RISE
RESEARCH ON IMPROVING SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

INSIGHTS

# The Problem of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

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**RISE Ethiopia**

## Key Points

- Factors that contribute to the incidence of out of school children include but are not limited to early/child marriage, economic barriers, conflict, socio-cultural norms, and lack of inclusive policies/practices in schools. These 'demand and supply barriers' could lead to one or all of these situations: 1) delayed enrolment of an eligible school aged child, 2) a child who will never attend school, 3) a child who will attend school but later drop out.
- The combination of demand and supply barriers to educational access has led to and continues to contribute to the large number of out of school children in Nigeria.
- Both governmental and non-governmental efforts are necessary to tackle the current situation through the use of education innovations such as the Accelerated Education Programme, combined with other conventional interventions such as rebuilding and expanding of infrastructure, more enrolment sensitisation, economic intervention, improved security, and legal enforcement.

## Introduction

In 2015, all United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which outlines a blueprint to address global challenges across a broad range of themes including poverty, health, education, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. The Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, otherwise referred to as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Unfortunately, an approximated 263 million children remain out of school around the world. This number includes children who never started formal schooling and children who started school but later dropped out (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016).

Reducing the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) is a key priority for countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria. This is because more than half of children globally that have not enrolled in school live in Sub-Saharan Africa, and more than 85 percent of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are not learning the minimum (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2018). Moreover, education is a fundamental human right, a critical driver for economic advancement and a powerful tool for poverty reduction. Hence, no child of school age should be denied access to quality and equitable education, and an opportunity to acquire skills that guarantee future employability and long-term earning.

In the Nigerian context, OOSC are prevalent in both rural and urban settings, but rural areas, and isolated or deprived areas in general, consistently show higher numbers of out-of-school children (World Bank, 2019). These children are spread across the country in varying proportions. This situation is of concern to the Federal Government of Nigeria as noted in the Nigeria Education Ministerial Plan (2018-2022) which outlines several strategies targeted at bringing children back to school. In spite of these strategies, the number of OOSC remains significantly high.

This insight note aims to provide an overview of the most recent data on out-of-school children in Nigeria, including breakdowns by socioeconomic and other demographic indicators. This will be followed by suggestions of possible interventions, prime of which is the Accelerated Education Programme (AEP), and other interventions which could serve to strengthen the existing laid out strategies by the government in addressing the OOSC problem in Nigeria.

## Overview of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

Nigeria has the largest number of out-of-school children in the world (UNICEF, 2018). It is estimated that one in every five out-of-school children around the globe is in Nigeria. Even though basic education is legally free and compulsory in the country, about 10.5 million children aged 5 to 14 years are out of school. About 50 percent of these children live in the northern region, known to be severely affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. In addition, only 61 percent of children between the ages of 6 to 11 years attend primary school regularly (UNICEF, 2018).

**Factors contributing to high number of OOSC in Nigeria**

There are a number of factors that contribute to the incidence of OOSC recorded across low- and-middle-income countries like Nigeria. These factors include but are not limited to early/child marriage, economic barriers, conflict, socio-cultural norms, and lack of inclusive policies/practices in schools. However, these factors or barriers can be categorised into two, i.e., demand and supply barriers. These barriers could lead to one or all of these situations: 1) delayed enrolment of an eligible school aged child, 2) a child who will never attend school, 3) a child who will attend school but later drop out.

*1. Demand Barriers*

Demand barriers are considered to be decisions made by household members that affect a child's access to quality education. There are several factors that could affect the demand for education. Some of these factors include: early/child marriage, low household income, child labour, religion, culture, etc. (UNICEF, 2014). Table 1 and 2 below highlights barriers that could prevent a child from ever attending school or dropping out of school, across 3 years (i.e., 2004, 2010, 2015). The findings from Table 1 and 2 below are based on the 2015 Nigerian Education Data Survey (NEDS) report.

As seen in Table 1, the top demand barrier that prevents children from ever attending is "labour needed". This implies that out of the children who do not ever attend school, the largest single reason given for never attending school is labour demands. In 2015, 21 percent of children never attended school due to labour demands in their household. However, this was higher in 2010 and 2004 (32 percent and 34 percent respectively), indicating a significant decrease in labour demands being a top reason for children never attending school. Furthermore, labour demands were also highlighted as a top reason for children dropping out from both government and private schools (as seen in Table 2). This corroborates the findings in Table 1, indicating that household labour demands are a major inhibitor to education access for school aged children.

*2. Supply Barriers*

The Supply rationale connotes that schools are the key drivers of education access, quality, and retention. Supply barriers that could potentially affect a child's access to education include but are not limited to lack of infrastructure, conflict/insecurity, lack of qualified teachers, language of instruction, and distance to school (UNICEF, 2014). Table 1 and 2 provide insights on reasons why children never attended school or dropped out of school. In Table 1, on the supply side, distance to school was the major reason why children never attended school accounting for 23 percent of the reasons given by households in the 2015 survey. Also, poor school quality was the second top reason as shown by 14 percent of responses in 2015.

*Table 1: Top Reasons for Having Never Attended School*

| | Barrier | 2015 | 2010 | 2004 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Demand Barriers | Labour Needed | 21% | 32% | 34% |
| | Monetary Cost | 18% | 25% | 23% |
| | No Interest | 10% | 10% | 8% |
| Supply Barriers | School Too Far | 23% | 32% | 20% |
| | Poor School Quality | 14% | 17% | 14% |

*Source: National Population Commission (Nigeria) and RTI International, 2016*

However, the major supply barrier leading to school drop-out among school aged children was poor school quality (i.e., 15 percent of responses in 2015 [as seen in Table 2]). These findings indicate that inadequate supply of infrastructures and distance to school are major supply side factors contributing to the OOSC numbers in Nigeria.

*Table 2: Top Reasons for Dropping Out*

| | Barrier | Government School | Private School | 2015 | 2010 | 2004 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Demand Barriers | Labour Needed | 15% | 11% | 14% | 17% | 21% |
| | Monetary Cost | 23% | 49% | 26% | 33% | 31% |
| | Engaged, Married, Pregnancy | 5% | 1% | 5% | n/a | n/a |
| Supply Barriers | Poor School Quality | 15% | 2% | 13% | 6% | 17% |
| | School Too Far | 7% | 3% | 6% | 8% | 10% |

*Source: National Population Commission (Nigeria) and RTI International, 2016*

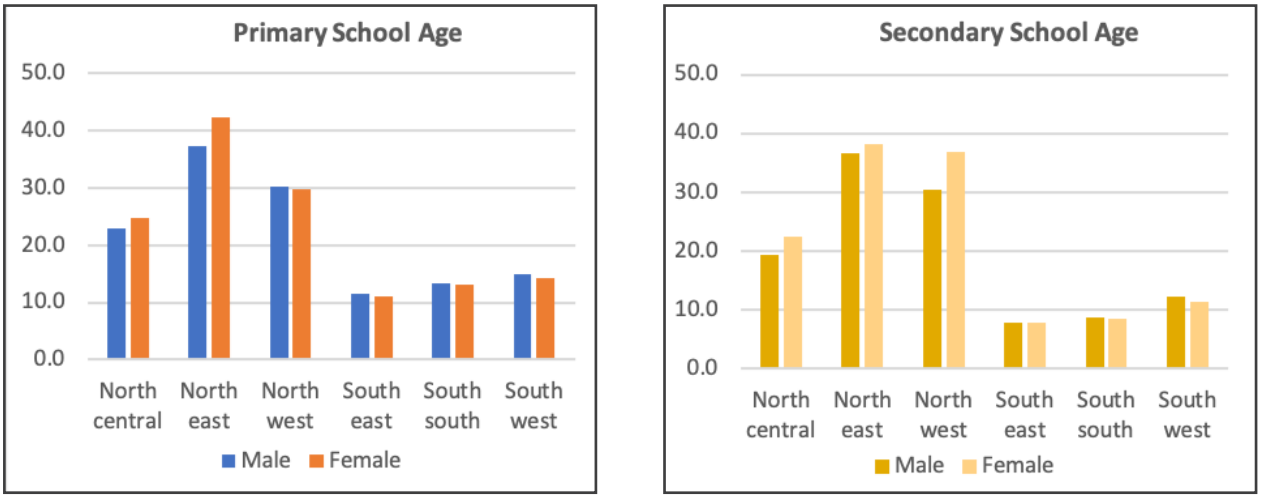
As stated earlier, there are other factors that are responsible for the OOSC situation in Nigeria, such as lack of qualified teachers, language barriers, conflict/insecurity, etc. In the northern part of Nigeria, conflict and fragility has led to a major setback in their education system, particularly the northeast which has led to the closure of many schools across the region. As a result of these, an estimated 1.9 million people, including women and girls of school age have been displaced from their homes. Also, approximately 1,200 schools have been damaged, and 1,700 have been closed down. More than 600 teachers have been slain, and 19,000 have been forced to flee their homes (OCHA, 2017; Ferrans et al., 2022). According to Odinkalu (2014), the closing down of schools has had far-reaching consequences, including ending the education of many students and the opportunity to pursue higher education. The Boko Haram insurgency is also one of the reasons for the widespread destruction of businesses and other economic activities in many parts of northern Nigeria, which has indirect impacts on the ability of parents to keep their children in school.

The 2016-2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)[1] provides relevant information on the OOSC situation in Nigeria. This is disaggregated according to gender, geopolitical zones, wealth index and settlement type, i.e., rural and urban

[1] This is the latest nationwide survey of OOSC numbers that covers the 36 states of the federation as at the time of writing this insight note. The NEDS 2020 only covered 17 states while the OOSC measurement in the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) 2018 report was estimated based on extrapolated National Population Commission (NPC) data and the available National Personnel Audit (NPA) data.

(as shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3). Figure 1 shows that across the geopolitical zones in Nigeria, the northeast has the highest percentage of OOSC of both primary and secondary school age in the country. In the northeast, there are more out-of-school (OOS) girls than boys who are of primary school age (i.e., 42.4 percent and 37.3 percent respectively). These results are also similar for secondary school age children with more OOS girls than boys at 38.1 percent and 36.5 percent respectively.

*Figure 1: Percentage of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Nigeria Across Geopolitical Zones*




*Source: Nigeria Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2016-2017*

In the overall outlook as shown in Figure 1, northern geo-political zones portray higher proportions of out-of-school children relative to the southern geopolitical zones in Nigeria. This result can be explained by a combination of factors including higher rates of poverty; prevalence of child marriage primarily influenced by cultural and religious beliefs; and insecurity and terrorist attacks, especially the presence of Boko Haram in the northeast (Oladujoye and Omemu, 2013). Also, nomadic pastoralist families are predominant in the north whose continuous migration by the reason of their occupation keeps their children out of school.

The northern part of the country is constituted by the majority of Muslims where religion is pivotal to identity and way of life. As such, it is common for parents to prefer Quranic education to public schools. Unfortunately, these schools are not designed to teach secular subjects that equip the children with foundational numeracy and literacy skills, let alone basic sciences and civic education. Current strategy by the government entails the integration of these schools into the educational system, under the Integrated Quranic and Tsangaya Education (IQTE) programme of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). By this, the government adopts and funds these schools, mandates them to incorporate secular subjects into their curriculum, and provides capacity building for their teachers on secular subjects' pedagogy.

The southern parts of the country generally show lower proportions of OOSC for both boys and girls. This may have been influenced by a greater degree of openness to western education. The southeast and the south-south were known for the OOS boy-child phenomenon. This is attributable to the norm of preference for trade apprenticeship over formal schooling which makes parents withdraw their boy child from school at an early age to join the labour market.[2] It is believed that entrepreneurship promises better economic benefit than the uncertainty of employment after formal education.[3] The efforts of a Ministerial Technical Committee set up in 2012 set up to look into this issue may have yielded some results as indicated by relative gender parity in the proportion of OOSC in both geo-political zones on the charts in Figure 1. Nowadays, the low male enrolment is observed in the southwest more vividly in the secondary school as depicted in Figure 1. These are mostly 'area boys', some of whom are homeless children living on the streets.[4]

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[2] The male child is traditionally expected to provide for the home in the future when he becomes a man.

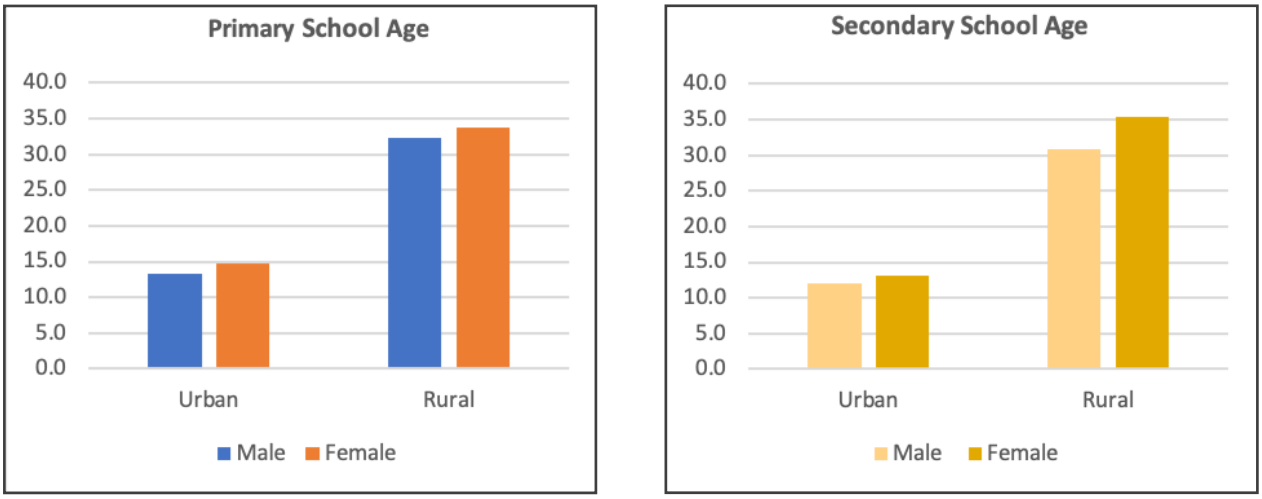
[3] This is not a judgmental position to say that parents are making incorrect decisions given the current realities of the country's economy with respect to the labour market prospects.

[4] These boys are made up of pre-teens, teenagers and youth who mostly end up in hooliganism

OOSC in the south-south may be predominantly children of migrant fishermen[5] who travel with their parents in pursuit of family business. Some of the demand and supply barriers that affect children's education access in the north are also witnessed in the south but to a modest degree.

Figure 2 shows that out-of-school children are more prevalent in the rural areas compared to urban areas. Over 30 percent of children are not in school in rural areas, compared to less than 15 percent in urban areas for secondary school age children. Similar situation is observed for primary school age children.

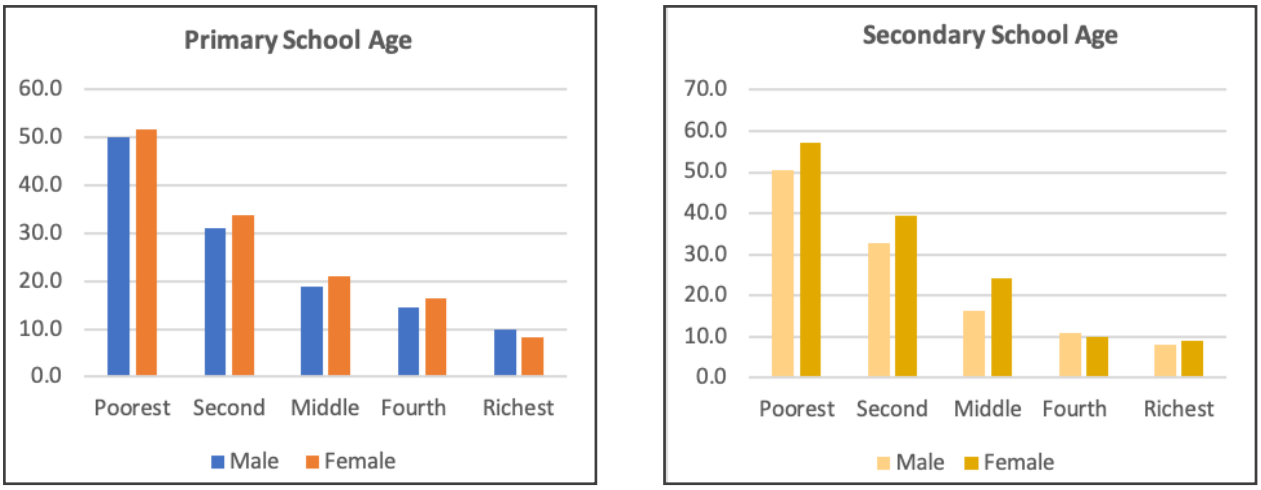
*Figure 2: Percentage of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Nigeria by Settlement Type*




*Source: Nigeria Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2016-2017*

Figure 3 shows that the poorest wealth index quintile has the highest prevalence of OOSC, and the numbers of OOSC decreases as the data moves from the poorest to wealthiest quintiles. This supports the findings of Kainuwa et al. (2013) that socioeconomic background influences education levels in Nigeria. Causal pathways for this vary. For instance, poor households are more rural, less likely to have educated parents. This result may also be associated with malnutrition and stunting that delays enrolment. As such, children of this profile may never enrol in school and where they do, they tend to easily drop out.

*Figure 3: Percentage of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Nigeria by Wealth Index Quintile*




*Source: Nigeria Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2016-2017*

[5] Fishing is the major occupation of south-southerners in Nigeria.

In all the charts displayed in the panels, it can be observed that girls tend to be more educationally disadvantaged, constituting a higher proportion of OOSC in most cases, although not substantial. By cultural gender norm, girls in some households are often encumbered with domestic activities with their mothers at home at the expense of schooling. They are also predisposed to being married while still of school-age. Mukhtar et al. (2011) identified religious misinterpretation, cultural practice, poverty, early marriage, illiteracy, and inadequate school infrastructure as some of the factors working against girl-child education in Nigeria.

## Possible Interventions

Across the Federal, State and Local Government levels, efforts have been made to address the problem of OOSC in the country. Recently, intervention attention has mainly focused on the conflict ravaged northeast where the basic education system has suffered a major disruption. A blend of interventions both by state and non-state actors is necessary to effectively fix the problem. A number of possible interventions as presented below should therefore be carefully considered.

**Accelerated Education Programme**

Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) is a widely used education innovation to address the education needs of OOSC globally (Menendez et al., 2016) which has shown potential to bring about a significant reduction in the number of OOSC in Nigeria. According to the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG 2017), AEPs are flexible, age-appropriate programmes, run in an accelerated time frame, which aim to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children and youth - particularly those who missed out on or had their education interrupted due to poverty, marginalisation, conflict, and crisis. The goal of Accelerated Education Programmes is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity (Boisvert, Flemming & Ritesh , 2017).

The potentials of this programme in reaching the OOSC are witnessed in its characteristics and design which include: a flexible education model; use of compressed/accelerated and context suited curriculum; admission of the overaged; certification and mainstreaming of completers as well as cost effectiveness. Up to five (5) AEPs have been funded and implemented by international development organisations in Nigeria since 2014 till the time of writing this note. These interventions have witnessed a remarkable enrolment and resulted into post intervention transition of OOSC back into the formal education system, proving a viable education innovation for reaching OOSC. Given the behemoth population of the OOSC, a state-led scaling-up of this intervention with dedicated funding from the government is therefore necessary for an appreciable nation-wide impact.

**Increased and improved educational infrastructure and resources**

Overcrowded classrooms are an indicator of insufficient educational infrastructure to accommodate enrolled learners. The Joint Education Needs Assessment (JENA) report for 2021, shows that across the 3 states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (BAY), one in four schools share infrastructure. The average number of students per classroom in BAY states is 124, very high, considering also that just 60 percent of teachers have some form of qualification and 14 percent are volunteers (JENA, 2021). This situation leads to poor quality of education. Also, where there are no adequate seats and tables for learners or perpetual teachers' absence, parents tend to withdraw their children from school. The gains from the educational interventions that encourage enrolment should therefore be sustained by the provision of infrastructure like classrooms, furniture, toilets and sanitary facilities, potable water, etc. The comfortability of these infrastructures is also important. This implies that classrooms should be adequately ventilated; and furniture should be comfortable to sit upon for the learners.

**Sensitisation on the importance of education**

It is necessary to sensitise and re-orientate the people on the importance of education, particularly girls' education. Both a government-led effort through its agencies such as the National Orientation Agency and advocacies by the Civil Societies are crucial to realise this. Also, advocacy should be conducted on the passing of the Child Rights Act (2003)

into law by the states of the Federation which are yet to do so. This will make the rights which include the right to basic education enforceable.

**A blend of economic interventions for households**

In societies where poverty is prevalent, child labour is often rampant. An economic intervention such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) has often been used to incentivise enrolment. However, this sort of intervention has not always been sustainable, making it a short-term solution. In other words, beneficiaries of this intervention tend to drop out of school when the cash transfer programme stops. For a long-term impact, this intervention should be combined with conditional economic empowerment programmes for households who would commit to support their children's education if empowered. By setting up the households with viable income generating activities, they can sustain their children in school via these sources of income.

**Improved security and safe spaces**

Teaching-learning activities can only take place in a safe and secure environment. The government therefore needs to improve on the security infrastructures necessary to protect the schools. Gender based violence and child molestation in the school environment should also be prosecuted leveraging available legal framework for child rights protection and safeguarding. Where schools are located in security sensitive environments, the Save-Our-Souls (SOS) system of emergency response should be made available to alert the security personnel in case of an attack. In the northeast, where attacks on schools are rampant, the location of security posts within the schools would serve as a deterrence.

## Conclusion

The combination of demand and supply barriers to educational access has led to and continues to contribute to the astronomical number of OOSC in Nigeria. Both governmental and non-governmental efforts are necessary to tackle the current situation. To successfully do this, the exploitation of education innovations such as AEP combined with other conventional interventions such as rebuilding and expanding of infrastructure, more enrolment sensitisation, economic intervention, improved security, as well as legal enforcement would be a holistic approach. As access to education is tied to various factors like socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic region, and other factors beyond the control of households, the population of OOSC is spread unevenly across the country. Therefore, interventions and the type thereof must be applied across the country based on the gravity of the situation, with the most affected populations prioritised.

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