

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND CHARTING A PATH FORWARD

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges hindering the establishment of an inclusive and equitable education system in Nigeria, while suggesting a path forward for policymakers and stakeholders. Despite various reforms, Nigeria continues to grapple with educational disparities, with vulnerable groups, particularly girls, children with disabilities, and those from low-income families, facing significant barriers to access. This article reviews existing challenges, analyzes policy efforts, and suggests strategic recommendations to foster an inclusive and equitable education system.

Introduction

Nigeria is located in West Africa, it is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated population of over 213 million people as of 2023 (World Bank, 2023). It is a diverse nation with over 250 ethnic groups, the largest being the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Nigeria operates a mixed economy, with oil and gas accounting for a significant portion of its GDP, while agriculture employs a majority of the population (OPEC, 2021). Despite being Africa's largest economy, the country faces challenges such as poverty, insecurity, and an education crisis, including over 10 million out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2020). Nigeria's education system has long grappled with the complex challenge of providing inclusive and equitable opportunities for children with disabilities. The concept of inclusive and equitable education is fundamental to sustainable development due to its importance of catering for all including children and persons with disabilities as well as other vulnerable groups.

In Nigeria, educational inequality remains a critical issue, with marginalized groups like females, children/people with disabilities, sub cultural groups, often excluded from quality education, despite the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). In spite of progress in increasing school enrollment rates, the country still faces serious challenges that hinder inclusivity, particularly for girls, children with disabilities, and internally displaced children.

Challenges in Achieving Inclusive and Equitable Education

Some of the challenges militating against achieving inclusive and equitable education in Nigeria include:

i. Gender Inequality/Disparities

Gender inequality or disparities continue to impede access to education in Nigeria, particularly in Northern regions where cultural norms rooted in patriarchal domination, discourage girls' education. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), approximately 60% of the 10.5 million out-of-school children in Nigeria are girls, especially in rural areas (UNICEF, 2020). Child marriage, poverty, and cultural beliefs further compound this issue, limiting girls' participation in formal education (UNESCO, 2020). Parents prioritize sending male children to school, and where female children are sent, you find out most of the time, her education gets terminated at the basic level, as very few girls are allowed to reach and complete higher education.

ii. Children with Disabilities in Nigeria

According to the National Population Commission (NPC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), approximately 7% of Nigeria's population consists of people living with disabilities, and children make up a significant portion of this group. Estimates suggest that there are over 25 million persons with disabilities in Nigeria, with a large fraction being children (UNICEF, 2012). Furthermore, the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reports that around 0.5% to 2% of children aged 2-17 have some form of disability, though the actual number may be higher due to underreporting, ignorance and stigma surrounding disabilities. The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education has been largely overlooked. While Nigeria ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007, implementation of inclusive education policies remains weak (Ajuwon, 2018). Schools are often not equipped with the necessary infrastructure, trained personnel, or resources to cater to students with special disabilities, which hinders their learning experience and overall educational attainment.

iii. Socioeconomic Disparities

Poor economic conditions and poverty remains a key barrier to educational access in Nigeria, with children from low-income households being the most affected. Education costs, though officially free at the basic level, include hidden expenses such as uniforms, transportation, and materials, making it inaccessible for many families. As noted by Edewor (2021), these economic barriers lead to significant disparities in enrollment and completion rates between children from affluent and poor backgrounds. Some children attend school in the morning without taking any food from home as a result of poverty, as reported by Save the Children (2024, March 5). Where it recorded a child saying: My stomach is always empty. UNICEF Nigeria, (2024, April 18) also reported that 1 in 3 children in Nigeria experiences severe child food poverty due to conflict, climate change, and poor diets. Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) (2024, October 4), also reported the scaling up nutrition through public private schools in Nigeria to mitigate hunger and malnutrition among Nigerian children.

ii. Conflict and Insecurity

Northern Nigeria, in particular, has been experiencing persistent violence, notably from the Boko Haram insurgency, which has disrupted educational infrastructure and created an unsafe learning environment (Human Rights Watch, 2019) to Banditry, Kidnappings and Abduction of School

Children as well as Students in Secondary and Tertiary Institutions of learning. Schools have been destroyed, teachers targeted, and students abducted, all of which has contributed to the growing number of out-of-school children in conflict-affected areas (Adamu, 2021). A high number of children have dropped out of school as a result of the insurgency, displacement from their homes and demolition of their schools.

Policy Efforts toward Inclusivity

The policy frameworks established to cater for the needs of children with disabilities in Nigeria includes:

1. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Program was established through the enactment of the UBE Act in 2004, which mandates free, compulsory, and universal basic education for all Nigerian children up to the Junior Secondary School level (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). The program was designed to address the challenges of access, equity, and quality in basic education across the country. Since its inception, the UBE initiative has recorded notable achievements, particularly in improving gross enrollment ratios in primary and junior secondary schools (World Bank, 2008; NBS, 2020).

However, the implementation of the UBE program continues to face significant obstacles. Inadequate funding remains a major challenge, often resulting in delayed infrastructure development, insufficient instructional materials, and limited teacher recruitment and training (Adebayo & Adesina, 2016; Yusuf & Adigun, 2010). The situation is even more critical for children with disabilities, who face limited access to inclusive learning environments due to poor infrastructure and the scarcity of trained special education teachers (Omede & Odiba, 2015; Obi & Ugwoke, 2017).

Furthermore, weak institutional monitoring and evaluation frameworks have hampered effective oversight of program implementation at the state and local government levels (Uko-Aviomoh, 2017; Ololube, 2012). Decentralization of responsibilities to State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) and Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) has often not been matched with adequate technical capacity or accountability mechanisms (Maduewesi, 2005).

To realize the goals of the UBE policy, scholars have emphasized the need for strengthened stakeholder collaboration, sustained political commitment, and investment in inclusive and gender-sensitive infrastructure (UNICEF, 2017; Uzoechina, 2013). Additionally, effective teacher training programs and community engagement strategies are essential in bridging equity gaps and enhancing learning outcomes.

2. National Policy on Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education (IE) is a global movement aimed at ensuring equal educational opportunities for all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. The National Policy on Inclusive Education was launched in 2017, to provide accessible, equitable, and quality education to all learners. In Nigeria, the **National Policy on**

Inclusive Education was developed to address the learning needs of all children, particularly marginalized groups such as children with disabilities, out-of-school children, girls, Almajiri children, and children in emergencies. Despite this progressive policy, implementation remains a major challenge due to various systemic, cultural, and economic factors. The strategies of the education includes: teacher training and capacity building, community sensitization, curriculum reform, infrastructure and resource development, collaboration with NGOs and international partners.

Despite the putting the policy in place, it continues to face challenges in its implementation, ranging from: inadequate Funding that has to do with limited budgetary allocations, Inconsistent disbursement of funds at federal, state, and LGA levels, lack of trained teachers from shortage of special education teachers to limited knowledge of inclusive pedagogies among regular teachers, **poor infrastructure of schools** that are not disability-friendly (lack of ramps, assistive devices, signage) and overcrowded classrooms that hinder personalized attention, negative societal attitudes, weak policy enforcement, fragmentation and poor coordination, limited data and research, language and curriculum barriers

Recommendations

In charting a path forward for inclusive education in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthening Teacher Training and Support

One of the most critical factors in achieving inclusive education is by boosting the capacity of teachers through trainings. Providing continuous professional development on inclusive teaching strategies and equipping teachers with the skills to manage diverse learners is essential (Ajayi & Ijaiya, 2020). The government should invest in training programs that focus on teaching students with special needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. Enhancing Infrastructure and Learning Materials

Inclusive education requires a learning environment that caters to all students irrespective of cultural background and disability status. This includes physical infrastructure, such as ramps and accessible toilets (for children with physical disabilities), as well as learning materials that support diverse needs (sub cultural groups), (UNESCO, 2020). The government, in collaboration with international organizations, private companies and local philanthropists, should prioritize the construction of disability-friendly schools and the provision of relevant educational resources.

3. Addressing Socioeconomic Barriers

To alleviate the impact of poverty on educational access, the government must revive industries that are long abandoned like textile industries to provide employment opportunities for parents, expand social safety nets, such as school feeding programs, scholarships, and conditional cash transfers, targeting vulnerable populations (Edewor, 2021). Reducing the indirect costs of education will incentivize parents to send their children, especially girls, to school.

4. Mitigating the Effects of Conflict

In conflict-affected regions, there is an urgent need to develop alternative education delivery models, such as community-based schooling and the use of technology to reach displaced children (Adamu, 2021). Additionally, strengthening security around schools, recruiting and equipping community volunteers with teacher training, as well as developing emergency education plans can help ensure that education continues during crises.

Conclusion

Achieving an inclusive and equitable education system in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the structural, economic, and socio cultural barriers to education. While policy frameworks exist, there is a pressing need for effective implementation and targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups. It is also by strengthening teacher capacity, enhancing infrastructure, reducing socioeconomic barriers, and addressing the impact of conflict, Nigeria can make significant progress toward an inclusive education system for all.

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