

Tackling the menace of out-of-school children in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria faces a critical challenge with its high rate of out-of-school children, projected at over 20 million, constituting one of the largest globally. This phenomenon poses severe implications for national development, economic stability, and social cohesion. Key drivers include poverty, cultural practices, inadequate infrastructure, and insecurity in conflict-affected regions. The gender disparity in education, particularly affecting girls in northern Nigeria, further exacerbates the issue. This paper explores multidimensional strategies to address the menace, emphasizing the roles of government, private sector, and civil society in providing comprehensive, unbiased, and quality learning designed for all children. It examines the implementation of free and compulsory basic education policies, conditional cash transfer programmes to alleviate financial barriers, and the integration of alternative education models for nomadic and displaced populations. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of community engagement, public awareness campaigns, and legislative reforms to combat cultural and social barriers to education. The study underscores the critical need for sustained funding, effective monitoring, and inter-sectoral collaboration to achieve sustainable solutions. A case is made for leveraging technology to expand access to learning and improving teacher training to enhance educational outcomes. Addressing the out-of-school children crisis is pivotal for breaking the cycle of poverty, fostering human capital development, and ensuring a brighter future for Nigeria.

Keywords: Menace, Out of School, Children, Education, Nigeria

Introduction

It is impossible to overstate the critical functions that education plays in the socioeconomic and political growth of any country. The foundation for improving the standard of human potential development in a nation is education. Based on all available data, the global educational attainment of a country's inhabitants is positively correlated with the economic and technical advancements documented in that country. It follows that the population's level of education is a critical factor in any organized nation's ability to survive. Education not only produces think tanks capable of advancing humankind, but it also makes space for improved nutrition and health, which contributes to improved hygiene. Additionally, it facilitates a heightened feeling of health awareness and helps cultures see increased rates of child survival (Esu, 2022). Once more, Adeyinka (2014) points out that education is a tool for freeing a person from the chains of ignorance and allowing them to explore the world of ideas, information, and creativity.

Education is regarded across nations as both a core human right and a foundation for sustainable development. A catalyst for individual empowerment and national development. Yet, Nigeria is facing a protracted educational crisis: It records the highest proportion of out-of-school children in the world, with recent estimates by UNICEF (2023) placing the figure at over 10.2 million. This phenomenon undermines the nation's developmental aspirations and perpetuates cycles of poverty, inequality, insecurity, and

social exclusion (UNESCO, 2022; Awopegba, Oduolowu, & Nsamenang, 2013). The out-of-school challenge in Nigeria is compelled by a complex interplay of economic, socio-cultural, institutional, and policy-related issues. These include pervasive poverty, insecurity due to armed conflict and insurgency (particularly in the North-East), weak enforcement of compulsory education laws, gender discrimination, child labour, and limited access to inclusive and quality education, especially in rural and marginalized communities (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021; Adebayo & Amosun, 2020). The disruption triggered by COVID-19 epidemic further exacerbated these challenges, pushing children particularly girls and those with disabilities out of school (World Bank, 2022).

The implications are far-reaching: children deprived of education are more likely to face exploitative labour, early marriage, poor health outcomes, and involvement in criminal or insurgent activity (Adediran & Okafor, 2021). On a national scale, the persistence of a large out-of-school population undermines human capital development and impairs Nigeria's progress on the way to attaining SDG-4, that targets to guarantee comprehensive and unbiased quality education for all. This paper principally aims to critically scrutinize the root causes and consequences of the out-of-school children crisis in Nigeria and to propose evidence-based, context-sensitive, and policy-driven interventions aimed at significantly reducing the phenomenon. This paper adopts a comprehensive narrative literature review to synthesize insights from

academic research, policy reports, and national education surveys

Despite various national and international commitments to education as a basic and inalienable human right (Jabaar, 2021), the challenge of access to quality education remains acute in sub-Saharan Africa. Huntington et al. (2023) report that approximately 98 million children across the region are out of school and lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills an alarming indicator of systemic educational deprivation. The Global Education Monitoring Group (Jabaar, 2021) further underscores the scale of the crisis, noting that one-third of the world's out-of-school children reside in Africa. In Nigeria, the situation is particularly concerning. According to UNICEF (2022), six out of ten Nigerian children under the age of five live in multidimensional poverty, severely affecting their access to early and foundational education. A 2005 UNESCO assessment revealed stark regional disparities: while 30% of children in rural Nigeria are not enrolled in school, the rate in urban areas is comparatively lower at 18%.

Federal and state-level interventions to lessen the count of children not attending school has been significantly constrained by deepening economic hardship and rising insecurity, particularly in northern Nigeria. These structural and contextual impediments have hindered the implementation of inclusive education policies. Moreover, data from UNICEF (2022) indicates only marginal progress: the out-of-school rate at the primary education level declined slightly from 27.2% in 2016-2017 to 25.6% in 2021. Nevertheless, 23% of children within primary and lower secondary school age brackets are still not enrolled in school reflecting a persistent gap in universal access to basic education.

According to data from the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) in Nigeria, the population of children aged six to eleven years who are not attending school has seen a modest decline from over ten million recorded in 2021. Projections suggest this number could fall further to approximately 9.5 million by 2023. However, recent statistics released by UNESCO present a different picture, indicating that the number of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Nigeria has now reached around twenty million. This increase is attributed to the application of a revised methodology aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education, alongside the promotion of lifelong learning for all individuals.

Further insights from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Six (MICS 6), jointly launched by the Nigerian government and UNICEF in 2022, reveal regional disparities in school attendance across the country. The survey highlights that the northern region of Nigeria accounts for the highest concentration of out-of-school children. For instance, Kebbi State records a 65% rate of children not in school, while both Zamfara and Bauchi States report 61% each. In contrast, states in the southern region, such as Ekiti and Imo, have significantly lower rates at 2% and 1%, respectively.

Internationally, the term "Out-of-School Children" refers to those within the formal primary school age range (six to eleven years) who are not enrolled in either primary or

secondary education. A 2021 report by UNESCO underscores the severity of the global education crisis, revealing that approximately 258 million children around the world are currently not in school. A significant proportion of the world's out-of-school children are found in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the issue is not unique to Nigeria alone. According to UNESCO data from the past five years, Nigeria, Pakistan, and India rank among the top three countries with the highest number of out-of-school children. The agency reported that, as of 2022, India had slightly over 52 million children aged between six and eighteen not enrolled in school, while Pakistan recorded approximately 19.4 million in the same age group.

The issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria stands out as one of the most pressing educational and developmental concerns in sub-Saharan Africa. At present, Nigeria holds the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with an estimated 10 million not attending school, according to UNICEF (2023). Among the major drivers of this crisis are terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and general insecurity particularly in northern Nigeria where an additional 530,000 children have reportedly dropped out of school due to attacks on communities, school abductions, and displacement (BusinessDay, 2025). These security-related disruptions have compounded the already precarious educational conditions in regions heavily impacted by climate change, desertification, and environmental degradation (UNDP, 2023).

The northern region of Nigeria, which is most severely affected, continues to witness declining enrollment and retention rates, especially among girls, due to the interplay of poverty, cultural and religious beliefs, gender inequality, early marriage, and child labour (Adebayo & Amosun, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). Many parents, influenced by these socio-cultural pressures and economic constraints, are either unable or unwilling to send their children particularly daughters to formal schools (UNICEF, 2022). As noted by Jabaar (2021), such conditions reflect deep-rooted structural inequities and a lack of policy enforcement around compulsory basic education.

While federal and state governments, in collaboration with development partners, have launched various interventions to address the out-of-school crisis, progress has been relatively slow and uneven. For example, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), in collaboration with the World Bank, launched the Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA) initiative in March 2021 to re-integrate out-of-school children, especially in educationally disadvantaged states (World Bank, 2021). The program aims to improve literacy outcomes and promote access to basic education through community-based strategies and result-based financing mechanisms. Additionally, UBEC has renewed efforts to operationalize the Early Childhood Care Development and Education policy, recognizing that foundational learning interventions are vital for building long-term educational resilience and reducing dropout rates (Voice of Nigeria, 2021).

Despite these efforts, empirical data suggests that progress remains insufficient. According to UNICEF (2022), the

proportion of children of primary and lower secondary school age who are out of school at the national level has decreased only marginally from 27.2% in 2016-2017 to 25.6% in 2021 indicating that systemic challenges continue to impede transformational outcomes. A multidimensional, equity-focused, and security-sensitive policy response is therefore required to reverse the trajectory and ensure universal access to quality education for all Nigerian children.

One of the essential rights acknowledged by international and national mechanisms is education. Children's access to education is restricted in many poor countries because of a number of variables, including parental influence and preferences, interest, and corruption. Education is a fundamental tool for human development and an essential tool for producing knowledgeable people. No matter a person's age or social standing, education transforms characters and sharpens minds (Jabaar, 2021). The issue of out-of-school children has attracted the attention of local, state and central government as well as development partners such as African Union, Economic Community of African States, United Nations, United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation, United Nations Children Education Fund and United States Agency for International Development at one time or the other. Despite numerous appeals from education experts and development partners for the establishment of an education system that is responsive to the developmental needs of children, progress remains limited.

As Dyer and Echessa (2019) emphasize, there is an urgent need for systemic reforms that ensure the basic education sector is inclusive, adaptive, and effectively resourced. A key recommendation emerging from policy discourse is the necessity for Nigeria to significantly increase its budgetary allocation to education, while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of stakeholders at both federal and state levels to drive innovations and accountability in basic education delivery. Given that basic education forms the bedrock of national development, it is imperative for relevant government key institutional actors in basic education delivery, including the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and the various State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) to strengthen their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks. Robust M&E systems will enable evidence-based planning and ensure that investment decisions in the education sector are informed by accurate, timely, and context-specific data.

Meaning of Out-of-School Children

Out-of-school children refer to those who are of school-going age but are not enrolled in school, who are able, healthy, and mentally fit to be in school, but are not enrolled in a formal school setting. Out-of-school children are pupils who have never been privileged to enroll in schools. According to UNICEF-Ghana (2015), out-of-school children are children old enough to be enrolled in primary school or lower secondary schools, but are out of school. The term Out-of-School Children encompasses both those who have dropped out and those who have never been enrolled in any form of formal

education. It is widely recognized that education plays a vital role in human development, impacting individuals and society at large. It lays the foundation for a meaningful and productive life, while also fostering intellectual advancement and enabling individuals to contribute effectively to the progress of their communities. Moreover, education is a key driver of broader socio-economic and cultural development. However, when the proportion of children not attending school is significantly high, it poses serious challenges to society and negatively affects economic growth. Acknowledging this reality, the United Nations, through its 2000 declaration, called on all member nations to guarantee access to education for every individual under the global Education for All initiative. Therefore, the issue of out-of-school children represents a significant educational challenge with far-reaching implications for a country's economic development.

The United Nations defines out-of-school children as those who have not been enrolled in any formal education system, excluding pre-primary schooling. Typically, this classification covers children aged 6 to 11 years. These children are expected to be in school but are not, often due to systemic shortcomings from both parents and the government in ensuring access to quality education. As described by Ojelade, Aiyedun, and Aregebesola (2019), out-of-school children include those aged between 1 and 12 who are found on the streets without connection to a functioning educational framework. Essentially, this term refers to school-age children who have been denied basic education because of various societal, economic, or policy-related factors.

Synopsis of Out-of-School Phenomenon in Nigeria

Nigeria continues to rank as one of the top countries globally in terms of out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2018). Estimates suggest that one out of every five children not attending school worldwide resides in Nigeria. Despite the legal provision for free and compulsory basic education, approximately 10.5 million Nigerian children within the 5 to 14 age bracket are currently not attending school. Nearly half of these children are located in the northern part of the country, a region deeply impacted by the Boko Haram conflict. Furthermore, only about 61 percent of children aged 6 to 11 consistently attend primary school (UNICEF, 2018).

This aligns with Yekeen's (2017) assertion that every child, regardless of their location or life circumstances, is entitled to quality education. Echoing this concern, former Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, emphasized that the continuously rising number of out-of-school children serves as the clearest indication that Nigeria has fallen short in meeting one of the core objectives of the Education for All initiative, as well as the Millennium Development Goal of ensuring universal access to primary education for all children of school-going age (Worldmeters, 2019). Nigeria, with a population of approximately 201 million, has surpassed countries like India (1.4 billion), Indonesia (270.6 million), and Pakistan (216.6 million) in the global count of out-of-school children. While both India and Nigeria experienced reductions in their out-of-school children populations in 2014, nations such as Pakistan and Indonesia saw increases during the same period.

However, Nigeria's numbers escalated, reaching an estimated 16 million in 2019. This figure represented the highest globally, accounting for about one in every five out-of-school children worldwide. Fortunately, by 2020, the number decreased to approximately 6.95 million, indicating progress yet underscoring the persistent challenges in ensuring universal basic education (Ndanusa, Abayomi, & Harada, 2021).

There has been a continuous escalation in the number of out-of-school children, public discourse has increasingly centered on identifying the specific groups affected in order to propose more targeted policy interventions. Although it is recognized that various levels of government have made commendable efforts to reduce the number of out-of-school children, Yagboyaju and Akinola (2019) argue that the Nigerian government must move beyond adopting generalized or "one-size-fits-all" policies that fail to address the unique needs of different subgroups. Despite the enactment of laws and the implementation of several policies, these measures have largely fallen short of producing meaningful outcomes. Uneducated children remain among the most vulnerable in society, often exposed to exploitation, social exclusion, and negative influences. According to the Global Partnership for Education, children facing multiple layers of disadvantage such as poverty, gender inequality, displacement, nomadic lifestyles, disability, or ethnic marginalization are frequently denied access to education (Ibid.). The consequences of this are profound, painting a grim picture for the nation's future. If the current trend of rising out-of-school children persists unchecked, it is likely that Nigeria will continue to grapple with its existing social and developmental challenges, or even face worsening conditions without deliberate and sustained interventions.

Drivers of Out-of-School Children Menace in Nigeria

A range of fundamental factors account for the widespread issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria. As identified by Ogunode, Adanna, and Ayoko (2022), these include inadequate funding for the education sector, corruption, weak enforcement of the Child Rights Act, persistent security challenges, lack of strong political commitment to resolve the crisis, widespread poverty, and a high population growth rate.

Inadequate Funding of Education

The persistent issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria is largely attributed to the chronic underfunding of the education sector and the inefficient utilization of available resources. Insufficient financial allocation across all educational levels has been identified as a primary factor contributing to the high number of out-of-school children. Ogunode and Stephen (2021) emphasize that Nigeria's budgetary allocation for education remains inadequate, falling significantly short of UNESCO's recommendation that developing countries allocate at least 26% of their national budgets to the education sector. This shortfall not only hampers the development of educational infrastructure but also affects the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, procurement of learning materials, and overall quality of education delivery. The bureaucratic corruption within the offices and ministries tasked with overseeing primary education administration is the reason for the lack of

funding for the internal management of primary schools across the nation. Poor funding for education, particularly for Nigeria's universal basic education programme, is caused by a number of causes. According to Raliyat, Umma, and Aisha's (2022) observations, 26 out of 36 states did not contribute the counterpart funding needed to access the N33.6 billion allocated the Federal Government, acting through the Universal Basic Education Fund, provided support from 2015 and 2021 for the rehabilitation of basic schools as well as interventions in the areas of capacity building, learning-teaching materials, and the development of infrastructure.

Insecurity

The escalating prevalence of out-of-school children in Nigeria is exacerbated by a confluence of security-related challenges, notably the frequent attacks on schools, abductions of schoolchildren, and the deterioration of basic infrastructure such as classrooms, water and sanitation (WASH) facilities, perimeter fencing, and classroom furniture. These factors collectively undermine the safety and appeal of the school environment, especially in conflict-prone areas. As Ogunode (2020a) and Raliyat, Umma, and Aisha (2022) observe, the surge in violent attacks on educational institutions and the abduction of students has significantly discouraged school attendance, particularly in Northern Nigeria.

The deteriorating security landscape, characterized by insurgency, banditry, and communal violence, has made education inaccessible for millions of children, most acutely in states plagued by insecurity. According to Raliyat et al. (2022), these escalating threats have rendered the school environment unsafe, forcing many parents to pull out their children from school for fear of abduction or violence. This situation is most severe in ten States with the highest numbers of out-of-school children include Kano, which tops the list, followed by Akwa Ibom, Katsina, and Kaduna. Other significantly affected states are Taraba, Sokoto, Yobe, Zamfara, and Bauchi many of which are grappling with persistent insecurity. A telling illustration of the crisis can be found in the actions taken by authorities in the North-West region were compelled to close over 4,000 public primary and 4,000 public secondary schools due to persistent threats. Following the high-profile Chibok schoolgirl abduction, Sabiu (2021) estimates that between 300,000 and 400,000 children have remained at home, further complicating school governance and jeopardizing the educational futures of affected learners.

Population Explosion

Population: The phenomenal rate of population growth in Nigeria throughout the years has been one of the country's most noticeable problems. The population was 88, 514, 98 in 1991 (FOS, 1998), but in 2006, the National Population Commission provisionally projected that it was over 140 million. Nonetheless, since more people live longer, there are more children who are ready for school and more people who need education at all levels (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007). An increase in student enrollment at educational institutions has resulted in a financial strain for the government.

Corruption

Another critical factor contributing to the persistent out-of-school children crisis in Nigeria is systemic corruption, which undermines educational service delivery and institutional accountability. Corruption in the management of basic education projects and programmes has significantly impeded the effective implementation of educational policies. Ogunode and Stephen (2021) assert that corruption remains a major constraint to expanding access to education, particularly at the foundational level. Similarly, Ogunode, Josiah, and Ajape (2021) emphasize that corrupt practices within educational institutions obstruct the sector's development and frustrate reform efforts. A vivid example is the alleged misappropriation of the UBE grant by the Kwara State Government, which reportedly diverted ₦1.45 billion of its counterpart funding that had been deposited in commercial banks. This prompted Universal Basic Education Commission to recover ₦1.83 billion, representing the state's allocation for the 2014 and 2015 UBE grants (Vanguard, 2020). Such instances highlight the mismanagement and lack of accountability that plague basic education funding mechanisms.

Further illustrating the scope of the problem, according to Adegboyega (2019), findings from Transparency International indicate that about 66% of funds designated for Nigeria's education sector were misappropriated by corrupt officials. The report highlights that corruption is deeply rooted across education systems within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), affecting not only the equitable distribution of resources but also access, quality, inclusion, and learning outcomes. Key corruption risks identified include resource misallocation, fraudulent procurement practices, examination malpractices, sexual exploitation in exchange for grades, fake credentials, teacher absenteeism, and nepotistic recruitment. These systemic challenges have far-reaching implications, not only stalling national development but also diminishing the life prospects of millions of children and weakening the social fabric of entire communities.

Poor Implementation of the Child Right Act

A significant contributor to the persistently high number of out-of-school children in Nigeria is the inadequate implementation and enforcement of the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003, that mandates obligatory education for all children. Despite the legal provisions intended to guarantee every child's right to education, enforcement remains weak, especially in several northern states where out-of-school rates are disproportionately high. Raliyat, Umma, and Aisha (2022) note that many state governments have failed to domesticate the Act within their jurisdictions, undermining efforts to ensure universal access to basic education.

The Child Rights Act (CRA) was established to incorporate key provisions from Significant global and regional legal instruments, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, into Nigeria's legal system. The Act strengthens the mandates of the National Policy on Education (2013), which guarantees nine years of free and compulsory education for all Nigerian children. However, as Ogunode (2020) asserts, the

non-domestication and poor implementation of this law in certain states particularly in the North have significantly impeded progress toward reducing the number of out-of-school children. As of 2022, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) confirmed that while 31 out of Nigeria's 36 states have enacted legislation aligning Despite the provisions of the Child Rights Act, five states Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Kano, and Zamfara have yet to fully domesticate or have yet to do so (Ahmed-Gusau, 2022). This legislative gap not only reflects a lack of political will but also perpetuates educational exclusion for millions of children, especially in regions already burdened by insecurity, poverty, and cultural resistance to formal education.

Poverty

Poverty is among the greatest challenging obstacles to educational access in Nigeria, significantly undermining efforts to achieve universal basic education. While basic education is constitutionally free and compulsory, indirect costs such as examination fees, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) levies, uniforms, books, and transportation place a substantial financial burden on low-income households. These costs often force families particularly those living in rural or underserved communities to make difficult choices about which children can attend school and which must stay at home. Consequently, children from impoverished households are frequently excluded from formal education, with older children, girls, and orphans most likely to be affected.

Musa (2019) affirms that the escalating poverty levels across the country hinder many parents from enrolling or retaining their children in school. In many cases, children are compelled to engage in street hawking, domestic labour, or other forms of child labour in order to contribute to the family's income or provide care within the household. UNICEF (2022) reports that over 43% of Nigerian children are involved in child labour, a situation exacerbated by deepening socioeconomic inequalities and weakening family structures. In such environments, education is often deprioritized in favor of immediate survival needs. Furthermore, the economic realities force many children to assume adult responsibilities prematurely, including working to support younger siblings or securing food for the household. This phenomenon disproportionately affects girls, particularly those from poor and rural backgrounds, who are probable to leave school prematurely due to gendered expectations around caregiving and domestic duties. As a result, poverty continues to perpetuate a cycle of educational exclusion, intergenerational illiteracy, and limited socioeconomic mobility.

Fertility Rate

Nigeria has a notably high fertility rate, influenced largely by religious and cultural norms, especially in the northern region, where it is common for individuals to have multiple wives and larger families. According to Ogunode, Jegede, and Ajape (2021a), a significant obstacle to the successful implementation of primary education policies is the continuous rise in primary school enrolment figures. Meeting the educational needs of this growing population demands substantial financial investment in both human and material resources. The country's population continues to expand

rapidly, significantly driving up the cost of providing education. As noted by NOUN (2012), Nigeria's population structure is heavily youth-dominated this age group constitutes the primary demand for education at all levels, placing enormous pressure on the country's instructional infrastructure as well as resources.

Lack of Political Will

Adanna, and Ayoko (2022) identify a major contributor to the surge in out-of-school children in Nigeria is often linked to a shortfall in authentic political will and long-term policy commitment, particularly at the state and local government levels. Despite being primarily responsible for managing and administering basic education, many state and local authorities have shown little dedication to improving the sector. This concern was echoed by the federal government, which criticized some northern state governments for allegedly mismanaging funds allocated for basic education. The Minister of Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu, publicly expressed disappointment in certain state governments, noting that such issues were undermining the federal government's efforts to support education. He also highlighted the flawed implementation of the Almajiri education initiative as a major setback. In response to the educational needs of mobile populations, the federal government had earlier established the National Commission for Nomadic Education in 1989. This commission was tasked with expanding access to basic education for nomadic communities, improving literacy, and equipping individuals with practical skills to enhance standard of living and contribution to nationwide growth.

Summary and Conclusion

The challenge of out-of-school children is a global educational concern with far-reaching economic consequences, and Nigeria is no exception. The dramatic rise in the number of OOSC from 8.7 million in 2014 to 13.2 million in 2015, and further to 16 million in 2019 is deeply troubling, even though a slight decline was recorded in 2020. Given the socio-economic and security implications of this growing population, urgent and comprehensive action is required. Nigeria's economic growth, national stability, and security are closely linked to how effectively the issue of OOSC is addressed. A multi-faceted approach involving both government and non-governmental actors is essential to make meaningful progress. This should include the integration of innovative educational strategies such as Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) alongside conventional interventions such as expanding and rehabilitating school infrastructure, increasing public awareness and enrolment campaigns, providing economic support to vulnerable households, improving security around schools, and enforcing existing education laws.

Right of entry to education in Nigeria is heavily predisposed by dynamics such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographic location, leading to uneven distribution of OOSC across the country. Consequently, targeted and region-specific interventions are necessary, with priority given to the most affected areas. As Okorosaye-Orubite (2017) rightly

points out, availability of educational services should extend beyond formal schooling to include non-formal education settings. This expanded access must cater not only to school-age children but also to youth and adults who were unable to attend school during their formative years. Special attention must be given to nomadic populations, migrant fisher folk, itinerant farm workers, and other socially, economically, or physically vulnerable groups. Providing inclusive education services in both formal and non-formal contexts is essential to ensuring no one is left behind.

Tackling the Out-of-School Children Crisis in Nigeria: Policy Recommendations

The growing concern of unenrolled school-age children in Nigeria is a national emergency that requires urgent, coordinated, and sustained policy intervention. One of the foremost steps towards addressing this challenge is the establishment of a comprehensive and workable national-level strategy framework jointly implemented by all tiers of government. This framework ought to be inclusive, evidence-based, and focused on ensuring universal access to basic education. It must clearly articulate strategies, responsibilities, timelines, and measurable targets for reducing the out-of-school population across different regions of the country.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need for massive investment in educational infrastructure. Governments at all levels should prioritize the construction of additional basic education schools, particularly in underserved and hard-to-reach rural communities. These schools must be equipped with adequate classrooms, sanitation facilities, and inclusive learning environments. To support this, budgetary allocations to the basic education sub-sector should be significantly increased and disbursed in a timely and transparent manner.

Equally important is the implementation of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Policies and programmes aimed at increasing school enrolment must not only be well-designed but also thoroughly monitored to ensure they are effectively executed. This includes regular assessments of school attendance, teacher deployment, resource utilization, and learning outcomes. Monitoring should also involve community participation to ensure accountability and local ownership.

In terms of funding, the government can consider reallocating a portion of the savings from fuel subsidy reforms towards education. These funds could be used to provide essential teaching as well as instructional resources for teachers and learners nationwide. Access to quality instructional materials will enhance the teaching-learning process and encourage retention and performance among pupils.

To safeguard these resources from mismanagement and diversion, it is essential for corruption-fighting agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission to play an active role in addressing the issues affecting the education sector. They should be actively involved in tracking education expenditure, particularly funds allocated to the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. Their involvement will enhance

transparency, deter misappropriation, and strengthen public confidence in the system.

Addressing the issue of insecurity is another critical aspect. Many children are unable to attend school due to threats posed by insurgency, banditry, and communal violence, particularly in northern Nigeria. The government must prioritize national security by resolving the underlying drivers of conflict and ensuring that for both learners and educators, schools represent areas of safety and protection.

Additionally, introducing social security packages such as school meal programmes, child grants, and health coverage for families in low-income and rural communities can significantly boost school enrolment. These incentives will ease the economic burden on parents and serve as motivation for families to support their children's access to education, particularly in areas where child labour or household responsibilities compete with formal education.

Lastly, the overall cost of education should be minimized to make schooling more accessible to all. This includes eliminating educational fees at the basic school level, offering conditional cash transfers to indigent families, and implementing community-driven sensitization campaigns to shift harmful socio-cultural norms that discourage school enrolment, particularly for girls and children with disabilities.

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