EMPOWERING THE MARGINALIZED: SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA AMIDST SOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES

*[1]Ibrahim DANJUMA, [2]Tetok Nicholas IRMIYA and [1]Abdulmutalib Gambo DAUDA

[1]Department of Vocational and Technical Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
*[2]Department of Agric Education, Federal University of Education, Pankshin
*Corresponding Author: Ibrahimdanjuma757@gmail.com

Abstract

Nigeria is home to over 10 million out-of-school children, many of whom are marginalised and vulnerable due to socio-economic challenges. This paper explores sustainable solutions to empower these children, promoting inclusive education and social equity. The paper examines the complex interplay of factors driving out-of-school children, including poverty, conflict and cultural barriers. The research highlights innovative approaches, such as community-led initiatives, mobile learning and vocational training, which have shown promise in reaching marginalised children. A multi-stakeholder approach involving government, civil society and private sector partnership is crucial for scaling up sustainable solutions. By prioritising inclusive education and empowerment, we can unlock the potential of Nigeria's most vulnerable children, fostering a brighter future for generations to come.

Keywords: Marginalised, Sustainable Solutions, Out-of-School Children, Socioeconomic Challenges

Introduction

Nigeria faces a critical educational crisis, with approximately 18.3 million children currently out of school; the highest globally (UNICEF, 2024). This alarming figure highlights the severe challenges within the nation's education system, which include poverty, inadequate infrastructure, cultural norms, and insecurity, particularly in the northern regions. The situation is exacerbated by internal conflicts, displacement caused by Boko Haram insurgency, and a lack of investment in educational infrastructure. These challenges disproportionately affect vulnerable groups such as girls, children with disabilities, and those in rural areas, creating an enduring cycle of poverty and marginalisation.

Education is a cornerstone of economic and social development, driving innovation, reducing inequality, and fostering stability. In Nigeria, the large number of out-of-school children represents a significant threat to the nation's growth prospects. Without access to quality education, these children face limited opportunities for upward mobility, contributing to a persistent skills gap in the labour market and perpetuating socioeconomic disparities. Addressing this crisis is not only essential for fulfilling global commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but is also crucial for securing Nigeria's future as a stable, prosperous nation (World Bank, 2024).

This article explores sustainable solutions to address the challenges facing out-of-school children in Nigeria. It aims to identify key barriers to educational access, evaluate existing interventions, and propose innovative strategies for fostering inclusivity and equity in the education system. By examining socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic factors, the article seeks to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. The focus is on creating pathways that empower marginalised children and ensure that no child is left behind in Nigeria's journey toward sustainable development. Recent data and case studies are utilised to emphasise the urgency of the issue and to demonstrate the transformative potential of targeted interventions.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria is grappling with an unprecedented educational crisis, as approximately 18.3 million children remain out of school, the highest number in the world (UNICEF, 2024). Of this alarming figure, over 60% are girls, and many belong to marginalised communities, including internally displaced populations due to conflict. Despite government initiatives like the Universal Basic Education program, the dropout rate remains high, and enrollment figures stagnate, signalling systemic challenges that hinder educational access and retention. Over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, making education an unaffordable luxury for many families (World Bank, 2024). Children from low-income households often prioritise income-generating activities over schooling, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy and economic hardship.

Armed conflict and insecurity, particularly in the northern regions, have displaced millions of families, disrupting access to education. Schools are frequently targeted by insurgent groups like Boko Haram, leading to closures and a climate of fear that discourages parents from sending their children to school (Akorede et al., 2022). Deeply rooted cultural norms and gender biases significantly impact educational access, especially for girls. Early marriage and child labour are prevalent in some regions, depriving children of opportunities for formal education (UNESCO, 2024).

Many schools lack basic facilities such as classrooms, learning materials, and trained teachers. In rural areas, students often travel long distances to access schools, further discouraging attendance. The inadequate funding of public education exacerbates these issues, leaving millions of children without a viable path to learning. Educational inequalities are starkly pronounced across Nigeria's regions. Northern states, such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, bear the brunt of the crisis due to ongoing insurgencies and systemic neglect. For example, while literacy rates in southern states exceed 70%, some northern states struggle with rates below 30% (Vanguard, 2024). These disparities reflect deep-seated structural inequalities that hinder national cohesion and development. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach that targets the root causes of educational exclusion while promoting inclusive and equitable solutions.

Socioeconomic Challenges

1. The Interplay between Poverty and Educational Exclusion

Poverty remains a significant barrier to education in Nigeria, with over 40% of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2024). Families struggling to meet basic needs often prioritise immediate survival over long-term investments in education. Consequently, children are compelled to engage in income-generating activities such as farming, street vending, or domestic labour, leaving little or no time for schooling. Poverty also limits access to essential school materials, uniforms, and transportation, perpetuating a cycle of educational exclusion and economic hardship.

2. Effects of Armed Conflict and Displacement on Access to Schooling

The ongoing insurgency in Nigeria's northern region has displaced millions of families, disrupting children's education. According to UNICEF (2024), more than 2 million children in northeastern Nigeria are out of school due to the destruction of schools, loss of teachers, and fear of attacks by insurgent groups like Boko Haram. Schools are often targeted in conflict zones, leading to closures and the breakdown of community-based education systems. Displaced children face additional challenges such as a lack of documentation, overcrowded refugee camps, and limited access to safe learning spaces.

3. Cultural and Gender Norms as Barriers to Education

Cultural and gender norms significantly impede educational access, particularly for girls. In many rural areas, traditional beliefs prioritise early marriage and domestic responsibilities over formal education for girls (UNESCO, 2024). Families often perceive educating boys as a better investment, leaving girls disproportionately excluded from learning opportunities. Additionally, societal stigmas around menstruation and inadequate sanitation facilities in schools further discourage girls from attending school regularly (Harande et al., 2025; Solomon et al., 2025).

4.   Infrastructure and Resource Limitations in Underserved Areas

In many parts of Nigeria, particularly rural and conflict-affected regions, schools lack basic infrastructure, including classrooms, desks, textbooks, and trained teachers. According to recent studies, over 10 million children attend schools without adequate learning facilities, with some sitting on bare floors under trees (Vanguard, 2024). The student-to-teacher ratio in some areas exceeds 100:1, undermining the quality of education. Poor road networks and long distances to schools further exacerbate the challenges, making education inaccessible for many children.

Opportunities for Intervention

Role of Government Policies and International Frameworks

Government policies and international frameworks provide critical avenues for addressing the out-of-school children crisis in Nigeria. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, introduced in 1999, is a key initiative aimed at ensuring free and compulsory education for children up to the junior secondary level. Despite challenges in implementation, the program has the potential to increase enrollment and retention rates if adequately funded and monitored (UNESCO, 2024). International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, emphasise inclusive and equitable education for all and provide a blueprint for aligning national efforts with global standards. Strengthened policy enforcement, increased budget allocation, and targeted interventions for marginalised groups can further enhance the impact of these frameworks.

Community-Based Initiatives to Promote Education

Grassroots efforts driven by community organisations play a vital role in bridging educational gaps. Community-based initiatives often focus on engaging parents, religious leaders, and local stakeholders to prioritise education. Programs such as the Safe Schools Initiative, launched in 2014, have worked to rebuild schools in conflict-affected regions and foster local ownership of education (UNICEF, 2024). Additionally, mentorship programs, after-school tutoring, and community learning centres have proven effective in encouraging school attendance, particularly for children in rural and underserved areas. Empowering communities to take active roles in educational planning and monitoring can yield sustainable improvements.

Leveraging Technology for Remote and Alternative Learning Models

The rise of digital technology presents significant opportunities to reach out-of-school children, especially in hard-to-reach or conflict-affected areas. E-learning platforms, radio-based education programs, and mobile learning apps offer flexible and cost-effective solutions for delivering quality education. For instance, initiatives like the Nigeria Learning Passport, developed in partnership with UNICEF and Microsoft, provide digital resources aligned with the national curriculum to support remote learning (UNICEF, 2023). These tools can complement traditional classroom learning, ensuring continuity during emergencies and reaching children in remote areas where schools are inaccessible.

Public-Private Partnerships in Education Funding and Development

Collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential for scaling up educational access and improving infrastructure. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can mobilise resources, expertise, and innovative solutions to address systemic challenges. For example, corporate social responsibility programs from companies like MTN Foundation have supported the provision of classroom facilities, scholarships, and teacher training (World Bank, 2024). By fostering collaboration among government agencies, private corporations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), PPPs can create sustainable models for funding and managing educational initiatives.

Sustainable Solutions

Enhancing Teacher Training and Capacity Building

A well-trained and adequately supported teaching workforce is essential for improving educational outcomes. In Nigeria, many teachers lack formal training, particularly in rural and underserved areas, where the student-to-teacher ratio can be as high as 100:1 (Vanguard, 2024). Sustainable solutions include investing in teacher training programs to enhance pedagogical skills, subject knowledge, and classroom management. Programs such as the Teacher Professional Development initiative, supported by international organisations like UNESCO, have demonstrated success in equipping educators to meet the diverse needs of learners. Providing incentives such as competitive salaries, housing, and professional growth opportunities can also help attract and retain qualified teachers in marginalised regions.

Promoting Gender-Sensitive Education Strategies

Addressing gender disparities in education requires strategies that focus on inclusivity and the unique challenges faced by girls. Gender-sensitive curricula, safe school environments, and the provision of sanitary facilities are critical for improving enrollment and retention rates among girls (UNICEF, 2024). Advocacy campaigns and conditional cash transfer programs have proven effective in encouraging families to send their daughters to school. Initiatives like the Girls' Education Project, implemented by the Nigerian government in partnership with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), focus on empowering girls through mentorship, scholarships, and life skills training.

Expanding Vocational and Skill-Based Training Opportunities

For many out-of-school children, traditional academic pathways may not be feasible due to age or financial constraints. Expanding access to vocational and skill-based training programs can provide an alternative route to economic empowerment and self-sufficiency. Government-supported initiatives such as the National Youth Service Corps Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development program aim to equip young people with market-relevant skills. Partnering with industries to align vocational training with labour market needs ensures that graduates are prepared for employment opportunities (World Bank, 2024). Additionally, integrating entrepreneurial training into the curriculum can foster innovation and self-reliance among youth.

Strengthening Collaboration Between Stakeholders

Effective solutions require collaboration among government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector entities, and local communities. Stakeholders must work together to pool resources, share expertise, and align goals. Multi-stakeholder platforms such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) have facilitated coordinated efforts to address educational challenges in Nigeria (GPE, 2024). Community involvement is particularly critical, as local leaders and parents play a key role in advocating for education and ensuring accountability. Strengthened partnerships can lead to more targeted interventions, efficient resource allocation, and long-term sustainability.

Case Studies and Success Stories

Examples of Successful Initiatives Addressing Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

2. **The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI):** Launched in 2014 in response to the Boko Haram insurgency, the Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) aimed to protect education from attacks in conflict-affected areas. Supported by the Nigerian government, international donors, and organisations like UNICEF, SSI focused on rebuilding schools, providing temporary learning spaces, and equipping teachers with conflict-sensitive training. It also facilitated the relocation of children from high-risk zones to safer areas (UNICEF, 2024).

3. **Girls' Education Project (GEP):** A collaboration between the Nigerian government and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the GEP has successfully improved girls' access to education in northern Nigeria. Through scholarships, mentorship programs, and community mobilisation efforts, the project has increased enrollment and retention rates among girls. By

addressing gender-specific barriers, such as early marriage and cultural stigmas, GEP has demonstrated the transformative power of targeted, gender-sensitive interventions (UNESCO, 2024).

4. **Radio and Mobile Learning Initiatives:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria leveraged radio-based education programs and mobile apps to reach out-of-school children. Initiatives like the Nigeria Learning Passport provided digital learning resources aligned with the national curriculum. These programs helped bridge the gap for children in remote or underserved areas and have been recognised as a scalable solution for future emergencies (World Bank, 2024).

Lessons Learned and Replicable Strategies

1. **Community Involvement is Key:** Programs that actively engage local communities have shown higher levels of success. For instance, community leaders and parents played a crucial role in mobilising resources and ensuring the sustainability of the Safe Schools Initiative. Building trust and ownership within communities fosters long-term commitment to education.

2. **Targeted Interventions Yield Results:** Gender-sensitive approaches, such as those implemented in the Girls' Education Project, demonstrate that addressing specific barriers leads to measurable improvements. Providing scholarships, safe learning environments, and mentorship programs can be replicated in other regions facing similar challenges.

3. **Leveraging Technology for Scalability:** Digital learning platforms, as seen during the pandemic, offer scalable solutions for reaching out-of-school children. Integrating technology into the education system can address geographic and financial barriers, ensuring that more children have access to quality learning opportunities.

4. **Collaboration Among Stakeholders Enhances Impact:** The success of initiatives like SSI and GEP highlights the importance of partnerships between governments, NGOs, and international organisations. Coordinated efforts enable the pooling of resources, sharing of expertise, and alignment of goals, which are critical for addressing systemic challenges.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Stakeholders

1. **Strengthen Policy Enforcement and Funding:** Policymakers must prioritise the education sector by significantly increasing budget allocations and ensuring that existing policies, such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act, are effectively implemented. A more robust policy framework that holds both local and national governments accountable for meeting educational goals will help drive tangible progress. Additionally, enhancing the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for education programs can ensure that resources are allocated efficiently, reaching the most marginalised populations (UNICEF, 2024).

2. **Implement Gender-Responsive Education Programs:** To close the gender gap in education, targeted programs focusing on girls' education are essential. These programs should address the root causes of gender disparities, such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and harmful cultural practices. Providing incentives for families to educate their daughters, offering scholarships, and creating safe school environments will help ensure that girls have equal opportunities to access education. Promoting gender-sensitive curricula and including more women in teaching roles can also contribute to a more inclusive education system (UNESCO, 2024).

3. **Invest in Teacher Training and Professional Development:** The quality of education is largely dependent on the competence of teachers. Policymakers should invest in comprehensive teacher training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills to handle diverse classrooms. Regular professional development, along with fair compensation and incentives, can help retain teachers in rural and conflict-affected areas. This will increase teacher motivation and ensure that children receive quality education, especially in marginalised communities (World Bank, 2024).

4. **Improve Infrastructure and Accessibility:** Nigeria's education system faces significant infrastructure challenges, particularly in rural areas. Policymakers should prioritise the construction and renovation of schools, ensuring that all children have access to safe and conducive learning environments. Expanding transportation networks, providing mobile classrooms in remote areas, and integrating ICT infrastructure into schools can significantly improve accessibility for out-of-school children (Vanguard, 2024).

Long-Term Strategies for Creating an Inclusive and Resilient Education System

1. **Promote Vocational and Technical Education:** Not all children will pursue traditional academic routes, making vocational and skill-based education a crucial component of an inclusive education system. Policymakers should invest in vocational schools and partnerships with industries to align training with market demands. Expanding access to skills training will not only offer an alternative educational path for out-of-school children but will also contribute to the country's economic development by providing a skilled workforce (World Bank, 2024).

2. **Strengthen Education in Emergencies (EiE) Frameworks:** Given the frequency of conflicts and natural disasters in Nigeria, it is vital to develop a strong Education in Emergencies (EiE) framework. This should include providing temporary learning spaces, supporting displaced children with access to education, and ensuring the continuity of learning during crises. Building resilient education systems that can quickly adapt to emergencies is critical to minimising the disruption of education for out-of-school children in conflict zones (UNICEF, 2024).

3. **Create Inclusive Education Policies for Special Needs Children:** An inclusive education system should cater to the needs of children with disabilities. Policymakers should ensure that schools are equipped with the necessary infrastructure and trained staff to accommodate special needs children. Special education programs and support services should be incorporated into the mainstream educational system, ensuring that no child is excluded due to physical or mental challenges.

4. **Foster Local and Global Partnerships for Education:** A sustainable and inclusive education system requires collaboration across all sectors. The government must foster partnerships between local communities, international organisations, private companies, and civil society groups. These partnerships can enhance resource mobilisation, share best practices, and implement impactful initiatives. Initiatives like the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) have proven effective in pooling international resources and expertise to address the education crisis in Nigeria (GPE, 2024).

The Role of Global Partnerships in Addressing the Crisis

Global partnerships play an indispensable role in supporting Nigeria's efforts to address the education crisis. International organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) provide both financial and technical support. These partnerships facilitate knowledge exchange, best practice sharing, and resource mobilisation, which are essential for implementing large-scale interventions. Furthermore, global partnerships help ensure that Nigeria's education policies align with international standards, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all by 2030.

Global funding mechanisms, such as the Education Cannot Wait initiative, have been instrumental in providing emergency education services in conflict-affected regions. These global efforts not only bring critical financial resources but also technical expertise and policy frameworks that can be adapted to the Nigerian context.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is not merely a fundamental right; it is the cornerstone of national progress and sustainable development. In Nigeria, where millions of children remain out of school, addressing this crisis is critical for shaping a future of equality, opportunity, and growth. Education is a powerful tool for breaking the cycles of poverty, reducing inequalities, and driving economic advancement. When every child, regardless of gender, socioeconomic background, or geographic location, is allowed to learn, the entire nation benefits. By ensuring

that all children, particularly those in marginalised and conflict-affected areas, have access to quality education, Nigeria can unlock its full potential and move closer to achieving its development goals.

However, this transformation will not happen overnight. It requires the collective efforts of government agencies, civil society organisations, local communities, international partners, and the private sector. Policymakers must make education a top priority by implementing inclusive policies, ensuring adequate funding, and addressing the root causes of educational exclusion. Communities must take ownership of their children's education, while international organisations must continue to provide financial and technical support to scale effective interventions.

This is a call to action for all stakeholders to come together, overcome existing barriers, and make long-term commitments to empowering Nigeria's marginalised children. Only through these collective efforts can we ensure that no child is left behind and that every child in Nigeria has the opportunity to succeed and contribute to the nation's progress. Together, we can build an education system that is inclusive, resilient, and capable of shaping a brighter future for Nigeria and beyond.

References

Akorede, S. N., Usman, U., Isiaq A. T., & Isiya, G. (2022). A review of health implication of kidnapping in Nigeria. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Multidisciplinary Studies, 2*(1), 67-72. https://alhikmahuniversity.edu.ng/IJARMS/index.php/journal/article/view/16/16

Global Partnership for Education (GPE). (2024). *Global Education Partnerships for Nigeria*. Retrieved from https://www.globalpartnership.org

Harande, S., Isiaq, A. T., Ayabiogbe, C. I., Lawan, A., Yakubu, S., & Ali, B. (2025). Effect of menstrual hygiene on the health status of female adolescents in senior secondary schools in Zaria Local Government Area of Kaduna State. *Global Journal of Health Related Researches, 7*(1), 124-131. http://journals.abu.edu.ng/index.php/gjhrr/article/download/632/299

Solomon, H. A., Umaru, M., Isiaq, A. T., Akorede, A. A., & Daniel, O. A. (2025). Assessment of knowledge of toilet infection preventive measures among boarding secondary school students in North East, Nigeria. *Global Journal of Health Related Researches, 7*(1), 62-67. https://journals.abu.edu.ng/index.php/gjhrr/article/download/625/292

UNESCO. (2024). *Education Cannot Wait: Global Initiatives for Education in Emergencies*. Retrieved from https://www.unesco.org

UNESCO. (2024). *Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender and Education*. Retrieved from https://www.unesco.org/global-reports

UNICEF. (2023). *Nigeria Learning Passport: Bridging the Education Gap*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/nigeria

UNICEF. (2024). *Education in Nigeria: Key Facts and Figures*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education

UNICEF. (2024). *The Safe Schools Initiative: Protecting Education in Conflict Zones*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/nigeria

Vanguard. (2024). *Infrastructure and Accessibility Challenges in Nigerian Education*. Retrieved from https://www.vanguardngr.com

Vanguard. (2024). *Nigeria's Educational Crisis: A Call for Urgent Action*. Retrieved from https://www.vanguardngr.com

World Bank. (2024). *Addressing Nigeria's Education Crisis: The Role of Vocational Education*. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview

World Bank. (2024). *Nigeria Overview*. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview