



## THE CHALLENGES OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA AND WAYS FORWARD

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### Abstract

Nigeria faces a significant educational crisis, characterised by a high number of out-of-school children (OOSC). This paper explores the multifaceted challenges contributing to this issue, including socio-economic factors, cultural beliefs, infrastructural deficits, and policy shortcomings. By examining these challenges, the paper aims to highlight the urgency of addressing the OOSC crisis in Nigeria to promote sustainable development and social equity. In a rebuttal of a sort, the paper refutes attempts by others to downplay or rationalise the challenges in a scholarly manner with superior and convincing enough arguments. The paper recommends, in strong terms, among others, increased funding for education, focused community awareness programmes, support for vulnerable families, strengthened policy implementation, enhanced teacher training and addressing transportation barriers.

**Keywords:** Out-of-school children, sustainable development, education, school enrolment, school drop out

### Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical component of national development. In Nigeria, however, millions of children remain out of school, hindering both individual potential and national progress. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2022), Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with estimates suggesting that over 10 million children are not enrolled in formal education. This paper aims to analyse the various challenges that contribute to this alarming statistic and propose potential solutions.

#### 1. Socio-Economic Factors

Many socio-economic factors account for the multifaceted challenges faced by out-of-school children. In this part of the paper, some of these factors are highlighted.

##### i. Poverty

Poverty is a primary driver of educational exclusion in Nigeria (World Bank, 2020). Many families struggle to meet basic needs, which often leads to prioritising immediate economic contributions over education. Children are frequently pulled out of school to engage in labour, whether in agriculture, informal trading, or domestic work. This cycle of poverty perpetuates educational disadvantage, as children who miss out on formal education often find it challenging to secure stable employment in adulthood (Okeke & Igbokwe, 2018).

##### ii. Economic Disparities

Geographical and economic disparities further exacerbate the OOSC crisis. Northern Nigeria, in particular, experiences higher rates of out-of-school children due to a combination of poverty, insecurity, and cultural factors (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The lack of resources in rural areas means fewer schools, inadequate learning materials, and poorly trained teachers, making access to quality education problematic.

#### 2. Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Certain cultural beliefs and practices contribute in no small measure to aggravating the problem at hand. These include gender disparities, traditional beliefs on *Almajiri* and traditional education, among others.

### **i. Gender Disparities**

Cultural beliefs play a significant role in educational access, particularly concerning gender. In many communities, girls are less likely to be enrolled in school compared to boys (UNICEF, 2021). Traditional gender roles often prioritise domestic responsibilities for girls, resulting in higher rates of dropout and lower enrollment. Addressing these cultural attitudes is crucial for increasing educational access for all children.

### **ii. *Almajiri* System**

The *Almajiri* system, prevalent in Northern Nigeria, poses another challenge. This traditional Islamic education system often leaves children vulnerable, as many are sent to live with religious teachers in the hopes of receiving an education. However, these children frequently do not receive adequate formal education, leading to high rates of illiteracy and limited future opportunities (Mustapha, 2017).

## **3. Infrastructural Deficits**

Certain deficits of infrastructure are responsible for the aggravated problem of out-of-school children in the study area. These include paucity of schools in terms of quantity and quality, and transportation barriers.

### **i. School Availability and Quality**

Inadequate infrastructure significantly hampers educational access. Many rural areas lack schools altogether, while existing institutions often face overcrowding, insufficient teaching staff, and poor facilities (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). The lack of basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity further undermines the learning environment, discouraging both attendance and retention (Abdulbaqi et al., 2019; Akorede et al., 2022).

### **ii. Transportation Barriers**

In many regions, especially rural areas, transportation barriers prevent children from accessing schools. Long distances, poor road conditions, and the absence of safe transportation options deter families from enrolling their children in school.

## **4. Policy Shortcomings**

Policy deficits are no less problematic in worsening the situation. It translates into inconsistent policies, poor funding of the policies and a lack of strict implementation.

### **i. Inconsistent Government Policy**

Despite various initiatives aimed at increasing enrollment, inconsistencies in government policy and implementation hinder progress. Programs such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) and the National Policy on Education have faced challenges related to funding, governance, and accountability (Akinyemi, 2020). This lack of effective policy execution contributes to persistent educational inequalities.

### **ii. Insufficient Investment in Education**

Investment in education remains inadequate compared to other sectors. The Nigerian government allocates a relatively low percentage of its budget to education, which affects the quality and accessibility of schooling (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). Increased funding is essential to improve infrastructure, train teachers, and provide learning materials.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges of out-of-school children in Nigeria are deeply rooted in socio-economic, cultural, infrastructural, and policy-related issues. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes increasing investment in education, improving infrastructure, and changing cultural perceptions about education, particularly for girls. Collaborative efforts between government, non-governmental organisations, and local communities are essential to create an inclusive educational environment that ensures every child has the opportunity to learn and thrive. Only through concerted action can Nigeria hope to reduce the number of out-of-school children and unlock the potential of its future generations.

## Recommendations

In the view of this paper, by addressing the critical areas below, Nigeria can work towards a future where every child has access to quality education, ultimately contributing to national development and social equity:

1. **Increased Funding for Education:** The Nigerian government should allocate a higher percentage of its budget to education to improve infrastructure and resources. This includes building more schools, especially in rural areas, and ensuring existing schools are adequately equipped.
2. **Community Awareness Programmes:** Implement campaigns to change cultural perceptions around education, emphasising the importance of schooling for both boys and girls. Engaging community leaders and influencers can help shift traditional views that hinder educational access.
3. **Support for Vulnerable Families:** Develop programs that provide financial assistance to low-income families to reduce the economic burden of education. This could include scholarships, free school meals, and the provision of school uniforms and materials.
4. **Strengthened Policy Implementation:** Ensure that existing educational policies are effectively implemented and monitored for accountability. Establishing transparent mechanisms for tracking progress and outcomes is crucial.
5. **Enhanced Teacher Training:** Invest in teacher training programs to improve the quality of education and retain qualified educators. Providing ongoing professional development and adequate compensation can help maintain a motivated teaching workforce.
6. **Addressing Transportation Barriers:** Develop infrastructure projects focused on improving transportation to schools. This can include building roads, providing school buses, or creating safe walking paths for children in remote areas.

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