

Critical Review of Nigeria's Educational Policy Crisis: Access to Education in Nigeria, 1999–2024

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601159>

Received: 27 June 2026; Accepted: 02 July 2026; Published: 14 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's educational policy landscape since the restoration of civilian governance in 1999 has been characterized by a paradox of ambitious legislative frameworks and persistent structural failure. This paper critically examines the trajectory of education policy and access to education in Nigeria from 1999 to 2024, covering 25 years of democratic governance. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports from UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank, and government policy documents, the paper evaluates the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme launched in 1999 and codified through the UBE Act 2004, the National Policy on Education (NPE), subsequent reform initiatives, and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) commitments. The paper argues that chronic underfunding, endemic corruption, institutional inertia, regional inequality, gender disparity, and the Boko Haram insurgency have systematically undermined educational access, leaving Nigeria as the country with the highest number of out-of-school children globally—estimated at approximately 18.3 to 20 million as of 2022–2024. The study employs a critical policy analysis framework, situating Nigeria's educational crisis within broader political economy debates about governance, federalism, and post-colonial state capacity. Recommendations are offered for evidence-based, equity-focused reform.

Keywords: Educational policy, Universal Basic Education, out-of-school children, access to education, Nigeria, UBE Act 2004, gender disparity, SDG 4

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development. It is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and domestically in Section 18 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In principle, the Nigerian state commits to ensuring equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels. In practice, however, the country has remained mired in an enduring educational crisis of historic proportions.

Since the return to democratic governance in May 1999 under President Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria has undertaken successive waves of educational reform—most notably the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme launched in September 1999, the UBE Act of 2004, the National Policy on Education (NPE), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) commitments, and more recently the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) agenda. Yet despite these legislative and policy instruments, Nigeria today holds the unenviable distinction of being home to more out-of-school children than any other country on earth. UNESCO estimates place this figure at approximately 20 million children and youth aged 6–18 (UNESCO, 2022), a number that reveals a profound, systemic failure of educational governance over a quarter century of civilian rule.

This paper offers a critical review of Nigeria's educational policy architecture from 1999 to 2024, interrogating the gap between policy intent and lived outcomes. It examines key legislative frameworks, funding patterns, regional and gender disparities, the destabilising effects of armed conflict—particularly the Boko Haram insurgency—and structural governance failures. The paper is oriented by a critical policy analysis framework (Ball, 1993; Ozga, 2000), which situates educational policy within broader political, economic, and social

power relations, rather than treating policies as neutral technical documents. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for reform.

Historical and Constitutional Context

Pre-1999 Educational Foundations

Nigeria's formal educational system bears the enduring imprint of British colonial administration, which established a dual educational structure comprising Western secular schooling and, in the north, Quranic institutions. After independence in 1960, successive governments pursued universal primary education as a developmental priority. The most ambitious pre-1999 initiative was the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme launched in 1976 under General Olusegun Obasanjo's military government. However, the UPE encountered severe implementation difficulties: underfunding, poor teacher preparation, inadequate infrastructure, and political instability led to its effective collapse during the economic contractions of the 1980s oil crisis (UNESCO/International Bureau of Education, 2000).

During the oil crisis of the 1980s, funding responsibilities for education were transferred between tiers of government and onto families through fee payments, and the Universal Primary Education scheme was decentralised. While oil-rich states managed to sustain rudimentary provision, the programme collapsed in poorer states (UNESCO, 2000). By the late 1990s, Nigeria's Federal Minister of Education, following a nationwide tour, declared that basic infrastructure in schools—classrooms, laboratories, workshops, equipment, and libraries—was in a state of total decay (UNESCO, 2000). This was the institutional inheritance that greeted the return to democracy in 1999.

The 1999 Constitutional Framework

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in Section 18, stipulates that: (1) government shall direct its policy towards ensuring equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels; and (2) government shall promote science and technology. While these provisions establish a constitutional basis for educational rights, they fall short of creating directly enforceable justiciable rights—a structural weakness that has been repeatedly identified as undermining accountability in educational governance (Nwoke et al., 2024). The constitution establishes a federal structure in which responsibility for primary education rests primarily with state and local governments, while the federal government retains oversight and policy coordination functions. This distribution of power has generated persistent intergovernmental tensions that have hampered effective educational delivery.

The Universal Basic Education Programme (1999–2004): Policy Architecture and Early Challenges

The UBE Programme Launch

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was officially launched by President Obasanjo in September 1999 as the flagship education reform of the new democratic administration. Replacing the discredited UPE, the UBE aimed to provide free, compulsory, and universal basic education to all Nigerian children, covering six years of primary schooling and three years of junior secondary education—a continuous nine-year educational cycle. The programme was monitored by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and intended to make basic education free, compulsory, and a right of every child (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

However, from its inception, the UBE programme was characterised by what a critical analysis would identify as a disjuncture between policy declaration and implementation capacity (Okoroma, 2003, as cited in Phillips & Hayes, 2009). While the programme was officially launched in September 1999 and implementation structures were established in January 2000, the enabling legislation was not passed at the federal level until 2004—a five-year gap during which the programme lacked legal foundations, enforceable sanctions, or a stable funding mechanism (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity [CREATE], 2009). This sequencing—launching a programme before passing its enabling law—exemplifies

the broader pattern in Nigerian educational governance of politics taking precedence over coherent policy design.

The UBE Act 2004: Legislative Framework

The Compulsory Free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 constituted a landmark moment in Nigeria's educational policy history. The Act made basic education free and compulsory for every child of primary and junior secondary school age, established UBEC as the coordinating body, and provided a constitutional basis for universal educational rights (UBE Act, 2004). Section 11(2) of the Act established a counterpart funding mechanism, requiring state governments to contribute 50% of the cost of UBE projects in order to access federal funds—a provision intended to generate state commitment but which in practice created barriers for revenue-poor states (Abdullahi, 2023).

The Act also allocated 2% of the Consolidated Revenue Fund to basic education, to be managed by UBEC and matched by state counterpart contributions. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 2004 declared that education would remain highly rated in national development plans and affirmed that every Nigerian child has a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of disability (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2004). Yet empirical evidence would demonstrate over subsequent years that these laudable policy statements did not translate into commensurate improvements in educational access or quality.

Funding Crisis: Between Policy Aspiration and Fiscal Reality

Chronic Underfunding of Education

Perhaps the most structurally determining factor in Nigeria's educational crisis is chronic underfunding. The UNESCO benchmark for education expenditure is a minimum of 15–20% of national budget or 4–6% of GDP. Nigeria has consistently fallen far short of these thresholds throughout the democratic period. Phillips and Hayes (2009) document that while education received approximately 13% of the national budget during the era of military governance, the new democratic government allocated only 8% in 2001 and a dismal 5.6% in 2004—less than half of the UNESCO minimum standard. Data compiled from the Central Bank of Nigeria's Statistical Bulletin and the World Bank database across the period 1999–2022 confirms that Nigeria's education budget allocation has remained persistently below international benchmarks (Nwoke et al., 2024).

This underfunding has had cascading consequences. It has resulted in shortages of qualified teachers, a brain drain from the public sector, inadequate instructional materials, a shortage of classrooms, and poor maintenance of existing infrastructure (UNESCO, 2000). The Education Tax Fund, established in 1995 to supplement budgetary allocations by requiring companies with more than 100 employees to contribute 2% of pre-tax earnings, provided some relief but has been insufficient to compensate for systematic budget shortfalls (UNESCO, 2000).

Corruption and Misappropriation

Underfunding is compounded by corruption, which has been identified as a systemic barrier to educational development across multiple studies (Olayinka, 2019; Nwoke et al., 2024). Nigeria's Corruption Perception Index scores have consistently placed it among the more corrupt countries globally, and education has not been immune. In 2005, President Obasanjo made a national broadcast alleging that members of the National Assembly had demanded and collected ₦55 million from the then Minister of Education, Professor Fabian Osuji, leading to the impeachment of the Senate President (Phillips & Hayes, 2009). The misallocation and misappropriation of education funds meant for critical resources has directly exacerbated marginalised communities' exclusion from formal schooling (Nwoke et al., 2024). According to UNESCO (2014), as cited in Obot (2025), Nigeria is among 37 countries losing money intended for education due to corruption.

The counterpart funding mechanism established by the UBE Act 2004 created further vulnerabilities. State governments that failed to meet counterpart contribution requirements could not access UBEC funds—yet the same states most in need of federal support were often those with the weakest fiscal capacity and the highest

rates of out-of-school children, creating a regressive dynamic that penalised the most educationally deprived populations (Abdullahi, 2023).

Access to Education: Enrolment Trends and the Out-of-School Crisis

Primary Enrolment Trends 1999–2024

A close reading of enrolment data across the period under review presents a mixed and often contradictory picture. Primary school enrolment rates increased from approximately 57% in 1999 to 71% in 2018, attributable in part to UBE-driven expansion of school places and demand-side interventions such as the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (Interlink Research Journal, 2023). However, these aggregate figures mask severe regional, socioeconomic, and gender-based inequalities, and the improvement in gross enrolment ratios has not translated into equivalent improvements in net enrolment or learning outcomes.

More troublingly, data on the net enrolment ratio at primary level reveal a decline from 61% in 1999 to 58% in 2010—even as the regional sub-Saharan African average rose from 58% to 76% over the same period (CREATE, 2009). This divergence between Nigeria and its regional peers suggests that the country's population growth—one of the fastest in the world—has outpaced the expansion of educational provision, leaving a growing absolute number of children out of school even as percentage measures appeared to improve marginally.

Out-of-School Children: A Global Record of Failure

The most damning indicator of Nigeria's educational access crisis is the sheer number of out-of-school children. The Nigeria Digest of Education Statistics (2022) estimated 10 million out-of-school children aged 6–11. When secondary school-aged children are included, the figure reaches an estimated 20 million (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2023). A 2024 NILDS Issue Brief, drawing on UNICEF (2024) data, reported approximately 18.3 million out-of-school children comprising 10.2 million of primary school age and 8.1 million of secondary school age—positioning Nigeria as the country with the highest number of out-of-school children globally (National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies [NILDS], 2025).

UNICEF (2022) states that one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria. Even though primary education is officially free and compulsory, approximately 10.5 million children aged 5–14 are not attending school, with only 61% of 6–11-year-olds regularly attending primary school and only 35.6% of children aged 36–59 months receiving early childhood education (UNICEF, 2022). In 2024, despite a government education sector roadmap explicitly targeting enrolment of 15 million out-of-school children, Nigeria still ranked 191st out of 208 countries in global education rankings and maintained a literacy rate of approximately 59.57% (NILDS, 2025).

Regional Inequalities: The North-South Education Divide

Structural Dimensions of Regional Disparity

Regional inequality constitutes one of the most entrenched structural features of Nigeria's educational access crisis. The north-south divide in educational participation is pronounced and deepening. UNESCO (2022) reports a sharp 15% decrease in primary school enrolment in the northern geopolitical zones compared to the southern regions (Nwoke et al., 2024). In the north, the net attendance rate stands at approximately 53%, compared to significantly higher rates in southern states. North-eastern and north-western states record female primary net attendance rates of 47.7% and 47.3%, respectively, meaning more than half of girls in these regions are not attending school (UNICEF, 2022).

States such as Kebbi and Sokoto top the out-of-school rankings, with 67.6% and 66.4% of school-age children respectively not in school (NILDS, 2025). Kano State was estimated to have 989,234 out-of-school children alone, followed by Akwa-Ibom (581,800), Katsina (536,122), and Kaduna (524,670) (Gender Parity Index in

Enrolment Study, 2024). These figures reveal a geographic concentration of educational deprivation that tracks closely with poverty rates, infrastructure deficits, and sociocultural factors.

Almajiri Schools and Non-Formal Education

A distinctive feature of northern Nigeria's educational landscape is the prevalence of Almajiri schools—traditional Quranic schools that provide Islamic education but, as officially classified by the Nigerian government, do not include basic secular literacy or numeracy skills. In north-eastern and north-western states, 29% and 35% of Muslim children respectively receive Quranic education through these institutions, and the government classifies them as officially out-of-school (UNICEF, 2022). The Obasanjo government's 2003 Almajiri education project, later expanded under President Goodluck Jonathan, attempted to integrate Almajiri schools into the formal education system with limited success. The project's outcomes have remained contested, with critics arguing that integration efforts were politically motivated and inadequately resourced (UBEC, 2022).

Gender Disparities in Education

Structural Gender Inequality

Gender disparities represent a persistent and deeply structurally rooted dimension of Nigeria's educational crisis. Although the UBE Act 2004 was passed to facilitate equal access to basic education regardless of gender, there remain concrete gaps of government effort to ensure equal access for girls' enrolment, retention, and completion (Akinbi & Akinbi, 2015, as cited in Gender Disparity Study, 2015). UNICEF (2022b) points to gender disparities as ostensible in both primary and secondary education, with a difference of 20% school enrolment and retention between male and female children (Nwoke et al., 2024).

Gender inequalities in educational access are driven by multiple intersecting factors: economic barriers that lead families to prioritise boys' education over girls', sociocultural norms and patriarchal practices that restrict girls' mobility and autonomy, early marriage and pregnancy which interrupt girls' schooling, and in northern Nigeria, specific religious-cultural frameworks that restrict girls' participation in formal, co-educational schooling (GCPEA/ReliefWeb, 2020; Sapientia Foundation Journal, 2020). The impact of gender-based educational exclusion extends beyond individuals: Klasen and Lamanna (2009) document that gender inequality in education constrains labour market productivity and economic growth.

Policy Responses to Gender Inequality

Nigeria has pursued several policy responses to gender inequality in education. These include the Girls' Education Project (GEP 1–3, 2004–2019) co-funded by the UK Department for International Development and UNICEF, targeting states with the highest gender disparities in the north; the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education (2006); the Child Rights Act (2003), which in Section 15.5 guarantees pregnant girls the right to continue education after delivery; and the Girls' Education Initiative under the Global Partnership for Education (UNICEF, 2014). The GEP's third phase (2012–2019) produced documented improvements in access and demand for girls' education in targeted states, but gains remained fragile and unevenly distributed (GCPEA, 2020). Structural barriers—particularly early marriage, economic poverty, and insecurity—have prevented policy instruments from achieving transformative change in gender parity across Nigeria's educational system.

Armed Conflict, Insecurity, and Education

The Boko Haram Insurgency and Its Educational Impact

No analysis of educational access in Nigeria between 1999 and 2024 can be complete without a thorough assessment of the devastating impact of armed conflict—above all the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram, whose name in Hausa translates as 'Western education is forbidden,' originated as a religious movement opposed to secular education in north-eastern Nigeria in the early 2000s and evolved into a militant

organisation following an armed confrontation with security forces in 2009 (World Bank, 2020; Diplomatic Courier, 2024). Since 2009, the insurgency has caused the deaths of more than 38,255 people and the displacement of approximately two million people in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states (Diplomatic Courier, 2024; Veriv Africa, 2024).

The educational consequences have been catastrophic. UNICEF estimates that more than 1,400 schools have been destroyed, damaged, or looted primarily in the north-east; more than 600,000 children have lost access to education; 2,295 teachers were killed since 2009 and 19,000 more displaced; and at the height of the conflict, over 57% of schools in Borno State—the worst-affected state—were closed (GCPEA, 2020; UNICEF via UN Media, 2024). Between 2009 and 2015, approximately 611 teachers were killed and 910 schools were destroyed, with 1,500 further schools forcibly closed (Veriv Africa, 2024). A Brookings Institution analysis (2020) identifies Borno State alone as having experienced nearly 30,000 deaths attributable to the insurgency from 2011 onwards. Nigeria ranked highest among all African countries for school attacks in 2023, recording 89 documented attacks in that year alone (Veriv Africa, 2024).

In north-eastern Nigeria, 2.8 million children are in need of education-in-emergencies support in the three conflict-affected states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. At least 802 schools remain closed and 497 classrooms have been destroyed, with another 1,392 damaged but repairable (UNICEF, 2022). The UNICEF Annual Report 2024 further documents that armed groups abducted 859 schoolchildren in 2023 and 777 in 2024, a pattern of attacks that has generated widespread fear and induced mass parental withdrawal of children from school.

The Chibok Girls Abduction and Its Policy Aftermath

The April 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Girls' Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State, by Boko Haram generated international outrage and the global #BringBackOurGirls advocacy campaign. While the abduction drew unprecedented international attention to Nigeria's educational crisis, its policy impact has been limited. The Nigerian government's responses to school attacks—including the Safe Schools Initiative, developed with international partners in 2014 and 2015—were underfunded and inconsistently implemented across the conflict-affected states. The Chibok abduction was not an isolated event; it was the most visible manifestation of a systematic campaign against formal education in the north-east that has continued through 2024, with mass abductions in Dapchi (2018) and multiple attacks on schools in Zamfara, Kankara, and other northern states (UNICEF, 2024).

Policy Governance Failures and Institutional Constraints

The Implementation Gap

A recurring theme across the literature on Nigerian educational policy is the yawning gap between policy formulation and policy implementation. Nigeria's policy documents—including successive editions of the National Policy on Education—are often technically sound and exhibit clear awareness of international best practice. Yet implementation consistently falls short, due to a combination of inadequate budgetary commitment, corruption, poor data systems, weak monitoring and evaluation, and frequent changes in political leadership and policy direction (CREATE, 2009; Nwoke et al., 2024; Obot, 2025).

Nwoke et al. (2024), in a peer-reviewed study published in the British Educational Research Association's Review of Education, document that frequent changes in administration, inconsistent policy implementation, corruption, and fluctuating oil prices have collectively undermined efforts to improve educational outcomes in Nigeria. The study finds that these factors—rather than any absence of policy intent—are the primary drivers of Nigeria's extraordinary out-of-school population. The NPE 2014 recorded primary school enrolment at only 54%, a decline from 60% in 1995, demonstrating that even basic attendance rates deteriorated over the democratic period despite multiple policy interventions (Nwoke et al., 2024).

Federalism and Intergovernmental Coordination

Nigeria's federal structure creates particular challenges for educational governance. Education—especially basic education—is constitutionally the responsibility of states and local governments, yet policy direction, standard-setting, and much funding flows from the federal level. This creates a system in which federal mandates are often unfunded or under-resourced at the sub-national level, and in which states have limited fiscal autonomy to sustain educational expenditure. The counterpart funding requirement of the UBE Act 2004, while designed to ensure state commitment, has in practice disadvantaged the most educationally deprived states, which are often those with the least revenue (Abdullahi, 2023).

The Education Management Information System (EMIS), which is critical for data-driven policy planning, has been characterised by delays in processing and reporting, poor data quality at the federal level, and inconsistencies between state-level data and nationally reported figures (UNESCO, 2000). This data weakness has made it difficult to accurately assess progress, target interventions, and hold governments accountable. Digitalisation of EMIS in 12 states, supported by UNICEF in 2024, represents a recent positive development, but data governance challenges remain systemic (UNICEF, 2024).

Recent Reforms and the 2024 Policy Landscape

The Tinubu Administration's Education Agenda

President Bola Tinubu's administration, which assumed office in May 2023, has articulated an ambitious education reform agenda under the Renewed Hope Agenda. A new education sector roadmap focused on basic education explicitly seeks to enrol 15 million out-of-school children and improve school access, learning quality, and infrastructure. The administration has also emphasised digital literacy and signed into law the Student Loan Fund (NELFUND) in 2024, with over ₦32 billion disbursed to tertiary students by early 2025 as a means of expanding access to higher education (NILDS, 2025; Wikipedia, 2024). President Tinubu has also established system-wide policies to comprehensively overhaul the education sector (Obot, 2025).

In 2024, UNICEF supported the expanded access to education for 2.62 million additional children—including 1.22 million females and 292 children with disabilities—through widespread mobilisation efforts, including nearly 240,000 previously out-of-school children through formal and non-formal educational pathways (UNICEF, 2024). These figures suggest meaningful progress in access initiatives, though they remain quantitatively insufficient relative to the estimated 18.3 million out-of-school children.

SDG 4 and Nigeria's International Commitments

Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. SDG 4.5 specifically requires the elimination of gender disparities in education by 2030 (United Nations Nigeria, 2024). With less than six years to the 2030 deadline, Nigeria's trajectory with respect to SDG 4 is deeply discouraging. The country's overall education ranking of 191st out of 208 countries, combined with its status as the global leader in out-of-school children, indicates that achieving SDG 4 by 2030 will require transformative—rather than incremental—policy change (NILDS, 2025). Current enrolment and quality trends place Nigeria substantially off-track for SDG 4 achievement.

Critical Analysis: Structural Determinants of Policy Failure

Drawing together the evidence reviewed, this section offers a critical synthesis of the structural determinants of Nigeria's educational policy failure across 1999–2024.

First, the political economy of Nigerian federalism generates perverse incentives in educational governance. The allocation of primary educational responsibility to under-resourced states and local governments, combined with federal policy mandates that exceed states' fiscal and administrative capacity, produces

systematic implementation failure. The counterpart funding model—intended as a mechanism for state commitment—has functioned as a barrier to access for the most disadvantaged populations.

Second, the primacy of political over policy logic—what CREATE (2009) terms 'la politique politicienne'—has repeatedly subordinated educational development to political calculation. The five-year lag between the UBE programme's launch and its enabling legislation; the use of educational projects as patronage vehicles; the resistance to data transparency; and the tolerance of teacher ghost workers and budget leakages all reflect a political culture in which education serves to generate political capital rather than human capital.

Third, the intersection of poverty, patriarchy, and conflict creates compound vulnerabilities for the most marginalised children. Nigeria's approximately 47% child poverty rate (UNICEF, 2024)—with nearly half of all children and adolescents living in households below the national monetary poverty line—means that even nominally free education carries hidden costs (uniform, transportation, materials) that effectively exclude the poorest children. Girls face the additional burden of early marriage, unpaid domestic and reproductive labour, and in conflict-affected areas, heightened physical danger. The failure to address these intersecting deprivations through integrated social protection and educational policies represents a fundamental weakness in Nigeria's policy approach.

Fourth, the Boko Haram insurgency constitutes an acute, externally imposed disruption whose effects have been amplified by the state's failure to guarantee school safety, provide adequate psychosocial support for conflict-affected children, or deploy resources sufficiently to rebuild destroyed educational infrastructure. Nigeria's ranking as the country most affected by school attacks in Africa in 2023 (Veriv Africa, 2024) reflects not only the intensity of the insurgency but also the insufficiency of protective policy responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing critical analysis, this paper advances the following evidence-based policy recommendations:

12.1 Increase and Protect Education Funding. Nigeria must increase its education budget allocation to a minimum of 15% of the national budget—the UNESCO-recommended threshold—and establish independent monitoring mechanisms to ensure that allocated funds reach schools. Anti-corruption controls in education procurement and budgeting must be strengthened, and the counterpart funding mechanism of the UBE Act 2004 should be restructured to prioritise equitable allocation based on need rather than revenue capacity (Abdullahi, 2023; NILDS, 2025).

12.2 Review and Update the UBE Act 2004. The UBE Act should be comprehensively reviewed to reflect two decades of implementation experience. Spending priorities should be shifted toward factors that demonstrably improve learning outcomes—textbooks, teacher recruitment and training, school inspections. Local Universal Basic Education Boards (LUBEBS) should be established to decentralise governance and enable school-level decision-making. School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) should be made a legal requirement for each school (Abdullahi, 2023).

12.3 Implement Targeted Equity Interventions. Context-specific, targeted strategies must be developed and adequately funded to address the multifaceted barriers to education for girls, children in conflict-affected areas, children with disabilities, Almajiri students, and rural populations. Gender-responsive budgeting, conditional cash transfers, school feeding programmes, and community-based early childhood centres have demonstrated effectiveness and should be scaled up (UNICEF, 2024; Nwoke et al., 2024).

12.4 Urgently Address Education in Emergencies. Nigeria must develop a comprehensive national Education in Emergencies (EiE) policy, adequately funded and operationally integrated with the humanitarian response architecture. Rebuilding destroyed school infrastructure in the north-east, training and deploying conflict-sensitive teachers, providing psychosocial support to conflict-affected learners, and implementing the Safe Schools Declaration in all conflict-affected states should be immediate priorities (UNICEF, 2024; GCPEA, 2020).

12.5 Strengthen Data Systems and Accountability. Investment in the digitalisation and harmonisation of EMIS across all states, building on UNICEF's 2024 support to 12 states, is essential for evidence-based planning. Nigeria should establish a transparent, publicly accessible education data platform; commit to annual publication of state-level educational outcome data; and create an independent National Education Ombudsman to receive and investigate complaints from parents, teachers, and communities.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-five years of democratic governance in Nigeria have produced a paradoxical educational legacy. On the one hand, Nigeria has constructed a substantial legislative and institutional architecture for educational provision—the UBE programme, the UBE Act 2004, multiple revisions of the National Policy on Education, the UBEC, and engagement with international frameworks from the MDGs to SDG 4. On the other hand, the country retains the largest out-of-school population on earth, a deeply fractured education system divided by region, gender, and class, and an educational quality profile that places students near the minimum threshold of attainment on international assessments.

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that this crisis is not attributable to a lack of policy ideas or even a lack of policy production. Rather, it reflects deep structural failures of political commitment, fiscal allocation, implementation capacity, and governance integrity. The Boko Haram insurgency has superimposed an acute crisis of access and safety on an already chronically underperforming system—with devastating consequences for north-eastern Nigeria in particular.

As Nigeria approaches the 2030 SDG deadline, the urgency of transformative educational reform cannot be overstated. Achieving SDG 4—inclusive, equitable, quality education for all—will require not incremental adjustments to existing policy, but a fundamental renegotiation of the political economy of education in Nigeria: a genuine commitment to treating education as a public good, not a political instrument; to funding schools as national infrastructure; and to ensuring that no child—whether a girl in Kebbi, a displaced child in Borno, or an Almajiri student in Kano—is left without the education that is their constitutional, legal, and human right.

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