

**ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CRISIS AND POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVENTION****¹NASIR HARUNA SOBA PhD, ²ABUBAKAR ABDULKAREEM
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Kaduna State University****Correspondence: nasir.soba@kasu.edu.ng****Abstract**

Nigeria is grappling with one of the most severe out-of-school children crises globally. Despite being a signatory to international conventions like the Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the country accounts for a significant proportion of the world's children deprived of formal education. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the persistent challenge of out-of-school children in Nigeria. It identifies and examines the multi-faceted drivers of this phenomenon, including socio-economic barriers, cultural and religious norms, insecurity, and the deteriorating quality of education. The paper argues that the issue is not merely one of access but a complex interplay of supply-side deficiencies and demand-side constraints. Using a desk-review methodology that synthesizes data from government publications, UNICEF, UNESCO, and other relevant literature, the study highlights the regional disparities, with Northern Nigeria being disproportionately affected. The paper concludes by proposing a robust, multi-sectoral policy framework that integrates financial investment, community engagement, security stabilization, and pedagogical reform as essential pillars for achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all Nigerian children.

Keywords: Out-of-school children, Nigeria, Educational access, Socio-economic barriers, Insecurity, Policy recommendations, SDG 4.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical catalyst for national development. However, for millions of children in Nigeria, this right remains elusive. The problem of out-of-school children (OOSC) defined as children of primary and lower secondary school age who are not enrolled in formal education represents one of the most significant challenges to Nigeria's social and economic progress. Recent data from UNESCO (2022) and the Nigerian Ministry of Education indicate that the figure hovers around 10 to 20 million, making Nigeria the country with the highest number of OOSC in the world. This crisis not only perpetuates a cycle of poverty and deprivation but also poses a severe threat to national cohesion, security, and sustainable development.

While the national average is alarming, the situation is not uniformly distributed across the country. A deep-seated regional disparity exists, with the Northern regions bearing the brunt of the crisis. States like Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Zamfara, and Sokoto have OOSC rates exceeding 60% in some areas (UNICEF, 2023). This contrasts sharply with the Southern states, where enrollment rates are generally higher. Factors such as the socio-cultural and religious landscape, historical underinvestment in education in the North, and entrenched poverty contribute to this divide. Furthermore, the crisis has a gendered dimension, with girls in the North being particularly disadvantaged due to early marriage, cultural biases favouring male education, and concerns about female safety in schools. This paper seeks to dissect the underlying causes of this persistent problem and propose a coherent set of evidence-based

policy recommendations to address it.

2. Problem Statement

Nigeria is confronted with a severe and persistent crisis of out-of-school children (OOSC), with an estimated 10 to 20 million children of primary and lower secondary school age not participating in formal education. This figure represents the highest national total globally, constituting a fundamental breach of the right to education and a critical impediment to achieving national development goals and international commitments, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The core of the problem is not merely a lack of school access but a complex interplay of multi-faceted barriers. These include pervasive poverty that forces children into labor, socio-cultural norms that prioritize early marriage for girls and traditional religious education for boys without formal skills, and escalating insecurity that has led to widespread school closures and attacks. Compounding these demand-side factors is a chronic supply-side failure characterized by a deteriorating public education system defined by inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a perceived lack of relevant learning outcomes.

This crisis disproportionately affects children in Northern Nigeria, particularly girls, and perpetuates a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty, limited economic productivity, and social instability. Despite various governmental and international interventions, the number of OOSC remains staggeringly high and is potentially growing due to population expansion and worsening insecurity. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive analysis and evidence-based, multi-sectoral policy response to address the root causes of this crisis and secure the future of Nigeria's children and the nation itself.

1. Research Questions and Objectives

To address the problem and to achieve the objectives of this study, the central research question guiding this study will be:

1. In what ways have the Boko Haram insurgency and armed banditry affected access to, participation in, and the delivery of basic education in Northeast and Northwest Nigeria?
2. What resilience strategies have households, local communities, educational institutions, and development partners adopted to ensure continuity of learning in conflict-affected communities?
3. How effective are existing national and sub-national policies and interventions in mitigating the out-of-school children crisis in Northeast and Northwest Nigeria?
4. What institutional, financial, governance, and political-economy factors constrain the implementation and effectiveness of educational policies and interventions at the state and local government levels?

Here are three specific, measurable, and actionable objectives for the study on out-of-school children in Nigeria.

1. To analyse the impact of insurgency and armed banditry on educational access, school participation, infrastructure, teacher availability, and learning outcomes in Northeast and Northwest Nigeria.
2. To examine the resilience and adaptation strategies adopted by households, communities, schools, government agencies, and humanitarian organizations to ensure continuity of learning in conflict-affected communities.
3. To assess the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of government policies and

programmes designed to reduce the incidence of out-of-school children in conflict-affected areas.

4. To investigate the institutional capacity, financial resources, governance structures, and political-economy factors influencing the implementation of education policies at the federal, state, and local government levels.

5. Literature Review

The persistent and escalating crisis of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Nigeria represents one of the most significant challenges to global education targets and national development. A robust body of literature has emerged seeking to diagnose the causes, scale, and implications of this issue which can be attributed to a confluence of interconnected factors.

4.1 Socio-Economic Barriers

Poverty is the most significant driver. For many households, the direct and indirect costs of education—such as levies, uniforms, textbooks, and transportation are prohibitive. Children are often required to contribute to household income through farming, street hawking, or domestic work, making school attendance an unaffordable luxury. Research by the World Bank (2021) and analyses by Adekola (2020) establish a strong correlation between household poverty and school non-attendance. The economic hardship exacerbated by inflation and unemployment further pushes families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational investment. This economic perspective is often framed within the human capital theory, where families weigh the long-term benefits of education against immediate economic needs. As Nwogu & Owoyemi (2019) argue, when the perceived return on investment in education is low due to high unemployment rates among graduates, the rational choice for impoverished households is to prioritize immediate income generation. This is compounded by the poor quality of many public schools, which diminishes the perceived value of education, a point powerfully made by Ukiwo (2017) in his analysis of the link between service delivery failure and social vulnerability.

4.2 Cultural and Religious Norms

A significant portion of the literature delves into the socio-cultural and religious dimensions of the crisis, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Studies by Höchner (2018) and Usman (2019) explore how cultural preferences for early marriage for girls effectively terminate their formal education. Patriarchal norms often prioritize the education of male children, viewing girls' primary roles as wives and mothers. Additionally, the preference for Almajiri education (Qur'anic schools) for boys, which traditionally focuses on religious instruction with little or no inclusion of literacy and numeracy, contributes significantly to the OOSC numbers. While not inherently negative, the lack of integration of this system with the formal curriculum leaves children without certified skills for the modern economy.

4.3 Insecurity and Conflict

The more recent and rapidly escalating driver documented in the literature is the impact of widespread insecurity. The work of think tanks like the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and analyses by Pérouse de Montclos (2021) detail how the Boko Haram insurgency, whose ideology is explicitly anti-Western education, has directly targeted schools, teachers, and students. This has resulted in the destruction of over 1,500 schools, the death or displacement of thousands of teachers, and the prolonged closure of educational institutions (UNICEF, 2023).

The literature frames this not just as physical destruction but as the creation of a "geography of fear." Research by Obi (2022) demonstrates that even in areas where schools remain open, parental fear of kidnappings dramatized by the Chibok and Dapchi abductions drastically reduces attendance. This has created a "lost generation" of children in conflict-affected zones, with profound implications for long-term stability and radicalization, a link explored in the work of Onapajo (2020) on youth marginalization and vulnerability to violent extremism.

4.4 Systemic Failures and Quality of Education

The poor quality of the public education system acts as both a cause and effect. Dilapidated infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate learning materials are commonplace. When children do enroll, the poor learning environment and irrelevant curriculum often lead to high dropout rates. The perception that schooling does not lead to tangible skills or employment opportunities diminishes its value in the eyes of parents and children alike.

5. A Multi-Pronged Policy Framework for Intervention

Addressing the out-of-school children (OOSC) crisis in Nigeria requires a holistic, coordinated, and sustained effort that simultaneously tackles both supply and demand-side constraints. The policy framework proposed below is organized around five interconnected pillars, each addressing a distinct dimension of the crisis. These pillars are designed to be implemented concurrently, recognizing that no single intervention can resolve this complex, multi-dimensional problem.

5.1 Pillar One: Strengthening Economic Incentives and Financial Access

The literature consistently identifies poverty as the most significant driver of educational exclusion (World Bank, 2021; Adekola et al., 2020). Therefore, any effective policy response must directly address the economic barriers that keep children out of school.

5.1.1 Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programs

Policy Recommendation: Scale up and expand the existing conditional cash transfer programs, explicitly linking disbursements to school enrollment and regular attendance. The conditionality must be strictly monitored and enforced.

Targeting: Prioritize the poorest households in high-OOSC regions, with a specific focus on households with girls of primary and lower secondary school age.

Implementation: Partner with state and local governments, community-based organizations, and financial institutions to ensure efficient, transparent, and timely delivery of funds. Use biometric verification to reduce fraud and leakage.

Expected Impact: Directly reduces the opportunity cost of sending children to school, incentivizing enrollment and regular attendance.

5.1.2 Comprehensive Scholarships and Bursaries

Policy Recommendation: Establish robust scholarship schemes that cover not only tuition but also all ancillary costs including uniforms, textbooks, transportation, and school supplies.

Targeting: Prioritize orphans, children with disabilities, children in conflict-affected areas, and girls at risk of early marriage.

Implementation: Decentralize scholarship administration to state and local government levels to ensure responsiveness to local contexts. Establish transparent selection criteria and grievance mechanisms.

Expected Impact: Removes the financial barriers that prevent vulnerable children from accessing education.

5.1.3 Expansion of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme

Policy Recommendation: Sustain, adequately fund, and expand the school feeding program to all primary schools, particularly in high-OOSC regions.

Implementation: Source food from local farmers to stimulate local economies. Ensure meals are nutritionally balanced to address malnutrition, which affects cognitive development and learning capacity.

Expected Impact: A guaranteed meal significantly increases daily attendance, improves concentration and learning outcomes, provides direct nutritional benefits, and acts as a powerful incentive for parents to enroll their children.

5.1.4 Elimination of All Hidden Costs

Policy Recommendation: Enforce the provisions of the Universal Basic Education Act, which guarantees free, compulsory basic education. Eliminate all forms of illegal levies, PTA fees, and other unofficial charges that burden poor families.

Implementation: Strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms at the school and community levels. Establish hotlines and complaint mechanisms for parents to report illegal fee collection.

Expected Impact: Removes a significant disincentive for enrollment and reduces the financial burden on already struggling households.

5.2 Pillar Two: Community Engagement, Awareness, and Norm Change

The crisis is deeply rooted in cultural norms, religious practices, and community attitudes. Addressing these requires respectful but persistent engagement with community stakeholders.

5.2.1 Mass Literacy and Advocacy Campaigns

Policy Recommendation: Launch nationwide, sustained advocacy campaigns leveraging traditional rulers, religious leaders, community elders, and local influencers to champion the value of formal education for both boys and girls. Frame education as compatible with religious and cultural values. Highlight the economic benefits of education, the importance of girls' education for community development, and the dangers of illiteracy.

Implementation: Utilize multiple media channels including radio (particularly effective in rural areas), television, social media, community town halls, and religious gatherings. Develop context-specific messages for different regions.

Expected Impact: Shifts community norms and attitudes towards valuing education, creating a supportive environment for enrollment and retention.

5.2.2 Integration of the Almajiri System

Policy Recommendation: Formally integrate Qur'anic (Almajiri) schools into the national education system through a structured, respectful partnership with Islamic scholars and institutions.

Implementation: Provide curriculum support to include basic literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills alongside religious instruction. Train Almajiri teachers in modern pedagogical techniques. Provide resources (books, learning materials) to Almajiri schools. Establish a certification system that recognizes both religious and secular learning.

Expected Impact: Transforms the Almajiri system from one that perpetuates exclusion to one that provides holistic education, equipping millions of boys with skills for the modern economy while respecting religious traditions.

5.2.3 Addressing Child Marriage

Policy Recommendation: Implement and enforce laws against child marriage, particularly in high-prevalence states. Combine legal measures with community sensitization on the health, social, and economic consequences of early marriage.

Implementation: Work with traditional and religious leaders to advocate for raising the marriage age. Provide economic alternatives for families through girls' scholarships and vocational training programs.

Expected Impact: Reduces the number of girls withdrawn from school for early marriage, allowing them to complete their education.

5.3 Pillar Three: Securing the Learning Environment

Insecurity has emerged as one of the most devastating drivers of the OOSC crisis, particularly in the North-East and North-West. Creating a safe learning environment is a prerequisite for enrollment and retention.

5.3.1 Revitalization of the Safe Schools Initiative

Policy Recommendation: Adequately fund and implement the Safe Schools Initiative with a clear action plan, timeline, and accountability mechanism.

Implementation: Provide physical security infrastructure, perimeter fencing, adequate lighting, secure entrances, and emergency communication systems. Deploy security personnel to schools in high-risk areas. Establish early warning systems and emergency response protocols.

Expected Impact: Creates a physical environment where parents feel confident sending their children to school and children feel safe to learn.

5.3.2 Community-Based School Security

Policy Recommendation: Foster collaboration between schools, formal security agencies, and local communities to develop context-specific security protocols.

Implementation: Establish community vigilante groups or school protection committees. Train community members on threat assessment, early warning signs, and emergency response. Integrate

community security efforts with formal security agencies for coordinated response.

Expected Impact: Leverages local knowledge and community ownership to create a more sustainable and trusted security framework.

5.3.3 Psychosocial Support Services

Policy Recommendation: Integrate psychosocial support and trauma-informed care into schools in conflict-affected areas.

Implementation: Train teachers to identify signs of trauma and provide basic psychosocial first aid. Employ school counselors and psychologists where possible. Establish referral pathways to specialized mental health services. Create safe spaces for children to share their experiences and receive support.

Expected Impact: Addresses the psychological impact of conflict and violence, enabling children to reintegrate into learning and cope with trauma.

5.3.4 Alternative Learning Pathways for Displaced Children

Policy Recommendation: Establish temporary learning spaces, mobile schools, and flexible education programs for children displaced by conflict.

Implementation: Use community centers, religious buildings, and temporary shelters as learning spaces. Implement accelerated learning programs to help displaced children catch up on missed education. Provide teaching materials and trained facilitators in emergency contexts.

Expected Impact: Ensures that displacement and conflict do not permanently disrupt children's education, providing continuity of learning.

5.4 Pillar Four: Improving Education Quality and Relevance

A poor-quality education system is both a cause and an effect of the OOSC crisis. Improving quality and relevance addresses the "perceived value" gap that often leads parents to withdraw their children.

5.4.1 Increased Education Budgetary Allocation

Policy Recommendation: The federal and state governments must meet, and preferably exceed, the UNESCO recommendation of allocating 15-20% of the national budget to education.

Implementation: Prioritize allocation to basic education, teacher recruitment and training, infrastructure rehabilitation, and learning materials. Ensure timely release and transparent utilization of allocated funds. Strengthen budget monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Expected Impact: Provides the necessary financial resources to address chronic underfunding and systemic failures in the education sector.

5.4.2 Comprehensive Curriculum Reform

Policy Recommendation: Review and update the curriculum to make it more relevant, skills-based, and aligned with 21st-century competencies.

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Implementation: Integrate vocational and technical skills training into the curriculum. Incorporate digital literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, and entrepreneurship. Ensure the curriculum is inclusive, gender-sensitive, and contextually relevant. Involve employers, industry experts, and civil society in curriculum development.

Expected Impact: Makes education more relevant to the needs of the economy and the aspirations of young people, increasing the perceived value of schooling.

5.4.3 Teacher Professional Development

Policy Recommendation: Invest in comprehensive, continuous professional development for teachers, focusing on pedagogical skills, child-centered learning, and teaching in crisis-affected environments.

Implementation: Establish mandatory in-service training programs. Provide scholarships and incentives for teachers to pursue further qualifications. Mentorship and peer learning programs.

Expected Impact: Improves the quality of teaching and learning, leading to better learning outcomes and increased student retention.

5.4.4 Infrastructure Rehabilitation and Expansion

Policy Recommendation: Invest in building new schools and rehabilitating existing ones, particularly in underserved and conflict-affected areas.

Implementation: Prioritize the provision of basic amenities: classrooms, furniture, toilets (especially girls' toilets), clean water, and electricity. Design schools to be accessible to children with disabilities.

Expected Impact: Creates a conducive learning environment that attracts and retains students and teachers.

5.4.5 Enhancement of the School-to-Work Transition

Policy Recommendation: Strengthen linkages between education and the labor market through career guidance, internships, apprenticeships, and job placement programs.

Implementation: Partner with the private sector to offer internships and apprenticeships. Provide career counseling and guidance in schools. Establish alumni networks and mentoring programs.

Expected Impact: Demonstrates the tangible economic value of education, incentivizing families to keep children in school.

5.5 Pillar Five: Strengthening Governance, Coordination, and Accountability

Effective implementation requires strong governance, inter-sectoral coordination, and accountability mechanisms.

5.5.1 Strengthening Inter-Governmental Coordination

Policy Recommendation: Establish robust coordination mechanisms between the federal, state, and local governments on the OOSC issue.

Implementation: Establish a National Task Force on Out-of-School Children with representation from all levels of government. Develop a shared national data system (integrated EMIS) accessible to all

stakeholders. Align state and local government education plans with national goals and targets.

Expected Impact: Ensures coherent, coordinated, and efficient policy implementation across levels of government.

5.5.2 Enhanced Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Policy Recommendation: Establish robust MEL frameworks for all OOSC interventions, with clear indicators, targets, and data collection mechanisms.

Implementation: Strengthen the capacity of UBEC, SUBEBs, and schools to collect and analyze data. Conduct regular independent evaluations of interventions. Use data to inform policy adjustments and resource allocation. Publish regular progress reports accessible to the public.

Expected Impact: Ensures accountability, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making.

5.5.3 Civil Society and Community Oversight

Policy Recommendation: Empower civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and citizen-led groups to monitor education delivery and advocate for accountability.

Implementation: Provide funding and capacity-building support for CSOs to conduct independent monitoring. Establish community scorecards to assess school performance. Create platforms for citizens to report grievances and hold authorities accountable.

Expected Impact: Increases transparency and accountability, reduces corruption, and ensures that services reach intended beneficiaries.

5.5.4 Partnership with the Private Sector and Development Partners

Policy Recommendation: Foster strategic partnerships with the private sector, development partners, and international organizations to leverage resources, expertise, and innovation.

Implementation: Establish public-private partnerships for infrastructure, technology, and teacher training. Align international donor support with government priorities. Promote corporate social responsibility initiatives focused on education.

Expected Impact: Leverages additional resources and expertise to accelerate progress.

5.6 Implementation Framework: Phased and Contextualized Approach

The policy framework must be implemented in phases, with different priorities for different contexts.

5.6.1 Phase 1: Crisis Response (First 12-24 Months)

Focus on: Securing the learning environment (Pillar 3), providing emergency education for displaced children (Pillar 3), and scaling up cash transfers (Pillar 1).

Targeted at: Conflict-affected states and communities with the highest OOSC rates.

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5.6.2 Phase 2: Structural Reform (24-60 Months)

Focus on: Curriculum reform (Pillar 4), teacher development (Pillar 4), integration of Almajiri system (Pillar 2), and strengthening governance (Pillar 5).

Targeted at: All states, with specific modifications for local contexts.

5.6.3 Phase 3: Consolidation and Scaling (60+ Months)

Focus on: Sustaining gains, scaling successful models, and embedding reforms in institutional structures.

Targeted at: National consolidation of gains.

5.6.4 Differentiated Strategies by Context

Context	Primary Drivers	Prioritized Interventions
Conflict-Affected (e.g., Zamfara, Borno, Yobe)	Insecurity, displacement, trauma	Safe schools, psychosocial support, temporary learning spaces, cash transfers for displaced families
High-Prevalence / Non-Conflict (e.g., Kano, Katsina, Sokoto)	Poverty, cultural norms, Almajiri system	CCTs, girls' education units, Almajiri integration, mass advocacy campaigns, curriculum reform
Urban (e.g., Lagos, Kano City)	Poverty, street hawking, perceived low quality	CCTs, school feeding, quality improvement, school-to-work transition, child labor enforcement

5.7 Summary: The Logic Model

The policy framework can be visualized as a logic model:

Inputs → Activities → Outputs → Outcomes → Impact

- Inputs: Increased budget allocation, policy reforms, partnerships, technical assistance.
- Activities: CCT disbursements, teacher training, school rehabilitation, safe school infrastructure, advocacy campaigns, curriculum reform.
- Outputs: More children enrolled, more schools built, improved teacher quality, safer learning environments, changed community attitudes.
- Outcomes: Reduced OOSC numbers, improved learning outcomes, increased school retention, reduced child labor and early marriage.
- Impact: Universal basic education for all Nigerian children, reduced poverty and inequality, enhanced social cohesion, sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

The crisis of out-of-school children in Nigeria is a national emergency that demands urgent and decisive action. It is a complex problem rooted in poverty, culture, conflict, and systemic failure. A piecemeal approach will not suffice. Success requires a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort involving all tiers of government, civil society, the private sector, international partners, and local communities. By implementing a comprehensive policy framework that combines financial support, community mobilization, security, and quality improvement, Nigeria can begin to dismantle the barriers that keep its children out of school. Ensuring every Nigerian child has access to a quality education is not just a moral imperative; it is the most strategic investment the nation can make for its peace, prosperity, and future.

Funding

The publication of this article was made possible by the generous support of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) Nigeria. (TETF/DR&D/CE/UNI/KADUNA/IBR/2026/VOL.1, BATCH 7) and Kaduna State University (KASU), Kaduna Nigeria.

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