OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract
Nigeria continues to face significant challenges regarding educational access, with a considerable number of children not attending school, despite global advancements in this area. These challenges stem from inefficiencies in government policies, persistent insecurity, various socio-economic and cultural issues, among other factors. This paper utilizes recent statistics and literature to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation. The paper examines the concept and dimensions of out of school children from both global and African perspectives, focusing specifically on Nigeria to assess the magnitude of the issue. The paper then identifies the underlying causes of the problem within the country and finally offers recommendations for addressing these challenges, which include the need for adequate funding of education, strengthening the Universal Basic Education and Child Rights Acts, enhancing security services, and reintroducing a free school feeding programme, among others.

Keywords: Education Access, Nigeria, Out-of-School Children

Introduction

In the name of Almighty Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful. I am deeply honoured to stand before you today and express my full appreciation and profound gratitude for the invitation by the Local Organizing Committee of this conference to deliver a lead paper at this important academic conference. The theme, '*Out of School Children in Nigeria: Challenges and way Forward'* is appropriate, relevant and timely. It speaks directly to one of the most pressing issues confronting our nation today - the alarming rate at which children are being denied access to education. This conference presents an invaluable platform for us to critically examine the factors contributing to this crisis and, more importantly, to chart a way forward that is both sustainable and inclusive.　　I am certain that with the collective wisdom in this gathering, we can develop actionable strategies to address this issue and secure a brighter future for our younger generation.

The United Nations has declared that every child has the right to education. Primary education must be free, and various forms of secondary education must be accessible to all children (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2019). Education is a fundamental human right, recognized under international law since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. More specifically, children's rights to education are firmly rooted in child-specific legal frameworks, such as

the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (African Union, 2024). Section 18 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution has also clearly stipulated that "The government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; the government shall provide free, compulsory, and universal primary education; the government shall ensure free secondary education and university education when practicable". Also in the Child rights act it was further emphasized that "every child is entitled to free, compulsory, and universal basic education, and it is the responsibility of the Nigerian government to ensure this provision" (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2003). Many states in the federation have also passed laws, like the UBE, Act, to reinforce compulsory education for Nigerian Children (UBE Act, 2004).

However, despite these legal obligations, a significant number of children in Nigeria remain out of school. According to the UNICEF (2023), Nigeria has one of the highest rates of out-of-school children globally.

Concept of out of school Children
The term out-of-school children has been defined in different perspectives. Each definition emphasizes different aspects of children's exclusion from formal education systems. Ogunode, Adanna and Ayoko (2022) viewed children who are yet to be enrolled in any formal education, excluding pre-primary education as out of school children. He further stated that, they 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. The age range for out-of school children is 6-11 years (Ogunode et al., 2022).

United Nations (2020), defines out-of-school children as individuals who are of school-going age, typically between 6 to 17 years old, but are not participating in formal education due to various reasons such as poverty, armed conflict, or disability. While, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), 2020) conceptualized out-of-school children as those who are not enrolled in any formal or non-formal education system.

Global Dimension of Out-of-School Children
About 244 million children remain out of school worldwide, with a majority residing in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia (UNICEF, 2023). In the year 2022, children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 across the world were out of school; of which 118.5 million were girls and 125.5 million were boys (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2022). The situation persist due an increase in armed conflicts, poverty and natural disasters (World Bank, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted educational access worldwide, disproportionately affecting vulnerable children. In many countries, especially in low-income regions of Africa, the closure of schools and limited access to digital learning have set back progress in education for millions of children (UNESCO, 2021).

African continent remains with the highest number of out-of-school children, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for more than half of the global figure (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). As of 2022, about 98 million children in Africa were not enrolled in school, with disparities between rural and urban areas, boys and girls, and across different

economic classes (UNICEF, 2022). Several factors also contribute to this alarming statistic, including poverty, child labor, early marriage, and inadequate educational infrastructure (GPE, 2023). Africa's high population growth rate further exacerbates the situation, making it difficult for educational systems to expand rapidly enough to accommodate the increasing number of school-age children. Additionally, many African countries face issues of underfunding in their education sectors, which limits the availability of teachers, classrooms, and learning materials (World Bank, 2022).

UNICEF (2022), reported that around 450,000 children of primary school age were out of school in Ghana in 2021. The primary factors driving this trend include poverty, child labor, and gender discrimination. Although Ghana has made notable strides in improving access to education, especially through the implementation of its Free Senior High School policy in 2017 (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2022). However, challenges remain in ensuring children access to quality education, particularly in rural areas and other disadvantaged segments of the population.

Niger Republic, which has been categorized among the one of the poorest countries in the world, has one of the highest rates of out-of-school children in Africa. In the year 2022, over 47% of school-age children were not enrolled in primary or secondary school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). A combination of factors including economic hardship, insecurity, early marriage and child labor are among other contributing factors to the menace (UNICEF, 2023).

Cameroon which suffers from economic and security challenges, is also struggling with the problem of out-of-school children. As of 2022, nearly 1.3 million children were out of school. The situation was fueled due to the internal crisis, which has severely affected the education sector in the North-West and South-West regions (UNESCO, 2023). Many schools in conflict zones have been shut down, forcing children into displacement or out of education entirely. Other factors like poverty and child labor also contribute to the high number of out-of-school children in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In Benin Republic, an estimated 300,000 children were out of school, mainly in rural areas (UNICEF, 2022).

However, some countries in Africa have made a giant stride toward realizing the initiatives of free education. These countries include Botswana, Zambia and Serra Leone. Botswana in particular, have being implementing free primary education policy for several decades, with emphasis on improving access to primary education, while secondary education has been subsidized; making it more accessible and affordable (UNESCO, 2023). Zambia has recently launched a free education policy in 2022, which covers schooling from early childhood to secondary level in public schools. Similarly, Sierra Leone passed a law in 2023 ensuring 13 years of free education, including one year of pre-primary and full secondary education (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Out of School Children in Nigeria: Challenges and way forward
Nigeria has the highest number of out of school children in the world, reaching up to 18.3 million (Chukwuemeka, 2024). It was stated that one in every five of the World's out-of school children is in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2023). It was also reported that 7.6 million girls

are out of school in Nigeria: 2.8 million at the primary level and 3.7 at the junior secondary school level More than 50% of girls are not attending school at the basic education level, 48% of them are from the North-west and North-East (UNICEF, 2022)..

The situation is particularly severe in the Northern region, where conflict and banditry has led to widespread displacement and destruction of educational infrastructure (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Additionally, economic instability, child labor, early marriage among others contribute to the high rates of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

In a country as rich in resources and potential as Nigeria, the fact that millions of children remain out of school is not just a challenge but a national tragedy. Education is not only a fundamental right; it is the foundation of development. Without it, we risk perpetuating cycles of poverty, inequality, and insecurity. The issue of out-of-school children has far-reaching implications for our future workforce, socio-economic growth, and global standing in the comity of nations.

The National Bureau of Statistics (2023); UNICEF (2023) and UNESCO (2022) have identified the following statistics with regards to the estimated figure of Nigeria's out of school children.

Breakdown of Out of School Children in Nigeria across the 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory

S/N	STATE	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
1.	Abia	67,000	78,000	145,000
2.	Adamawa	380,000	340,000	720,000
3.	Akwa Ibom	110,000	100,000	210,000
4.	Anambara	75,000	75,000	150,000
5.	Bauchi	460,000	380,00	840,000
6.	Bayelsa	58,000	52,000	110,000
7.	Benue	160,000	140,000	300,000
8.	Borno	700,000	500,000	1.2 Million
9.	Cross River	98,000	92,000	190,000
10.	Delta	85,000	75,000	160,000
11.	Ebonyi	72,000	68,000	140,000
12.	Edo	67,000	58,000	125,000
13.	Ekiti	50,000	40,000	90,000
14.	Enugu	68,000	62,000	130,000
15.	Gombe	320,000	300,000	620,000
16.	Imo	62,000	58,000	120,000
17.	Jigawa	290,000	241,000	531,000
18.	Kaduna	320,000	280,000	600,000
19.	Kano	900,000	600,000	1.5 Million
20.	Katsina	600,000	500,000	1.1 Million
21.	Kebbi	410,000	310,00	720,000

S/N	STATE	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
22.	Kogi	75,000	65,000	140,000
23.	Kwara	60,000	55,000	115,000
24.	Lagos	130,000	110,000	240,000
25.	Nasarawa	105,000	95,000	200,000
26.	Niger	400,000	350,000	750,000
27.	Ogun	92,000	78,000	170,000
28.	Ondo	75,000	65,000	140,000
29.	Osun	58,000	52,000	110,000
30.	Oyo	110,000	100,000	210,000
31.	Plateau	135,000	115,000	250,000
32.	Rivers	150,000	150,000	300,000
33.	Sokoto	430,000	390,000	820,000
34.	Taraba	280,000	240,000	520,000
35.	Yobe	520,000	430,000	950,000
36.	Zamfara	410,000	340,000	750,000
37.	Federal Capital Territory	55,000	45,000	100,000
Grand Total		**8,338,000**	**7,029,000**	**15,466,000**

In most Northern states, majority of out of school children are boys, which may likely be attributed to the issue of child labour, while girls face another challenges which include early marriage and forced domestic work (UNICEF, 2023). In Borno, Kano, and Katsina states, boys constitute a larger portion of the out-of-school population. However, in states like Zamfara and Yobe, where the practice of early marriage is predominant, the number of out-of-school girls is very high.

North-East and North-West regions of Nigeria accounts for the majority of the country's out-of-school children, essentially due to proliferation of poverty, insecurity and other cultural practices. States like Borno, Yobe, and Kano have the greater numbers of out-of-school children. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and UNICEF (2023), Kano State has an estimated 1.5 million out-of-school children, which makes it the highest in the nation in terms of school children in the country. On the Southern part of the Country, states like Lagos, Rivers, and Anambra have significantly lower numbers of out of school children.

Causes of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria
Several factors are responsible for to the high level of out-of-school children in Nigeria, some of which include the following:

Inadequate Funding of Education

Successive Nigerian government have nonchalant attitude toward education sector, which have resulted in insufficient funding of the sector at all level. This has resulted to a high number of out-of school children in the country. For example in the year 2024 budget, which amounted to 27.5 trillion, the government allocated the sum of N1.54 trillion to education sector, representing 6.39% of the total budget (Suleiman, 2023).This is far below the UNESCO's recommendation which is 15 to 20% of the total budget of a country.

Inadequate Infrastructure
Many states, particularly in rural areas, lack sufficient schools, trained teachers, and learning materials (UNESCO, 2022).

Persistent Insecurity
Insurgency and banditry in Northern Nigeria have led to the closure of schools and displacement of families, preventing many children from accessing education   (UNICEF, 2023).

Corruption
Corruption has been one of the cankerworm that derails Nigeria in achieving educational progress. Corruption in education especially at the Basic Education level has led to the misuse of funds leading to the wastage of resources (Ogunode, Adanna & Ayoko, 2022).

Poverty
Economic hardship is a significant barrier to education for many Nigerian families, particularly in rural areas (Oladipo, 2021).

Cultural Norms
Cultural practices, particularly in the northern part of the country, which encourage teenage girls to be married off, removing them from formal education (Akanbi, 2020). Other practices include haphazard early marriage, unplanned polygamous marriage and higher fertility rate as well as rampant and careless divorce.

Way Forward
The issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria depicts a multifaceted nature of the problem confronting the education system in the country. In many States of the federation, particularly in the north, the issue of out-of-school children is not merely one of access but also of retention; as many children who enroll in school eventually drop out due to various pressures. There is the need for concerted efforts from the government, Parents, the Community and Private sector as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in addressing the situation. Government policies need to focus on improving funding of education sector, enhancement of teacher quality and addressing the socio-economic challenges that prevent children from attending schools. The international community should intensify efforts in supporting the Nigerian governments through funding and

technical assistance, teacher re-training and ensuring that progress toward universal education is not derailed by conflict, poverty, or inequality.

Recommendations
Addressing the out-of-school children crisis in Nigeria requires comprehensive and sustained policy interventions. The following recommendations are proffered:
Appropriate funding, Strengthening UBE and full implementation of the Childs' Rights Act in all the states of the federation.
Re-introduction of Free School Feeding Programme at all levels of Basic Education to serve as an incentive to the impoverish families
Improved Security Services in conflict-affected regions, particularly in the North-East and North-west where insurgency and banditry has severely disrupted education.
There is need for the government to intensify efforts in engaging the community leaders and traditional rulers towards addressing the cultural barriers preventing children from attending school.
There is need for more emphasis from the government for the Integration of traditional Qur'anic Schools into Formal Education System.
Enhancement of teacher quality, provision of adequate school infrastructure and instructional materials.
Additional priorities should be given to Girl child Education such as free education and scholarship programmes.
School fees should be reduce to the barest minimum at all level of education.

Conclusions
In Nigeria, the problem of out-of-school children is a multifaceted challenge, driven by a combination of poverty, insecurity, cultural practices and inadequate infrastructure. To address this issue, a combination of community engagement, policy reform, sustained investments in education and teacher training is required. Moreover, government partnerships with international organizations, NGOs, and the private sector will be critical in ensuring that all children, regardless of gender or location have access to quality education.

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