



EXPLORING THE ROOT CAUSES OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL PHENOMENA IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

The issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria remains a critical challenge to the nation's socio-economic development and global educational goals. This paper looks into the multidimensional root causes of this problem, focusing on socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions. It classified the effect of out-of-school phenomenon in Nigeria into immediate, short-term term and long-term effects. The paper, through findings, identifies loss of opportunity, limited economic prospects and economic stagnation as some of the challenges of out-of-school children. The paper suggests that Government at all levels should introduce poverty alleviation programs aimed at reducing the economic burden on families and ensure effective implementation of such programs, the free and compulsory basic education policy enshrined in the National Policy on Education should be implemented and enforced by inaugurating a special designated agency or outfit, and Government at all level should promote cultural reorientation by engaging communities through awareness campaigns to change negative perceptions towards education, especially for girls and physically challenged children to address these challenges, aiming to provide an inclusive and equitable educational system for all children.

Keywords: Root causes, Out-of-school, Socio-economic Dimension, Political Dimension and Cultural Dimension.

Introduction

Nigeria is grappling with a significant educational crisis, as evidenced by the substantial number of children who remain out of school. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Global Education Monitoring Report 2024 and the latest estimates from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 272 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 worldwide are out of school globally as of 2023. Initiative for Research, Innovation, and Advocacy in Development (IRIAD) in 2025 revealed that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children globally, with approximately 18.3 million children still out of school in Nigeria as of late 2024.

The implications of such a vast number of out-of-school children are profound, affecting the futures of the individuals and the nation's socio-economic development. Children deprived of education are more susceptible to poverty, exploitation, and health challenges. Moreover, a large out-of-school population hampers economic growth, perpetuates cycles of poverty, and poses challenges to social cohesion. To effectively address the problems of out-of-school phenomenon, it is imperative to look into the different root causes that contribute to the high rate of out-of-school children. This paper aims to explore the socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions that buttress this crisis, providing a comprehensive understanding essential to the government for formulating effective interventions.

Concept of Out-of-School Children

Out-of-school children are Children of schoolgoing age who are not enrolled in or attending any form of formal or informal education (UNESCO, 2020). The age range for out-of-school children is 6-11 years. Out-of-school

children are children of school age who are supposed to be in school but are not in school due to several reasons, which could be parental and governmental failures to provide accessible, quality education for them. Out-of-school children are young children in the age group of 1 to 12 that are roaming the streets without access to a functional educational system (Ogunode et al., 2022). Out-of-school children are a term used for children who do not attend school of children within school age, due to some established factors.

Root Causes of Out-of-School Phenomena in Nigeria

The root causes of out-of-school phenomenon in Nigeria are multidimensional, some of which include: socioeconomic, cultural and political factors.

1. Socio-economic Dimension

This is one of the most endemic root causes of out-of-school phenomenon in Nigeria. Poverty remains a substantial barrier to education in Nigeria. Many families struggle to afford school fees, uniforms, books, and transportation. The economic burden often forces children to drop out of school or never enrol in school (UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, children from poor families are often required to work to support household incomes, further limiting their access to education (Abdulbaqi et al., 2024). Rising poverty forces parents to put children in the labour market and street hawking, and the breakdown in social and family life are some of the root causes of the high rate of out-of-school children in Nigeria. This position was reaffirmed by Ogunode (2020) and Musa (2019) that many Nigerian parents cannot send their wards to school due to the high rate of poverty. Almost all public basic schools in Nigeria that preach free education still collect some fees like examinations and PTA levies. Where a family's resources are low, families either enrol some children, leaving some at home to help with housekeeping or at the farm. In most cases, older children, orphans, and girls are most likely to be left out. This is a major factor in the out-of-school problem. Studies show that households in rural areas spend less on education due to limited resources and competing financial priorities (World Bank, 2018).

2. Cultural Dimension

Another dimensional root cause is cultural beliefs and practices, which play a grave role in educational access. In many parts of Nigeria, particularly in rural areas of Northern Nigeria, cultural norms have given more priority to early marriage and domestic responsibilities for girls over formal education. According to UNICEF (2020), about 43% of girls in Nigeria are married before their 18th birthday, limiting their chances of continuing education. Similarly, boys in rural areas are encouraged and persuaded by their parents to migrate to urban areas, mostly outside the region, for greener pastures or to pursue vocational work and farming, instead of attending school. These practices extend a cycle of limited educational attainment and poverty (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2021). Cultural beliefs like attaching health challenges of children with impairment to evil or spiritual attacks, hindering them from seeking medical solutions, which in turn prevent them from enrolling such children in schools.

Some religious misconceptions, like Boko Haram, believe that Western or secular education is forbidden; in some communities, especially in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria, certain religious sects believe that Western education contradicts their faith, leading to resistance against formal schooling. Some parents prioritise religious education over formal education, resulting in enrolling their children in religious schools while neglecting formal education. Other religious misconception that increases the rate of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria include: fate and predestination (destiny), dependency on religious leaders' teachings without critical thinking and fear of moral corruption in schools.

3. Political Dimension

The political factor is one of the most critical root causes of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Corruption in Nigerian politics and administration is one of the most critical factors responsible for out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria and the country at large. Ogunode and Stephen (2021) assert that corruption in the administration of Basic education initiatives is a cause of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Adegboyega (2019) affirms that Transparency International documented that "66 per cent of the money Nigerian governments allocate to education was stolen by corrupt officials. According to the report, corruption is commonplace in education systems across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This affects education access, quality, inclusion and learning outcomes with devastating consequences, not only for national economic growth but also for the life chances of children, their families and communities," the report stated. The report highlighted "Resource misallocation, corrupt procurement, fake qualifications, teacher absenteeism, and corrupt recruitment practices" as the various corruption risks and challenges facing education systems in all the countries, especially in Nigeria and its northern region. Corruption, mismanagement of resources, and a lack of accountability have hindered efforts to address the issue of out-of-school in Northern Nigeria.

Political instability, conflict, and insecurity can severely disrupt education systems. The ongoing insurgency in the northeast and insecurity in the northwestern region of Nigeria, for instance, have led to the closure of numerous schools and the displacement of communities, forcing children to flee their homes and abandon their education (Akorede et al., 2022). The lack of access to schools intensifies the problem, especially for children with disabilities, who face significant barriers to attending school (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Inadequate government policies and political will are another major political cause of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Despite numerous policies aimed at improving education, implementation remains weak. For instance, Nigeria's Universal Basic Education Act (2004) mandates free and compulsory basic education, yet enforcement remains inconsistent (UNESCO, 2021). The government's inability to provide sufficient funding and oversight has left millions of children without access to the school system (Transparency International, 2020).

Implication of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

The phenomenon of out-of-school children in Nigeria has far-reaching and devastating consequences, not only for the individual children but also for the nation as a whole. This paper categorised the effects into immediate, long-term, and societal.

1. Immediate Effects

These are consequences or outcomes of out-of-school activities on children that occur immediately; they do not take a long time to become apparent. They include:

- a. **Loss of Opportunity:** Out-of-school children are deprived of the fundamental right to education, which limits their future opportunities for personal and professional growth (UNESCO, 2022). They miss out on acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, critical thinking abilities, and knowledge that are essential for navigating the modern world. This lack of foundational skills further marginalises them in a competitive job market (World Bank, 2020).
- b. **Increased Vulnerability:** Children out of school are more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect (Akorede et al., 2022). They are at a higher risk of child labour, recruitment into armed groups, and involvement in criminal activities. This vulnerability is often worsened by poverty and lack of social safety nets (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

2. Long-Term Effects

These are consequences or outcomes of out-of-school activities on children that occur after a long period of time; they take a long time to become apparent. They include:

- a. **Limited Economic Prospects:** Out-of-school children often face a lifetime of poverty and unemployment due to their lack of education and skills (World Bank, 2020). They are likely to be trapped in low-paying jobs with little or no chance for advancement. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty and limits their ability to provide for themselves and their families.
- b. **Poor Health Outcomes:** Lack of education is linked to poor health outcomes, including higher rates of infectious diseases, malnutrition, and maternal mortality (Abdlbaqi et al., 2019; Akorede et al., 2023).

Out-of-school children may also lack access to basic healthcare services and health information (Akorede et al., 2022). This can lead to decreased life expectancy and increased burden on the healthcare system.

- c. Social Exclusion:** Out-of-school children are often marginalised and excluded from social and civic life (UNICEF, 2021). They may face discrimination and stigma, which can further limit their opportunities and well-being. This social exclusion can lead to feelings of hostility and contribute to social instability.

3. Societal effect

These are the consequences of out-of-school on the society (Community, State and the Nation). They include:

- a. Economic Stagnation:** A large population of uneducated citizens hinders economic growth and development (Abdulbaqi et al., 2024). Wrexham Glyndŵr University (2021). The lack of skilled labour can discourage investment and limit innovation, leading to a less productive workforce and a weaker economy. The implications of this for Nigeria are that Nigeria will lose its ability to compete in the global economy.
- b. Increased Poverty:** Out-of-school children are more likely to live in poverty, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty (World Bank, 2020). This can lead to increased social inequality and instability. The economic burden of supporting a large impoverished population can strain government resources.
- c. Social Problems:** High rates of out-of-school children are associated with increased crime rates, social unrest, and insecurity (UNODC, 2020). Uneducated youth are more likely to be involved in criminal activities and may be easily recruited by extremist groups. This poses a threat to national security and stability.
- d. Hindered Development:** The large number of out-of-school children in Nigeria poses a significant obstacle to achieving sustainable development goals (UNDP, 2022). The country's progress in areas such as health, education, and economic growth is hampered by the lack of human capital development. This affects Nigeria's ability to meet its development targets and improve the quality of life for its citizens.

Suggestions

This paper, after exploring some of the root causes of out-of-school children in northern Nigeria, makes the following suggestions, which, if implemented, will significantly reduce the rate of out-of-school children in northern Nigeria and the country at large:

1. The government at all levels should introduce poverty alleviation programs aimed at reducing the economic burden on families and ensuring the effective implementation of such programs.
2. The free and compulsory basic education policy enshrined in the National Policy on Education should be implemented and enforced by inaugurating a special designated agency or outfit, tasked with the function of ensuring strict implementation.
3. The government at all levels should promote cultural reorientation by engaging communities through awareness campaigns to change negative perceptions towards education, especially for girls and physically challenged children.
4. The government at all levels should invest in educational infrastructure by building and equipping more schools, particularly in rural areas and train teachers to improve education quality.
5. Government Policies should be strengthened to increase budgetary allocation to education and ensure transparent implementation of policies.
6. Communities should be involved in the security and decisions about their schools.

7. The government should provide adequate security, especially in rural areas where banditry cases are more prevalent, by addressing the issues causing insecurity in the country, particularly in the northern part.

Conclusion

The effects of out-of-school phenomena in northern Nigeria are broad and have devastating consequences for individuals and society. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the country's development and for ensuring a brighter future for its children. This paper discussed the concept of out-of-school children in Nigeria and looked at three major dimensional root causes (Socio-economic, Cultural and Political) for large out-of-school children in Nigeria and their implications to the individuals and the nation at large. This paper classified the impact of out-of-school phenomenon in Nigeria into immediate effect on the child, long-term effects on the individual and societal impact. Some of the specific impact of out-of-school children in Nigeria that the paper highlights includes loss of opportunity, limited economic prospects and economic stagnation. This paper suggests that Government at all level should introduce poverty alleviation programs aimed at reducing the economic burden on families and ensure effective implementation of such programs, the free and compulsory basic education policy enshrined in the National Policy on Education should be implemented and enforced by inaugurating a special designated agency or outfit, and Government at all level should promote cultural reorientation by engaging communities through awareness campaigns to change negative perceptions towards education, especially for girls and physically challenged children.

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