities, hindering development efforts and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Diverse factors contribute to these disparities, including socio-economic status, geographic location, and systemic discrimination against marginalized groups. Effective interventions, as underscored in various studies, demonstrate that targeted measures alongside universal policies can significantly reduce educational inequalities. Successful examples from other contexts suggest that fostering an equity-focused political discourse and incorporating evidence of educational exclusion can drive meaningful change. Moreover, the need for innovative actions is critical to develop sustainable educational frameworks that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Ultimately, addressing these disparities not only enhances individual opportunities but also fosters social cohesion and long-term stability within Nigeria.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made;

- 1) Implement equity-focused educational policies: Develop and enforce policies that specifically address the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups (e.g., girls, children in rural or conflict-affected areas, and children with disabilities). Allocate more educational resources and funding to underserved regions to bridge infrastructure and quality gaps.
- 2) Strengthen inclusive and quality education systems: Invest in teacher training programmes that emphasize inclusive education practices and conflict-sensitive pedagogy. Improve access to early childhood education and foundational learning, especially in low-income and rural communities.
- 3) Promote community and stakeholder engagement: Involve local communities, civil society organizations, and traditional institutions in educational planning and monitoring to ensure culturally relevant and community-supported solutions. Launch public awareness campaigns to address discriminatory norms and practices that hinder school enrollment and completion.
- 4) Leverage data and evidence for policy and planning: Establish robust data collection and monitoring systems to identify exclusion patterns and track educational progress among marginalized populations. Use disaggregated data (e.g., by gender, location, and socio-economic status) to design targeted interventions.
- 5) Prioritize education in conflict-affected and fragile regions: Establish safe learning spaces and deploy mobile education units in conflict-prone areas to ensure continuity of education. Partner with humanitarian agencies to integrate education into emergency response and recovery plans.
- 6) Encourage public-private partnerships: Foster collaborations between government, private sector, NGOs, and international partners to expand educational opportunities and innovation.

Support low-cost technology and digital learning tools to overcome geographical and infrastructure barriers.

- 7) Align national strategies with the SDGs: Integrate the principles of SDG 4 (Quality Education) into national development plans and educational frameworks. Promote inter-sectoral approaches linking education with health, nutrition, and social protection initiatives.
- 8) Promote gender-sensitive interventions: Implement programmes that address barriers to girls' education, such as menstrual hygiene, child marriage, and school-related gender-based violence. Provide scholarships and mentorship programmes for girls and young women.
- 9) Ensure sustainable financing for education: Increase national budgetary allocation to the education sector to meet international benchmarks. Establish transparent and accountable mechanisms for fund utilization to ensure effectiveness.
- 10) Foster political will and leadership commitment: Promote political advocacy for inclusive education through evidence-based campaigns and policy dialogues. Encourage leaders at all levels to champion equitable education as a pillar for national peace and prosperity.

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