

Realizing SDG 4 for children through a rights-based approach to quality education in Nigeria: Lessons from South Africa and Uganda

Godswill Owoche Antai¹ & Benjamin Okorie Ajah²

College of Law, University of South Africa, Pretoria, Email: eajahbo@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

This research examines the extent to which the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) is delivering inclusive and equitable quality education at all stages in Nigeria from a children's rights perspective. This article aims to appraise the extent to which international and regional human rights instruments protect the right to education. Utilising a doctrinal and comparative research methodology, the paper reveals a serious gap in terms of access, budget, infrastructure and accountability, especially in the terrorism affected states and among the socially backward classes. The paper contends that a rights-based approach informed by principles such as participation, non-discrimination, accountability and legal enforceability provides a more effective basis for realising SDG 4 in Nigeria. The study highlights the need to reinterpret educational policy through the lens of human rights to dismantle barriers such as institutional obstacles and attain equity as a means of realising Nigeria's commitment to educating children.

Keywords: Human Rights, Sustainable Development, Education, and Children

Introduction

Education contributes to the development of individuals, particularly children, to realise their full potential and is a key instrument of development and poverty reduction and of countering income disparity and social exclusion. Instruments of the United Nations for human rights, for example the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 13) and the Convention on the Right of the Child (Articles 28 and 29) recognise this as a right to free and compulsory primary education for the child and to access equal opportunities for quality education on the upper levels of education (Siddiqui, 2012). Even at the sub-regional level, education can be enjoined as a means through which human dignity, human development and human equity can be realised by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Within this context, the recent (2015) universal reaffirmation of the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs), the inclusion of SDG 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 commits both the global and national to further commitment to education as a human right and development goal (Christinah Sadiki, 2024). Nigeria, as a signatory state to both the global and continental instruments, has both legal and moral responsibility to ensure that the right to education is realised by its people, and that means especially children, for they make up the larger portion of its population. At the national level, Section

18 of the Nigerian Constitution, the Child Rights Act 2003, and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act 2004 form legal and policy grounds upon which protection and promotion of education are established. Institutional mechanisms such as the Federal Ministry of Education, Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), and State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) are established for the purposes of enforcing education-related policy and obligations to legal provisions (Arowolo & Arowolo, 2024). Despite such normative and institutional obligations, access to quality education in Nigeria is bedevilled by numerous challenges, such as underfunding, inadequate infrastructures, low numbers of teachers, insecurity, gender inequality, as well as barriers of a sociocultural nature. They have all resulted in extensive educational deprivation, with specific impact borne by children within rural, conflict, and marginalised communities. Such studies are thus warranted by the perceived disconnect between Nigerian legal mandates and reality on the ground regarding SDG 4 implementation (Gunawan, 2025). The argument is that a rights approach underpinned by a set of values that include embracing universality, non-discrimination, participation, rule of law, and accountability provides a more efficient and equitable path to overcoming systemic barriers to education and SDG 4 realisation targets. The main research question at this point is to what extent current legal, policy, and institutional undertakings aid in delivering a rights-based approach to education, how Nigeria has progressed thus far in achieving SDG 4 targets, and how Nigeria's efforts towards quality and inclusive education are compatible with international

instruments on human rights and what are the key challenges to achieving quality education for all children within Nigeria (Hepzibah, 2021). The significance of this research is that it enriches the discussion of education, human rights, and development within Nigeria. Having analysed SDG 4 realisation under a rights agenda, this study significantly contributes to sectors of normative and implementation failures within the provision of quality education to Nigerian children. The study further offers evidence-informed recommendations to policymakers, civil society advocates, and development actors who are concerned with realising the right to education as a chief driver of sustainable development and social justice.

Methodology

This research applies doctrinal and comparative analysis to investigate the progressive realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for the child in a rights-based approach to quality education in Nigeria, with insights from South Africa and Uganda. The analysis of the treatment of the subject matter: What contains the methodology applied is a combination of critical analysis of relevant legal instruments, policies, and judicial decisions and international instruments, including the UDHR, the CRC, and the ACRWC, in relation to the right to education, as well as national constitutional and education legislation of the studied states. Secondary research includes materials from peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, reports from international organisations including UNESCO and UNICEF, and pertinent government documents. With the comparative methodology, the research analyses how the legal and policy processes in relation to the realisation of SDG 4 in Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda converge or diverge, with a view to developing how the latter two jurisdictions, by virtue of their demonstrable commitment to embedding human rights principles in education policy and practice, may best inform the former. The data is analysed descriptively and inferentially to examine the degree to which the Nigerian education system mirrors a rights-based model of accessibility, availability, acceptability and adaptability. The study also examines the organisation, policy coherence and accountability systems within the three states to identify potential avenues for Nigeria to enhance its legal and institutional structures in pursuit of SDG 4 for children.

Assessment of the Realisation of SDG 4 for Children in Nigeria

Monitoring progress for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for children of Nigeria from a rights-based perspective paints a picture of sporadic incremental progress, built-in inequalities, and structural failures. SDG 4 for inclusive, equitable, and quality education and lifelong learning for all is an inclusive range of targets strongly linked with children's rights as right-holders themselves (Gunawan,

2025). They encompass access to free and quality basic education, early childhood development and pre-primary education, gender equality in education, and education of children with disability and other marginalised ones. Nigeria has expressed rhetorical commitment to SDG 4 through policy expressions, policy plans, and institutionally formulated schemes, but realisation of such targets remains sporadic and short of inclusive and equitable norms inhering under a perspective of rights. In granting access to free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, Nigeria has made considerable progress, primarily by enforcing the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, ensuring free and compulsory basic education at basic and junior secondary levels (Bolaji, 2014). The UBEC organisational structure and its cooperative agreement with state-level sub-divisions such as SUBEBs have enhanced school facility development, fostered enrolment, and helped fund basic education.

Still, under such initiatives, the country continues to endure one of the highest rates of children out of school in the world, approximated at over 10 million children by UNICEF, who are primarily residents mostly in Northern Nigeria and endure poverty, insecurity, as well as socio-cultural issues. Education Quality is also a concern; most public schools don't have good infrastructure or qualified teachers, and they lack teaching material and suitable conditions for studying. The divide between city and countryside, and public and private schools, further exacerbates disparities that are rife within the right to a quality education. (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). The sector of early childhood education, a very important precursor to a lifetime of productivity and mental well-being, has drawn growing concern within Nigeria's policy with respect to education in recent years. National Policy on Education emphasises early childhood care and education (ECCE), and attempts have been made to integrate this within mainstreams of traditional schooling (Usman, 2024). Nonetheless, accessibility still remains limited as well as vastly uneven, with early childhood education essentially non-existent within rural locations and being powered almost exclusively by private provision within such regions. Most children who reside within rural and underdeveloped locations continue to lack such as a result of the non-existence of public pre-primary schools, limitations within accessibility, as well as public perception of perceived value within ECCE being marginal as well. Such a lack of attention can make SDG 4 inaccessible since this SDG aims at ensuring all boys and girls acquire quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030 (Tekin, 2019).

Gender equity in schools has been enhanced quantitatively, especially at all levels, where enrolment of boys and girls at the primary level has increasingly tended to converge with

that of boys and girls at higher levels of schooling as well. Supportive policies by the Government and donors, such as the Girl Child Education Programme, Safe Schools Initiative, and conditionality-linked transfer programmes, have led to an uptick in girls' enrolment and stay-in-school behaviour in schools. In the wake of ongoing advances, regional inequalities are still very wide – particularly in the North-West and North-East, where social and cultural norms, early marriages, poverty, and security issues act as deterrents to enrollment, especially for girls in schools (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2008). High rates of Gender violence, minimal WASH facilities in schools, and a dearth of gender responsive policies constitute barriers to girls' access to and retention in school. These indicators show that attempting to measure gender parity through straightforward numbers is problematic, and rather point to the need for more transformative, rights-based measures that address structural discrimination and enable the education of girls in safe, inclusive and enabling environments. For children with disability and those marginal others like internally displaced children (IDPs), those living under conditions of war, and those who live in Almajiri arrangements, the equity and inclusivity of education under SDG 4 are not yet realised. Even while there is legal and policy support like the National Policy on Inclusive Education and Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018, there are tepid and spasmodic implementations (Guha & Mukherjee, 2025). Schools are not built to be inclusive, lack those with training, and lack facilities sufficient to educate mainstream children with diverse educational needs. To add to this, stigma and marginalisation that still taint disability persist in excluding the majority of children from schools. In war-torn areas, instability has disrupted extended learning, destroyed school infrastructures, and caused children trauma as well as loss of knowledge outcomes. For those Almajiri children whose education is largely restricted to unstructured Qur'anic teachings under unhygienic environments, denial of access to mainstream schools feeds exclusion cycles and denies children the right to inclusive and quality education provision (Anti et al, 2025). As such, while there are laudable efforts by Nigeria to position its education sector to achieve SDG 4 targets, the realisation of targets by children remains patchy and highly fractured. A review that puts children as central actors with recognised and realised rights identifies that legal and policy articulations are not enough without forceful enforcement, special interventions for most excluded ones, and responsibility measures to ensure no one is left behind. SDG 4 realisation for Nigeria is going to take not only sustained political will as well as fiscal investment, but instead a shift to educational policies that put on centre stage all children's dignity, autonomy, and rights as a priority (Emordi & Ruth, 2023).

Challenges and barriers to realising SDG 4 for Children in Nigeria

Realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for Nigerian children is obstructed by powerful dynamics of structural, socio-economic, political, and cultural inhibitions that continue to suppress access to inclusive and equitable quality education. In addition to Nigeria's legal obligation to international and regional instruments of human rights and internalisation of responsibility to teach with national policy and legal instruments, the practical realisation of SDG 4 is forcefully limited by structural inhibitions (Antai et al, 2025). Distinguishable such inhibitions are poor funding, perennial conflicts and insecurities, poor amenities accompanied by poor quality pedagogy, and entrenched cultural and societal attitudes that bar vulnerable children, most especially adolescent girls. Poor funding is a causal inhibitor to SDG 4 realisation within Nigeria. In spite of recognising a huge place for education within national development, allocations to the sector within annual budgets have continued to recurrently drop below UNESCO's 15–20% minimum threshold of national budget allocations that are realised as a minimum to finance basic activities and operations within basic schools' sectors. Such annual schools' conditions with perennial under-funding have translated into perennial schools' statuses of under-infrastructures, poor quality pedagogy and teaching materials, poor remuneration of teachers, and poor systems of monitoring and evaluation (Matthew & Kazaure, 2020). Most public schools, most especially schools at grass-roots and underserved sites, are underprovided with states of dilapidations without basic amenities such as classrooms, toilet amenities, electricity supply, and clean potable water sources. Inadequate investments into education limit the capacity of the state to expand access, enrich quality, and absorb an ever-growing pool of school-going children, thus contravening one of the central pillars of a rights approach that obligates to progressively realise the right to education with maximum available resources (Mncube, 2023).

Insecurity and violence, especially in the northern Nigerian states, are another significant hindrance to access and continuity in schools for children. Terror operations of Boko Haram, directly targeting Western-style education, have entailed destruction of schools, kidnapping and killing of pupils and teachers, and displacement of tens of thousands of households. Internally displaced children, particularly those living in overcrowding with no easy access to schooling facilities, are vulnerable to long-term disruption to schooling and psychological trauma. Lack of safety has removed enormous numbers of children, particularly girls, from schools because of fear and destroyed schooling facilities. The 'Safe Schools Initiative' and other safety-focused interventions, while to be congratulated, were not rolled out and institutionally embedded within insecure

locations in time. The widespread existence of the lack of safety erodes education availability and access and violates children's right to a safe and suitable place to learn (Kpae & Tajudeen, 2021).

The bad infrastructure and teacher quality are also a big challenge to SDG 4 for Nigerian Children. Most lack the physical infrastructure of classrooms, libraries, laboratories and toilets to facilitate quality teaching and learning. Another usual rather than exceptional phenomenon in schools is the crammed classes, with an indiscriminately poor pupil-teacher ratio that diminishes teacher quality and the possibility of offering individual attention to every student. This is further compounded by a lack of trained teachers to make this acute problem particularly severe at rural and disadvantaged locations within the country, and incessant professional development and motivation for very limited teaching personnel who are available. Most of those who are available are not properly trained to meet differentiated learning needs, and are most often not present at schools due to poor work spirit and irregular payment of wages (Nwokeocha, 2017).

Social and cultural barriers also have a far-reaching impact on children's access to quality education, especially in the case of girls and children belonging to marginalised sections of society. Child marriage, gender roles, and traditional norms continue to dissuade the admission of girls to school and retention of girls at school, especially in North-East and North-West states. Early marriage is viewed as a customary or economic survival strategy in most communities at the cost of the education of the girl child and her autonomy. Gender-based violence in the form of school harassment, unavailability of proper menstrual management facilities, and absence of female role models in the teaching fraternity also discourage girls from attending school (Esavwede, Gasiokwu & Antai, 2025). Lastly, socio-cultural prejudices on children with special educational needs and children belonging to the nomadic or non-conventional education system, like the Almajiri, also give rise to their systematic exclusion from the mainstream school. Such barriers contradict the logic of non-discrimination, equity, and participation at the heart of a rights-based approach and lead to traps of poverty, illiteracy, and marginalisation (Nasidi, 2024). SDG 4 attainment by Nigerian children is arrested by multi-sectoral threats requiring holistic and rights-based interventions. Without addressing systemic defects in financing, security of students and teachers, infrastructure of schools, and capability and attitudes of teachers, and erosion of society due to certain cultural norms, the promise of education inclusive and egalitarian to every Nigerian child will continue to be a mirage. An approach to rights that is anchored in the principles of equity and focuses on the welfare of the child everywhere must demand the urgent and collaborative action of government,

civil society, and international partners to break through those deep-rooted barriers and to secure the inalienable rights and dignity of the child in every part of the country (Adeniran et al., 2019).

Evaluation of government strategies, policies, and interventions

Consequently, thereto, Niger State has thus taken some measures, policies, and interventions further toward achieving SDG 4 of inclusive and equitable quality education, and fostering lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. They are conscious of education's preeminent status as a central human right enshrined both within international instruments concerning human rights, to which Nigeria acceded as a signatory, the Children's Convention, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and national constitutional instruments, the 1999 Constitution and Child Rights Act. Though this normative basis exists, implementation and effectiveness have been patchy, thus inspiring questions as to their adequacy, coordination, and rights-orientation in catalysing concrete advances in children's education in Nigeria. One of such policy instruments in the vanguard is the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme, its adopted by an act of 2004 as the UBE Act. The programme ensures free and compulsory nine years of basic formal education, six years of primary and three years of junior secondary schooling, for every child in Nigeria. The Act places legal obligations upon parents, guardians, and governments, and gives an outline for the provision and monitoring of provision for basic education (Majekodunmi et al., 2024). Though the UBE Programme is a significant step forward in securing access, issues of implementation are rife, including inadequate provision of budget, collapsing oversight mechanisms, poor school infrastructure, and inadequate teachers. Most states have not domesticated nor taken actions on provisions of the UBE Act, and this has helped to perpetuate inequalities of access and quality of learning, particularly under conditions of conflicts and periphery locations. The programme's potential to deliver universal accessibility, however, remains to a very great extent under-tapped, significantly for marginal and vulnerable children (Ejere, 2011).

In pursuit of early childhood education, the Nigerian state has enacted the National Policy on Education (NPE), which identifies early childhood care and education (ECCE) as being the sine qua non to lifetime learning. The policy provides for the provision of pre-primary schools in public schools and integration of ECCE with basic education. In practice, though, early childhood education remains a low priority with meagre budgetary articulation and inadequate numbers of trained caregivers, suitable environments for learning, and common curricula to bolster sound

development. The lack of an overarching legislative instrument to entrench ECCE as a right has also further inhibited its full realisation, while leaving myriad children, most particularly those living in rural and disadvantaged environments, on the periphery of this initial period of learning (Sooter, 2013). The Nigerian Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), which has been designed with development partners to inform policy planning and investment within education, establishes priorities aligned with SDG 4, and these are to elevate equity, construct teacher development, augment infrastructures, and correct gender imbalances. Supporter policies such as the National Gender in Education Policy, the Safe Schools Initiative, and the Home-Grown School Feeding Program have also been unleashed to promote enrolment, retention, and learner well-being. Despite such programs professing adherence to rights-based orientation of equity and inclusion, effectiveness has always been derailed by poor coordination within federal, state, and local agencies, by inadequate incorporation of stakeholders, as well as weak data systems to aid monitoring and accountability. Moreover, myriad interventions continue to be donor-funded or pilot and are thus not sustainable or scalable to the larger educational landscape (Dauda, 2007).

It appears to be a titanic endeavour to protect students and their right to education from abductions by crises perpetrated by Boko Haram insurgents from northern Nigeria, embarked upon as a Safe Schools Initiative. All those initiatives, though, have been set back by persistent insecurity, poor funding, and ineffective law enforcement. The extent of such reportage of such a project remains small, and a huge number of vulnerable regions' schools remain closed, with tens of thousands of children remaining out of school due to fear (Antai et al, 2025). Likewise, the Almajiri Education Programme, meant to streamline Quranic studies with mainstream courses, has not been effective at all, as policy interventions are inconsistent, there are no fitting infrastructures, and traditional religious authorities are against such moves. Though such policies and interventions are an articulation of Nigeria's will to fulfil its mandate under SDG 4 and to maintain the right to education, such policies and interventions are not only fragmented but also largely reactive, thus undermining long-term outcomes. A rights approach not only requires legal and policy instruments but also a structural commitment to participation, non-discrimination, openness, responsibility, and resource mobilisation. Sadly, there is still poor educational governance with institutionally rooted inefficiencies, corruption, and poor political will that undermine a proper unleashing and tracing of government policy directions. Overall, despite Nigeria's commendable legislation and various policy interventions to bring quality education to children, lapses in implementation, poor inclusion of a rights

approach, and poor sustainable funding and coordination among institutions have adequately undermined such policies from being very effective. Such a review and strengthening of such policies, all guided by a broad and wide rights approach, are necessary to fill such policy words with educational reality for children to be served by Nigeria (Murtala, Ahmad, & Sule, 2025).

The Role of a Rights-Based Approach in Enhancing Quality Education

Such a process socialises children as active rather than passive rights-holders with voice and influence rather than passive recipients and subjects, with apparent responsibility to governments and duty-bearers to non-discriminatory respect, protect, and fulfil the right to education (Antai et al, 2025). Infusion into education systems, policies with values from human rights such as responsibility, non-discrimination, and transparency, and participation inclusive policies are rendered fair, inclusive, and responsive to diverse as well as diversifying needs alike, especially by those such a kind of learners who are uprooted and vulnerable themselves, kinds of needs. Participation provides a cornerstone to a rights approach and provides children, families, societies, and other stakeholders with tangible opportunities to contribute to help develop, implement, and monitor programs and policies by themselves (Okpong, Antai & Ndifon, 2025). Inclusive such a procedure optimises relevance, ownership, and responsiveness so that education systems better match improved conditions and cultural traits local, and empower students to demand and procure entitlements by themselves. In Nigeria, expanding participation to children and societies, especially such marginal ones, including but not limited to such ones as uprooted individuals, children with special needs, and girls, helps to identify bottlenecks as well as design solutions specific to existing conditions of life and hence augment entry and quality correspondingly (Craissati et al., 2007).

Mechanisms of accountability can contribute to holding education providers and governments accountable for their duties under SDG 4. A rights-based approach requires transparent grievance mechanisms, monitoring of progress and compliance with legal and policy frameworks. In Nigeria, this means building the capacity of institutions such as the UBEC, education monitoring bodies, and human rights commissions to effectively hold service delivery, financial management, and compliance with standards to account. This also means putting in place complaints and redressing mechanisms and ensuring that these are accessible to children, parents and civil society to hold authorities accountable for violations or deficiencies within the education system. Alignment to accountability inculcates the necessary value of responsibility and ongoing improvement required for narrowing the gap in quality

education and equity. The principle of non-discrimination ensures that all children have equal opportunities to receive education free from gender bias, ethnic barriers, physical impediments such as disabilities or illness of any sort, and poverty. When non-discrimination becomes an operational concept, the challenges of biases that generate exclusion or marginalisation of certain groups are eradicated. Redressing exaggerated gaps between the genders, and developing learning environments for children living with disability, and targeting interventions for conflict and rural areas (Craissati et al., 2007). A rights-based approach places high emphasis on curriculum and teacher training on diversity and sensitivity, and policies enabling equitable sharing of resources. This principle has an immediate correlate with the subject emphasis of SDG 4 on equitable and inclusive education and the promise of committed expenditures being leveraged at “leaving no one behind (Antai et al, 2025). Transparency follows learning from and accountability through participation by making learning achievement more transparent, providing greater openness of the disbursement of the budget, and making decisions. Open governance gives access to data on education expenditures, reforms, and performance, and enables education stakeholders to take part at an informed level and keep tabs. In Nigerian contexts, transparency reduces corruption, rationalises allocation of resources, and enhances education leaders' and communities' trust. It further becomes the foundation upon which independent monitoring and advocacy take place by the media as well as civil society (Hepzibah, 2021).

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the judiciary, and the media all play significant roles in facilitating the enhancement of education rights realisation using a rights-based approach. CSOs take the roles of watchdog, advocate, and agents of service delivery and work tirelessly to identify gaps, hold the state accountable, and advance the voices of marginalised communities and children. CSOs are engaged in community mobilisation, give legal aid, and take part in developing and tracking the delivery of policies. The judiciary offers an important entry point to education rights enforcement through constitutional provisions' interpretation and internationalisation, statutory legal provisions' operationalisation, and international treaty enforcement. Through strategic litigation and judicial activism, the Nigerian judiciary may yet be able to galvanise government to enforce compliance, to redress discriminatory conduct, and to break new ground in points of legal principle establishing the justiciability of the right to education (Craissati et al., 2007). Finally, the media provides a suitable space to contribute to public informing, violations narrating, and offering expert opinions on education policy and practice-making. Critical reporting and regular coverage of the education sector might have the potential to keep

policymakers in check and increase transparency and accountability in sector practices. In conclusion, adopting a rights-based approach to educational practice and policy making strengthens the pursuit of the realisation of SDG 4 by integrating essential fundamental human rights elements to promote greater inclusion, equity and quality. Participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and transparency serve as effective instruments for making the right to education a reality, turning system flaws and barriers into means of positive evolution. The energetic roles played by the judiciary, the media, and CSOs further consolidate these practices and ensure children's rights are respected and made actualised and fulfilled in education, and children are never left behind (Fredman, Campbell & Taylor, 2018).

Assessing Nigeria's Legal and Policy Alignment with Rights-Based Approaches and SDG 4: Gaps, Implications, and Impact on Children's Development

Intricate synthesis of Nigeria's policy and legal instruments identifies satisfactory but partial convergence with a rights-based approach (RBA) to education's inherent values and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)'s targets. Section 18 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution and statutory acts like the Child Rights Act (2003) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004) make a clear legal basis affirming education as children's inherent right. The acts reflect RBA's pillars of responsibility to deliver free and compulsory basic education, non-discrimination, and establish implementation and monitoring arrangements of RBA's pillars of responsibility to encourage participation, responsibility to deliver basic education, non-discrimination, and transparency to bridge the gap between policy intention and implementation reality. The national instruments are supplemented by Nigeria's international treaty obligations under such treaties as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), as well as regional instruments like the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, all of which entrenches right to inclusive and good quality education. Existence of such an explicit legal basis despite all this, to what extent Nigeria's education policies and practices practically reflect transformational ideals and SDG 4 targets of RBA are thinly spread and uneven, is a source of concern. Where Universal Basic Education Programme and complementing policies enhanced enrolment and built structural pillars, a remedy still awaits to be supplied to bridge the RBA's pillars of participation, responsibility, non-discrimination, and transparency divide. The discontinuous coordination between central, state, and local governments, as well as erratic funding, weak enforcement, as well as limited stakeholder participation, all serve to strongly frustrate comprehensively meeting fully children's educational entitlements. Additionally, systemic injustices that are mostly found in the north and countryside

occasion a disconnect between the espoused universalism of legal texts and the experiential lived reality of exclusion by girls, children with disability, as well as those rendered displaced by war. Gaps between constitutional promise, law, and street-level bureaucracy are skewed to huge omissions (Sahani, 2025). To begin with, while education is constitutionally enshrined as a directive principle of state policy but not as an enforceable right, this constrains access to judges and disappoints state responsibility. Precisely along those lines, while the Child Rights Act and UBE Act were enacted with the provision of rights-based, inconsistent domestication by states, and poor implementation, render most children out of school or receiving poor schooling. Physical infrastructure shortage, shortage of qualified teachers, security breaches owing to insurgency, and socio-cultural barriers further propagate such gaps that occasion a disconnect between normative ascription and lived schooling reality (Isokpan & Durojaye, 2016).

Unable to effectively achieve the right to quality education promotes severe and long-term consequences on the development of children and the overall socio-economic development future of Nigeria. Also, children who are deprived of quality education are less likely to achieve their cognitive, social, and economic potential, with less contribution to societal development and better life opportunities. Denial of education entrenches poverty traps, illiteracy, and isolation with disproportionate harm as well as widening inequalities. Nationally, underinvestment in human development via education stifles economic growth, social cohesion, and democratic good governance, inhibiting Nigeria's ability to release its young ones as Innovation and Development dividends (Umo et al, 2025). Positively, repeated education shortages endanger Nigeria's meeting international obligations and global commitment extolled within SDGs, damaging its reputation and standing within global policy forums for human and development outcomes. Broadly, even where policy and legal tools reassert an integral centre to children's right to a quality education within a rights-based framework, broad sweeping deficits and structural roadblocks to complete SDG 4 compliance inhibit complete compliance. Addressing such a deficit becomes less a matter of enforcing children's rights, but a precondition to enforcing Nigeria's sustainable development and societal advancement. It takes collective action to make legal obligations within acceptable, well-rounded and accountable trends in education for all children to empower education to allow it to unlock its transformative potential as a right of a person in education (Emordi & Ruth, 2023).

Lessons from South Africa and Uganda

The experiences of South Africa and Uganda offer valuable lessons in how Nigeria can successfully achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for children through a rights-based approach to quality education. Both nations have taken notable strides toward infusing these principles within their educational models, and both provide workable templates for reform. Section 29 of the 1996 South African Constitution also explicitly entitles the right to education, providing a solid legal base to promote inclusivity and equal access to education. Progressing towards the realisation of the South African government's promise for free and compulsory basic education under a regime of firm social justice jurisprudence has played a part in increasing and equalising access (Mateus & Shange, 2021). Historic decisions like *Governing Body of the Juma Musjid Primary School v. Juma Musjid Trust*, [2011] demonstrate how courts have protected children's right to education and held governments accountable to their duties to ensure no child is shut out of schools. Furthermore, as part of the post-apartheid educational transformation, there has been a strong focus in South Africa on challenging systemic oppression through inclusive syllabi, teacher education, as well as affirmative support (funding) to historically disadvantaged schools. It has made equity and participation, two important elements of a rights-based approach, much stronger. Uganda's experience also provides useful guidance and lessons for Nigeria in the mainstreaming of education policies with human rights principles. The right to education is enshrined in the Ugandan Constitution and the Education Act of 2008, and there are policies for both universal primary education (UPE) and universal secondary education (USE). Uganda's partnership with development partners and civil society organisations in delivering the education-for-all programs has enhanced community participation, transparency and accountability in education governance (Antai, 2024). The focus of this country on gender equality, especially through schemes like the Gender in Education Policy (2009), shows how legal and policy frameworks can be tools which help to address barriers to girls' schooling and children from marginalised communities. Uganda's experience also highlights the need to mainstream human rights education in schools to raise awareness, tolerance, and empower students from a young age (Aidonojie et al., 2025).

Both South Africa and Uganda can teach Nigeria that a rights-based approach to achieving SDG 4 is not about policy statements but about having legal rights that can be enforced, institutional accountability, and political will sustained over time. Nigeria can draw lessons from South Africa's lead in constitutionally entrenching the right to education and in the role of the judiciary in monitoring compliance. In the same vein, Uganda's communal and participatory framework might guide Nigeria in enhancing

multi-stakeholder involvement, notably parents, local collectives and civil society. They both demonstrate the importance of addressing systemic inequalities through targeted measures geared towards vulnerable children, sufficient resources, and an effective allocation of teachers. They further show that the quality of education increases when rights-based principles—non-discrimination, equality, participation, and accountability are incorporated into the design and implementation of policies. Therefore, by drawing from the legal rigour of South Africa and the inclusive policy mechanisms of Uganda, Nigeria can develop a robust framework for offering quality education which not only meets every child's right to education, but also promotes social justice, and is cognisant with the broader intent of SDG 4 (Antai et al, 2025)

Conclusion and Recommendation

The intersection of education as a universal human right and the realisation of SDG 4 in Nigeria has been brought into sharp focus, and this calls for adopting a rights-based approach if quality, equitable and inclusive education for all children is to be realised. This study indicates that Nigeria has made good legal and policy provisions that recognise a right to education and are consistent with international human rights norms, but that there remain serious disconnects between such efforts and actual practices. Systematic gaps like lack of funding, insecurities, poor infrastructure, and socio-cultural inhibitions still bar the complete realisation of children's education rights with highly uneven impacts for vulnerable and marginalised segments of society. Such letdowns not only damage children's development and personhood but also Nigeria's overall socio-economic development and sustainable development agenda as well.

This study recommends that budget spending for education will need to be stepped up, not merely to widen access but to enhance educational facilities, teacher training, and educational materials. Transparent and efficient mechanisms for holding a person responsible that keep track of how expenditures are made, probe policy impact, and permit correction are no less required. Such interventions by policy need to take centre stage for vulnerable and marginalised children, special needs children, internally displaced children, and those scarred by war/conflict or poverty, so that special programs can remove these obstacles to education. Enhancing data systems to record and process data is also needed to efficiently check progress versus targets of SDG 4, to note inequalities, and to provide evidence to influence policy. Disaggregated data will also be needed to allow actors to hold governments to account and demand transparency in the management of the education system. Global partnerships with international bodies, civil society and local citizens are necessary as well to tap into technical expertise, resources and grassroots advocacy. Partnerships

can close gaps in programming, support advocacy, and mobilise momentum for rights-based education reform. In brief, a speedy development of a rights-based and inclusive policy response on education reform is inevitable if the Nigerian education system is to be transformed. Promoting the dignity and agency of the child, and catering for its needs, is the heart of the solution, and it is that which delivers equity and societal development. By adopting these reforms, Nigeria will fulfil its international and domestic legal and moral duties and will lay the groundwork for its children and its future, and thus for what the country desperately needs to be able to grow sustainably, once again.

References

- Adeniran, A., Onyekwena, C., Onubedo, G., Ishaku, J., & Ekeruche, A. (2019). *Is Nigeria on track to achieving quality education for all? Drivers and implications (CSEA Case Study)*. http://cseaafrica.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/08/190710_Summary-Nigeria_Final.pdf
- Aidonioje, P. A., Izevbuwa, O. G., Obieshi, E., Okpoko, M. O., & Damina, J. J. (2025). Advancing gender's balance rights through constitutional and legal reforms: A comparative study of Nigeria and Uganda. *Journal of Indonesian Constitutional Law*.
- Antai, G. O., Ekpenisi, C., Obisesan, O. O., Umo, M. E., & Kolo, E. A. (2025). Human rights and the use of force: Examining the Nigerian government's response to the #EndSARS protest. *NIU Journal of Educational Research*, 11(1), 69–82.
- Antai, G. O., Ekpenisi, C., Okonji, C. I., Kolo, E. A., & Okpong, D. E. (2025). Balancing national security and human rights: A critical analysis of Nigeria's anti-terrorism laws. *NIU Journal of Social Science*, 11(1), 287–299.
- Antai, G. O., Etobe, E. I., Ushie, E. A., Okpa, J. T., Obiefuna, O., Nnamani, R. G., Enweonwu, O. A., & Asomba, I. U. (2025). Appraisal of Africa's response to the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts within the continent. *African Renaissance*, 22(3), 79–96.
- Antai, G. O., Ndifon Jr., C. O., Ikubanni, O. O., Ogba, S. A., & Imiefoh, A. I. (2025). The effect of the conversion of extradition methods and unlawful deportation on human rights in Nigeria. *Journal of Indonesian Constitutional Law*, 2(2), 128–159.
- Antai, G. O., Obisesan, O. O., Umo, M. E., Hassan, I., & Okpong, D. E. (2025). Press freedom and national security: The place of human rights in Nigeria's cybercrime laws. *NIU Journal of Social Science*, 11(1), 301–313.
- Antai, G. O., Sewaya, M., Ekpenisi, C. E., & Adeke, C. (2025). Role of international law in curtailing domestic and gender-based violence: A comparative analysis of South Africa, Nigeria, and Uganda. *Kampala International University Law Journal*, 7(1), 128–150.
- Antai, G. O. (2024). Universality versus cultural relativism in international human rights: A case study of the Anti-

- Homosexuality Act of Uganda 2023. *IAA Journal of Management*, 11(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.59298/IAAJAM/2024/112.11400.00>
- Arowolo, G. A., & Arowolo, A. A. (2024). Children's right to education in Nigeria: The challenges and the prospects for the girl child. *African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration*.
- Bandyopadhyay, M., & Subrahmanian, R. (2008). *Gender equity in education: A review of trends and factors* (CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 18).
- Bolaji, S. (2014). *Intent to action: Overcoming barriers to universal basic education policy implementation in Nigeria*.
- Sadiki, C. M. (2024). Promoting inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*.
- Craissati, D., Banerjee, U. D., King, L. M., Lansdown, G., & Smith, A. (2007). *A human rights-based approach to education for all*.
- Dauda, R. O. (2007). Female education and Nigeria's development strategies: Lots of talk, little action? *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 14, 461–479.
- Ejere, E. I. (2011). An examination of critical problems associated with the implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in Nigeria. *International Education Studies*, 4, 221–229.
- Emordi, A. T., & Ruth, O. I. (2023). SDG Goal 4: Out-of-school children and all-inclusive development in South West Nigeria. *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences*.
- Esavwede, J. P., Gasiokwu, P. I., & Antai, G. O. (2025). Legal reform in political party financing in Nigeria: Strengthening frameworks and enhancing enforcement mechanisms. *Journal of Law and Legal Reform*, 6(3), 1483–1516. <https://doi.org/10.15294/jllr.v6i3.20837>
- Fredman, S., Campbell, M., & Taylor, H. (2018). Human rights and equality in education: Conclusion. In *Human rights and equality in education*.
- Governing Body of the Juma Masjid Primary School v. Juma Masjid Trust*, [2011] ZACC 13.
- Guha Ray, S., & Mukherjee, S. (2025). Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all: An analysis based on gender parity index and digitalisation in school education in North East India. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*.
- Gunawan, W. B. (2025). Revisiting Sustainable Development Goal 4 “Quality Education”: Insights, prospects, and recommendations. *Sakaguru: Journal of Pedagogy and Creative Teacher*.
- Hepzibah, P. (2021). The relevance of human rights and human capital investment in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 3 and 4) in Nigeria.
- Isokpan, A. J., & Durojaye, E. (2016). Impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on the child's right to education in Nigeria. *Development Economics: Women*.
- Kpae, G., & Tajudeen, A. S. (2021). Terrorism in Northern Nigeria: An appraisal of its impact on the educational system.
- Majekodunmi, T. A., Sogunle, B. A., Adeyemi-Balogun, M. O. J., Antai, G. O., Onwubiko, K. J., & Aidonojie, P. A. (2024). Issues and challenges concerning access to justice in Nigeria: Clinical legal education aid as a panacea. *NIU Journal of Legal Studies*, 10(2), 37–50.
- Mateus, S., & Shange, K. (2021). Broken & unequal: The South African education system and the attainment of the right to basic education through litigation. *Pretoria Student Law Review*.
- Matthew, U. O., & Kazaure, J. S. (2020). Multimedia e-learning education in Nigeria and developing countries of Africa for achieving SDG 4. *International Journal of Information Communication Technology and Human Development*, 12, 40–62.
- Mncube, D. W. (2023). Chapter 3: Analysis of the impact of poor infrastructure provision on the quality of education in rural schools. In *Axiom Academic Publishers*.
- Murtala, S., Ahmad, K., & Sule, M. (2025). Evaluation of government policies and community interventions on addressing educational barriers amidst insecurity in Nigeria. *Federal University Gusau Faculty of Education Journal*.
- Nasidi, N. A. (2024). “Must they go to school?” Northern Nigeria and the challenges of girl-child education, 1999–2015. *Reconstructing the Past: Journal of Historical Studies*.
- Nwokeocha, S. (2017). Teacher quality, development and motivation in Nigeria. *African Educational Research Journal*, 5, 126–134.
- Okpong, D. E., Antai, G. O., & Ndifon, C. O. (2025). Leveraging punishment for effective enforcement of discipline in the Nigerian Navy. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 434–454.
- Sahani, I. (2025). Bridging the gap between policy and practice: A rights-based approach to education in Nepal. *Sambhak: Human Rights Journal*.
- Siddiqui, M. H. (2012). Human rights and equality in education: Introduction. In *Human rights and equality in education*.
- Sooter, T. (2013). Early childhood education in Nigeria: Issues and problems. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3, 173.
- Tekin, A. K. (2019). How to achieve quality early childhood education for all: Goal 4 of the United Nations sustainable development. *Journal of Sustainable Development Education and Research*.
- Umo, M. E., Akwagiobe, R. A., Antai, G. O., & Ekpe, C. E. (2024). Transboundary trafficking of Africans for inhuman

and exploitative labour: The Nigeria experience. *Kampala International University Law Journal*, 6(2), 258–273.

Usman Isaac, N. (2024). Early childhood care education (ECCE) and national security. *Solo International Collaboration and Publication of Social Sciences and Humanities*.