

INTERROGATING THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria is a pressing concern to all stakeholders with far-reaching implications for the country's socio-economic development. Despite the efforts of the Nigerian government to address the challenges through various policy initiatives and institutional frameworks, over 10 million of children remains out of school in the country, placing the country as the number one with the highest number of out-of-school children in the world. The surge in the number of out-of school children in Nigeria is traceable to poverty, insecurity, cultural, religion barriers, insecurity and inadequate educational infrastructure. The unabated rise in the figure of out-of-school children in Nigeria has far reaching implications for the future of the country. Children who are out of school are exposed to violence, abuse, neglect, Childs labour, sexual exploitation, social stigma and recruitment to extremist groups and are likely to involve in other criminal activities leading to insecurity that can affect the socio-economic development of the country. To address the issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria, government and other critical stakeholders must work together to tackle the root causes. The paper recommended the need for government at all levels to increase funding to the education sector, improve infrastructural facilities in schools, organize periodic capacity building for teachers and constantly embark on community engagement advocacy.

Keywords: Out-of-school children, Education, Causes, Effect, Legal and policy framework

Introduction

Education has been described as one of the fundamental human rights of every citizen and a crucial factor in the overall development of any nation (Bello and Muhammad, 2017).

However, many children in Nigeria are denied of this right, leading to significant number of them out of school in Nigeria. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020) statistics shows that, there are over 10

million children aged 5-14 not attending school. This ugly statistics placed Nigeria as the number one country with the highest number of out-of-school children in the world (BusinessDay, 2025). This disturbing statistics is a reflection of the complex nature and interconnected issues affecting the Nigerian education sector which must be addressed by all critical stakeholders. Out-of-school children (OOSC) can be conceptualized in many different ways using the three dimensions based on school exposure and this includes: those who attended school in the past and dropped out, those who never attended school but will enroll in school in the nearest future, and those who never enrolled (UNESCO, 2014).

As part of the global efforts to address the challenges of the education sector and reduce the number of out-of-school children globally, the United Nations Member States in 2015 adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which outlines a blueprint to address global challenges across a broad range of themes including poverty, health, education, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. The Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, otherwise referred to as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Unfortunately, an approximated 263 million children remain out of school around the world. This number includes children who never started formal schooling and children who started school but later dropped out of school (Oyekan, Ayorinde, and Adenuga, 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016).

Reducing the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) is a key priority for countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria. This is because more than half of children globally that have not enrolled in school live in Sub-Saharan Africa, and more than 85 percent of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are not learning the minimum (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2018). Moreover, education is a fundamental human right, a critical driver for economic advancement and a powerful tool for poverty reduction. Hence, no child of school age should be denied access to quality and equitable education, and an opportunity to acquire skills that guarantee future employability and long-term earning.

In the Nigerian context, out-of-school children are prevalent in both rural and urban settings, but rural areas, and isolated or deprived areas in general, consistently show higher numbers of out-of-school children (World Bank, 2019). These children are spread across the country in varying proportions. This situation is of concern to the Federal Government of Nigeria as noted in the Nigeria Education Ministerial Plan (2018-2022) which outlines several strategies targeted at bringing children back to school. The number of out-of-school children remains significantly high in spite of all these strategies (Oyekan, Ayorinde, and Adenuga, 2023).

Despite the institutional and legislative frameworks by the Nigerian government such as the UBE Act 2004 which provides free and compulsory 9-year continuous education for every Nigerian child, at national and sub-national levels to address educational disparity, reducing the burden of school deprivation, and ensure universal basic education in Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) report in 2018 indicated that about 10.5million children were not in school, out of

which over 6million of are girl child, this further spotlight gender disparities associated with the risk of educational exclusion. This statistics further show that, one in every five of the world's out-of school children is in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2021).

This issue of out-of-school children is more prevalent in the Northern part of the country, particularly North-West and North-East zones where socio-economic, cultural, and security factors contributes to poor school enrollment school age children and high dropout rate (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018). Studies have shown that out-of-school children are more vulnerable to all kinds of abuses, exploitation, and poverty, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage among them (UNICEF, 2019). The school deprivation crisis among Out-of-School Children limits the technical skills required to thrive in the competitive labour market and build the human capital needed for sustained, inclusive economic growth in the nation (UNESCO, 2015). In Nigeria, the context and complexities of school deprivation among Out-of-School Children are poorly understood, and there is the need for evidenced-based strategies to provide an inclusive education for all. There is therefore the need to understand the complex factors driving the issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria so as to come up with actionable suggestion to nip the crisis in the bud.

Overview of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

Out-of-School Children

Education has been described as the bedrock of development of any nation (Ikiyei, Donkemezuo, Precious & Seribofa, 2022).The realization of the relevance of education to national development has propelled government at all levels to prioritize the

education its citizens. The formal institution saddled with the responsibility to properly train and educate the children is the school system. The Nigerian government also went further to put in place educational policies that ensure that all children acquire at least the basic level of education. Presently, there are millions of children that lack access to basic education due to factors that are beyond their control. These children are referred to as out-of-school children. With the rapid increase in the number of out of school children, particularly in the Northern part of the country, Nigeria has been described globally as the country with the largest population of such children (Ojiya, Enganya, Habila, Mohammed, Salihu and Shiek, 2023).

Out-of- School Children has been described as children in the official primary school age range who are not enrolled in primary or secondary school. They can further be described as children of compulsory school age range who never enrolled and those who left before completion (i.e. drop out) (UNESCO, 2015). It is on record that one out of every child that is excluded from formal school setting in Africa is a Nigerian child. The United Nations refers to out-of-school children as the children who are yet to be enrolled into any formal education or were sometimes in school but had dropped out owing to one reason or the other. This is however excluding pre-primary education. The median age range for out-of school children in many countries of the world is between 6-11 years. Out-of-school children are school-age children that are supposed to be in schools but are not in schools due to parental and governmental failures to provide accessible quality education for them. They are young children in the age group of 1 to 12 who are roaming the street without access to

a functional educational system (Ojelade, Aiyedun & Aregebesola, 2019). Out-of-school children are also viewed as children whom the government and parents have failed to provide quality basic education for. Generally, the term "out-of-school children" is a description of non-attendance of school for school-age children for some factors out of their immediate control (Ojiya et al, 2023).

UNICEF in May, 2024, put the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria at about 18.3 million. This alarming figure has position Nigeria as the country with the highest number of out of school children globally (Vanguard, 2024). Researches have shown that 1 in 3 children are Out of School in Nigeria. While the primary level accounts for 10.2 million, there are 8.1 million at the junior secondary school (JSS) level (UBEC, 2018). There are 12.4 million children that never attended school and 5.9 million left schools early. Nigeria's Out of School population accounts for 15% of the global total. Only 1 in 3 children aged 36-59 months have access to Early Childhood Care Education programmes (UNESCO, 2020). Only 1 in 3 adolescents eligible for senior secondary school are attending schools. More than 50% of girls are not attending school. In basic education level, 66% of all out-of-school children are in the Northeast and Northwest while 86% are from rural areas, and 65% are from the poorest quintile (Cambridge Education. 2021).

These figures have been strongly disputed by the UBEC. According to UNESCO, the data is based on children aged 6-18 years ranging from primary to senior secondary, while UBEC's data is related to ages 6-11 (The Guardian, 2023). Irrespective of the figure, it is the responsibility of every responsible government to ensure that no child is out of school, education is the right of

every child. The sympathetic historical review of out-of-school children in Nigeria as reported by the Guardian (2023) shows that the number has always been on the increase 6.4million in 2000; 7.5million in 2010; 9.6million in 2020; and 13.5million in 2021. These perpetual massive increases in the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria are an indication that the country had fallen short of the global Education For All (EFA) by 2000 movement launched in 1990 and the Millennium Development Goals for providing free and compulsory universal education for all children by 2015 launched in 2000. This is a wake-up call that if the government doesn't strategies and take pragmatic steps toward the reduction of out-of-school children, achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal target by 2030 might be a mirage (Yahaya, Hamzat and Mudashiru, 2024).

Out-of-School Children across States in Nigeria

The table below shows the state by state percentages of out-of-school children in Nigeria as at 2024 as reported by the Business day and the Cable newspapers.

S/N	State	Percentage of Out School Children Ages 6-15
1	Kebbi	67.6%
2	Sokoto	66.4%

3	Yobe	62.9%
4	Zamfara	61.3%
5	Bauchi	55.7%
6	Borno	54.2%
7	Jigawa	51.1%
8	Gombe	48%
9	Katsina	45.9%
10	Niger	42.8%
11	Kano	39.2%
12	Taraba	28.8%
13	Nasarawa	25.4%
14	Plateau	23.2%
15	Kwara	22%
16	Kaduna	21.9%
17	Adamawa	21.7%
18	Oyo	20.9%
19	Ogun	20.5%
20	Ebonyi	16.7%
21	Ondo	13.8%
22	Osun	12.8%
23	FCT	12.8%
24	Edo	11.3%
25	Akwa Ibom	10.6%
26	Kogi	10.2%
27	Delta	9.3%
28	River	7.7
29	Cross River	7.6%
30	Enugu	7.5%
31	Bayelsa	7.4%
32	Lagos	6.4%
33	Abia	5.6%
34	Ekiti	5.1%
35	Imo	5.1%
36	Anambra	2.9%

Source: Business Day, March 22, 2024
and the Cable, March 19, 2024

Factors Keeping Children Out-of-School in Nigeria

Nigeria has been described as a home to a staggering number of out-of-school children in the world. The phenomenon is a complex issue triggered by various factors. Understanding the causes of out-of-school children issue in Nigeria is

crucial for developing effective strategies towards addressing it. Some of these factors include poverty, which has been identified as a significant contributor to the high number of out-of-school children in the country. In Nigeria, there is the general assumption that basic education is compulsory and free for all children. However, in most public basic schools in Nigeria, students are required to pay different varying fees for school maintenance. The present economic situation in Nigeria is seriously affecting parents as many families are struggling to meet basic needs, let alone afford education related costs. This development has affected most families' readiness to send their children to school, thus, creating an increase in the total number of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Another factors contributing significantly to the high number of out-of-school children in Nigeria is insecurity, the violent attacks by Boko-haram and bandits in the Northeast and Fulani herdsmen in the North central have forced many children out of school (UNICEF, 2017). According to the UNICEF report in 2018 about 600,000 children have lost access to education due to Boko-haram activities, 2,295 teachers have been killed and over 19,000 others displace by the conflict, while more than 1,400 schools have been destroyed, damaged or looted (Daily Trust, 2021). In Benue State, the Executive Secretary of the State's Teaching Service Board, Wilfred Uji, stated that the incessant herdsmen attacks had disrupted the school calendar and prevented 300,000 children from going to schools (Mohammed, Quadri and Yoshifumi, 2021).

Other disturbing factors include the Social and gender norms that place a low value on education, contribute to girls, Almajiri children and others, not attending school or dropping out of

school. Lack of comprehensive data on OOS children limits reach and impact of interventions. Chronic underfunding of education and inefficient use of available resources perpetuates the Out-of-School phenomenon. Insufficient supply of trained teachers, inefficient teacher recruitment and deployment, and weak regulatory mechanisms lead to overcrowded classrooms and Poor quality teaching and learning outcomes contribute to drop out from the education system (UNICEF, 2022).

Legal and Policy Framework for Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

The federal government of Nigeria has developed various legal policy and institutional frameworks aimed at reducing the increasing number/cases of out-of-school children in the country. Some of which includes;

Constitutional Right to Education: The Nigerian constitution guarantees the right to education for all citizens, children inclusive. The Chapter 2 Section 18(3) (a) of the 1999 Constitution under educational objectives supports the participation of children in education in Nigeria. Subsection 3, having three paragraphs, specifically states that: Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end, Government shall as and when practicable provide: a) Free, compulsory and universal primary education; b) Free university education; and c) Free adult literacy programme.

Universal Basic Education Act, 2004: This Act has 16 sections with Schedules that constitute the compulsion of basic education. As the Act mandates it for children to attain the least basic education, it also makes it imperative for the Government, as therein in some sections, to provide

necessary tools and facilities for the actualization of this. The UBE Act dedicates 2% of Nigeria's Consolidated Revenue Fund annually to UBEC, but this is not always used efficiently or effectively (Cambridge Education, 2021).

Child Rights Act, 2003: The Child's Right Act is an Act that is legislated to provide and protect the rights of a Nigerian child; and other related matters. As such, this Act ensures that child's right including the right to education would facilitate their participation in classrooms.

National Policy on Education, 2014: The Section 4 of the National Policy on Education states that the government will provide functional basic education for adults & youth who have never had the opportunity of formal education.

National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE): The National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) was established in 1989 by defunct Decree 41 now Nomadic Education Act, Cap N20 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004, to cater for the educational needs of the socially excluded, educationally disadvantaged and migrant groups in Nigeria. The operations of the commission, thus, have a strong chance to increase the participation of children in the class.

Aside the policy framework above, successive government in Nigeria have also implement different programmes aiming at reducing the increase in the numbers of out –of-school children in Nigeria. For instance, the President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan administration made concerted effort particularly though the Almajiri initiative. The Almajiri system, a traditional Islamic education system,

has significantly contributed to the number of Out-of-School children in Nigeria. The administration built over 100 Almajiri Model Schools to integrate both Quranic and formal education aiming to provide a more comprehensive education to children in the Almajiri system to equip children with essential skills and knowledge. While these initiatives were well intentioned, the impact of the Almajiri Model Schools has been limited, and many of these have largely failed to achieve their objectives. Most of the Almajiri Model Schools structures have either been used for conventional education or lay waste because its pupils have gone back to the old ways of street begging (The Guardian, 2020).

International Organizations Response to Out –of-School Children Issues in Nigeria

International organizations, particularly the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have made significant efforts in collaborating with the Nigerian government to address the issues and challenges of out –of-school children. UNICEF (2022) highlighted some of the key responses and initiative towards the issues of out of school children in Nigeria.

- Support to Federal Ministry of Education to develop a National Enrolment Drive Framework and reached over 820,000 through enrolment campaigns in 2017.
- Mapping of OOSCs and provision of cash transfers to enable access to and retention in school.
- Implementation of minimum standards on safe school in 12 states.
- Development of a policy on gender in education, costed states gender plans & re-entry guidelines for girls.
- Development of guidelines for integration of Almajiri children

into formal primary schools and integrated Qur’anic schools (IQS).

- Improvement of infrastructure through micro-grants to Community-Based Management Committee (CBMCs).
- Engagement with traditional and religious leaders in 19 Northern States and Federal Capital Territory to commit to reducing OOSC.
- Establishment of high-level women’s groups in 12 states to advocate for girl-child education.
- Provision of teaching and learning material to improve quality of learning in formal schools, IQSs, temporary learning spaces and informal community learning hubs.
- Establishment of peer education clubs for girls and for boys to support girls’ retention and transition.

Effects of Out-of-School Children

The menace of out-of-school children in Nigeria pose a great danger not only to the child, but to the country at large, and if not properly addressed can cause multiple challenges in the nearest future. One of the significant effects of out –of- school children is the violations of their right to basic education and this can lead to increased risk of violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation and recruitment to extremist groups. Any child deprived of school will also miss the opportunities for learning and skills development, Lack access to meaningful employment, perpetuation of intergenerational poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2022). The growing number of early marriage and pregnancies among girl-child is one major effect of the out-of-school children. Farouq, et al, (2024), posited that girl child if not engaged in academic activities sees marriage as the

next plan. These girls most times are not psychologically and emotionally matured for such plans. The early marriage among girl-child who are out of school will continue to perpetuate gender inequality and maternal/mortality (UNESCO, 2014).

Another implication of the out of school children is the potential gap it can create in the supply of manpower in all sectors of the Nigerian economy, this assertion corroborates Charity et al, (2020), the authors posited that, the short supply of labour occasioned by out-of-school children will affect all aspect of human life, as there will be vacancies in several areas that demand skills acquires through education at school. The implication of out of school children have sinister effects for children and country at large, education deprived children grow to become adults with limited economic and self – sustaining opportunities (Adedoyin, 2024). Also, Out-of-School children are less likely to participate in civic and political activities or contribute to the demand for accountability from political leaders, which can weaken democratic processes (World Bank, 2028). The aforementioned is an incentive for engaging in criminal activities like kidnapping, banditry, cultism, drug addiction, which paints the country in bad light, scare away potential investors and it requires huge financial resources to tackle.

Conclusion

The issue of out of school children in Nigeria has become a complex and pressing menace that require stakeholders' immediate and collective action. With millions of children deprived of their rights to basic education, the country faces significant social, economic and developmental challenges. Despite government interventionist efforts at addressing the issue of out of School

children, the problem still persist. The launch of the UBE ACT 2004 by the Nigerian government demonstrates the political willingness of the government to ensure that all children of school going age are not deprived of basic education. Some of the impediments militating against the reduction in the growing number of out of school children are occasioned by cultural and religion believes and the unwillingness of some parents to enroll their children in school.

This issues and other like underfunding and short supply of qualified teachers if well addressed will reduce the growing number of out of school children in Nigeria. The continued increase in the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria will continue to threaten the country's socio-economic development, peaceful co-existence and general well-being. It will negatively impact the Nigeria's targets towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiative, Addressing this challenge of out-of-school children in Nigeria required multi-faceted approach involving all critical stakeholders working together to nip the menace in the bud.

Suggestions

To address the challenges of out-of-school children in Nigeria, government at all levels must take the suggestions below into consideration so as to guide and secure the future of the country.

- The government at the national and subnational levels should increase funding to the education sector, most especially at the basic level.
- The government should incentivize the study of teacher education courses across higher institutions in Nigeria as this will

- attract more students and improve the supply of teachers.
- There should be strict penalty for parents who fail to enroll their school going children to schools.
- There should be more enlightenment on the importance of basic education, as this will help to break the Cultural and Political barriers.
- Government should also collaborate and partner with international organizations, NGOs and private sector to leverage on their resources and expertise

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