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Strengthening Nigeria's Universal Basic Education: Legislative Imperatives to Tackle the Out-of-School Children Crisis and Build Human Capital

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Executive Summary

Nigeria's education sector is facing a severe crisis characterized by a persistently high number of out-of-school children, leading to poor learning outcomes. An estimated 10.2 million primary school-age children are not enrolled in school, while only one in four children aged 7-14 possesses basic literacy and numeracy skills. Despite the Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework, inadequate funding, weak policy implementation, insecurity, poverty, and socio-cultural barriers continue to undermine access to quality education and threaten national development.

Addressing the crisis requires stronger legislative oversight, improved financing, enhanced accountability, and targeted interventions to ensure that all Nigerian children have access to safe and quality basic education. To address these challenges, the National Assembly may consider adopting the following proposed legislative and policy interventions:

- *Strengthen the enforcement of compulsory basic education by introducing enforceable sanctions for non-compliance by parents, guardians, and subnational governments.*
- *Mandate annual state-level education performance reporting on key indicators, including enrolment, dropout rates, teacher availability, and infrastructure conditions, with incentives and penalties tied to compliance.*
- *Establish a National School Safety and Access Framework to protect schools from insecurity, support early warning systems, and provide reconstruction funding for conflict-affected educational facilities.*

Background

Nigeria is faced with a deepening education crisis characterized by a persistently high number of out-of-school children. According to UNICEF, approximately 10.2 million primary school-age children are not enrolled in schools in Nigeria, making the country one of the largest contributors to the global out-of-school population¹. This situation poses critical and significant risks to national development, economic productivity, and social stability.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, implemented through the Universal Basic Education Commission, was designed to guarantee free and compulsory basic education for all Nigerian children. However, despite its ambitious policy framework, implementation remains weak due to systemic issues as inadequate funding, poor accountability mechanisms, and uneven commitment across states².

¹ UNICEF (2025). Education: Out-of-school children in Nigeria. <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>

² Anaduaka, U. S., & Okafor, C. F. (2013). The universal basic education (UBE) programme in

Nigeria: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Research in National Development*, 11(1), 152-157.



The crisis is not limited to access alone. Learning outcomes are also observed to be critically poor. Evidence from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 2021) shows that only about 25% of children aged 7–14 in Nigeria can read and comprehend a simple sentence or perform basic numeracy tasks³. This indicates that even many enrolled children are not acquiring foundational learning competencies.

Further compounding the issue of educational access in Nigeria is the pervasive insecurity in several parts of the country, particularly the North-East and North-West region, which has led to school closures, displacement of students, and destruction of educational infrastructure. These challenges are aggravated by widespread poverty, and other socio-cultural barriers like the almajiri system, early marriages, child labor, etc., that further restrict school attendance of Nigerian children⁴.

2. Key Issues

Nigeria's education sector is confronted with a critical challenge that requires urgent and coordinated policy intervention. The existence of approximately 10.2 million out-of-school children in Nigeria underscores persistent deficiencies in access, equity, and inclusion within Nigeria's basic education system. Despite the legal guarantee of free and compulsory

basic education under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework, implementation remains undermined by inadequate funding, weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and limited enforcement at the state and local government levels. In addition, difficulties in accessing and effectively utilizing UBEC intervention funds have constrained the impact of existing investments in the sector. Beyond the challenge of access, poor learning outcomes among enrolled pupils point to a growing learning crisis, with only a minority of children attaining basic literacy and numeracy competencies, thereby raising concerns about the quality and effectiveness of educational delivery. These challenges are further exacerbated by insecurity and widespread poverty, which continue to disrupt schooling, increase dropout rates, and expose children to child labour and other consequences of their economic vulnerability. Addressing these interconnected issues will require strengthened policy implementation, improved financing and accountability, targeted investments in teaching and learning resources, and the adoption of comprehensive measures to ensure that every child has access to safe, inclusive, and quality basic education.

3. Recommendations

To mitigate the surge in the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria, the National

³ Ferber, S. (2025). *Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Its Development and Determinants* (Doctoral dissertation, Dissertation, Tübingen, Universität Tübingen, 2025).

⁴ Kanu, I. A., Paul, P. M., Bazza, M. B., Kamai, P. H., Kanyip, P. B., & Onukwuba, M. (2024). Educational insecurity in northwest Nigeria. *International Journal of Religion*, 5(7), 151-164.



Assembly through its relevant committees may wish to consider adopting the following courses of action:

i. Strengthen Legal Enforcement of Compulsory Education: The National Assembly may wish to amend existing education laws to introduce enforceable sanctions for non-compliance with compulsory basic education. This should clearly define obligations for parents, guardians, and subnational governments to ensure universal school enrollment and attendance.

ii. Mandate State-Level Education Performance Reporting: The National Assembly may wish enact legislation that require all states to submit annual standardized reports on key education indicators, including enrollment rates, dropout rates, infrastructure conditions, and teacher availability. Funding incentives or penalties should be linked to compliance.

iii. Establish a National School Safety and Access Framework: A dedicated

legislative framework should be created to address insecurity-related disruptions in education. This should include federal coordination of school protection mechanisms, early warning systems, and reconstruction funding for schools affected by conflict.

4. Conclusion

Nigeria's out-of-school children crisis remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting the country's education sector and broader development agenda. Despite the existence of the Universal Basic Education framework and various government interventions, millions of school-age children continue to be excluded from formal education, while many of those enrolled are unable to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. The persistence of inadequate funding, weak policy implementation, insecurity, poverty, and socio-cultural barriers has significantly undermined efforts to achieve universal basic education.

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