

Business Case for the National Child Wellbeing Dialogue



Introduction

More than seven years ago, Nigeria joined the rest of the world in adopting and implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. They include targets to end preventable child and maternal deaths, eradicate malnutrition, provide all children access to quality education, and eliminate financial barriers faced by children in accessing basic social services necessary for realising their rights as stated in the Convention of the Right of the child (CRC) and ending child poverty in all forms.

Nigeria's future prosperity is intricately linked to the development of its human capital thus, ensuring every child has access to quality education, healthcare, and an identity through birth registration is pivotal. This business case advocates for increased investment in universal access to basic education, improved primary healthcare, as well as a strengthened the social protection system to foster comprehensive human capital development. Achieving these goals would in tandem translate to dynamic and inclusive growth of the country.

The Current State of Children in Nigeria

Nigeria currently lags in achieving the 2030 SDG indicators for child-centred development. National statistics paint a disconcerting reality: one out of every three children lack access to basic education, while three out of four children grapple with basic reading and mathematics comprehension. Equally concerning is the fact that four million women give birth without the assistance of skilled healthcare professionals, annually. Moreover, 2.5 million children miss out on crucial vaccinations and are predisposed to acute malnutrition. An astounding 21 million children under the age of 5 lack a birth certificate, undermining their access to basic services. The situation augments the urgency for comprehensive improvements in education, healthcare, and birth registration towards realizing improved well-being of children in Nigeria.

Moreover, as of 2019, violence against children in Nigeria has inflicted an estimated economic cost of USD\$6.1 billion, equivalent to about 1.07 percent of the country's GDP. This estimation likely underestimates the economic burden of such violence, as it omits several severe consequences due to data limitations. In 2021, Nigeria suffered a staggering loss of \$40 billion, roughly 7.83% of GDP, as a result of reduced revenue productivity stemming from a less educated population. To be more precise, reduced school enrolment led to an annual reduction of per capita growth by 0.55%.

Return on Investments in child-centered development

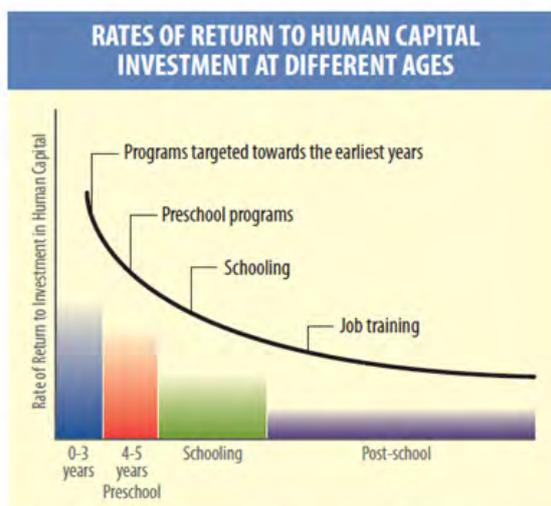
Child-centered development has emerged as a cornerstone for sustainable national growth, drawing from its profound impacts on various societal dimensions. One of its most prominent benefits is the acceleration of economic growth. By focusing on the holistic development of children, countries lay the foundation for an improved workforce equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. This, in turn, heightens productivity, contributing significantly to potential GDP growth¹. Countries that have invested in their children's early years witness greater economic resilience and competitiveness in the global market.

¹World Bank. (2017). World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise. Washington, DC: World Bank.

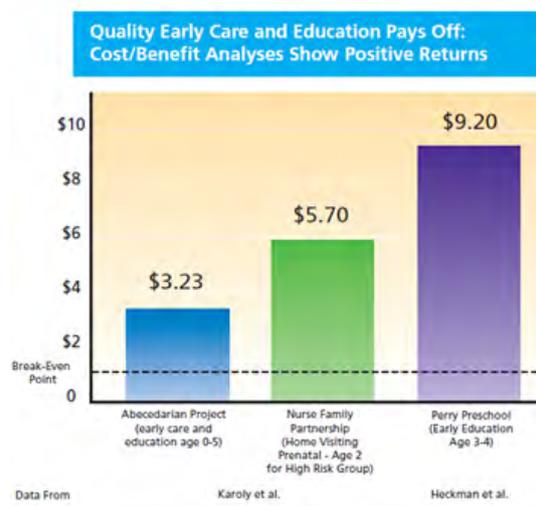
Evidence-based Early Childhood Programs Support Children's Healthy Development and Help them Become Productive Adults

Nigeria currently lags in achieving the 2030 SDG indicators for child-centred development. National statistics paint a disconcerting reality: one out of every three children lack access to basic education, while three out of four children grapple with basic reading and mathematics comprehension. Equally concerning is the fact that four million women give birth without the assistance of skilled healthcare professionals, annually. Moreover, 2.5 million children miss out on crucial vaccinations and are predisposed to acute malnutrition. An astounding 21 million children under the age of 5 lack a birth certificate, undermining their access to basic services. The situation augments the urgency for comprehensive improvements in education, healthcare, and birth registration towards realizing improved well-being of children in Nigeria.

Moreover, as of 2019, violence against children in Nigeria has inflicted an estimated economic cost of USD\$6.1 billion, equivalent to about 1.07 percent of the country's GDP. This estimation likely underestimates the economic burden of such violence, as it omits several severe consequences due to data limitations. In 2021, Nigeria suffered a staggering loss of \$40 billion, roughly 7.83% of GDP, as a result of reduced revenue productivity stemming from a less educated population. To be more precise, reduced school enrolment led to an annual reduction of per capita growth by 0.55%.



SOURCE: Prof. James Heckman, 2000 Nobel Laureate in Economics.



Graph Courtesy: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

Investing in high-quality early childhood care is crucial for the healthy development of future generations. By providing children with a nurturing and stimulating environment at a young age, nations can pave the way for their success in all areas of life. Therefore, it is vital to prioritize the well-being and growth of children by ensuring that they have access to high-quality early childhood care programmes.

- » High-quality early childhood care and education can close up to half of the educational achievement gap.
- » High-quality pre-kindergarten education, especially for disadvantaged children, has been shown to decrease special education placement by 49% and reduce grade retention by 50%.
- » Decrease child abuse and neglect by 51% and juvenile arrests by 33%;
- » Increase high school graduation by 31% and college attendance by more than 80%; and Increase employment by 23%.

Policy Options for Nigeria

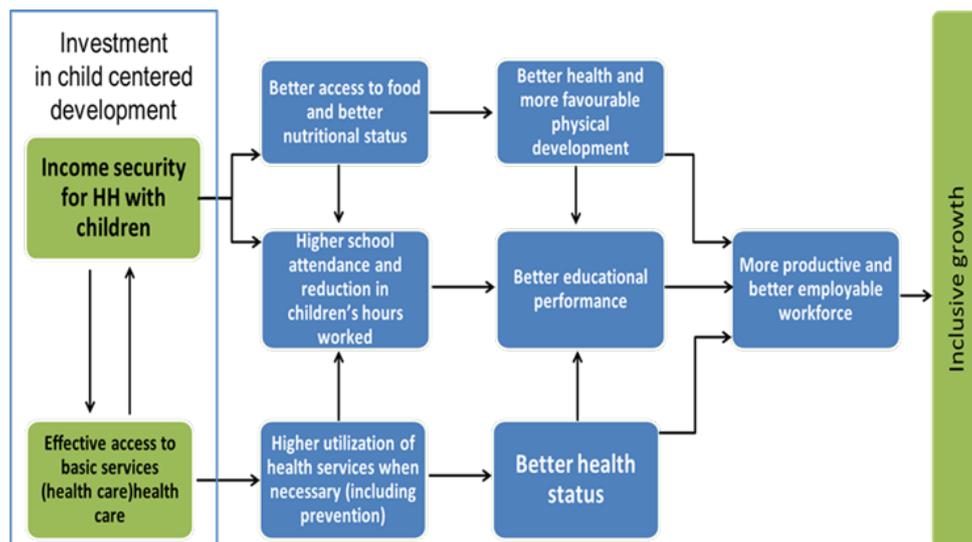
Nigeria stands at a crossroads, where we must make a choice between the low road, perpetuating the negative trends that cripple our economy, or the high road, where the country embarks on strategic investments in children's healthcare, education, nutrition, shelter, and social protection. This investment is not just a moral imperative but also a sound economic investment. Children represents the future of every nation, and their well-being is inextricably linked to the long-term prosperity and stability of the country.

In tandem with economic benefits, the social impact of child-centered development is profound. With more children engaged in educational activities, there's a marked reduction in juvenile delinquency and crime². Moreover, when children learn the values of unity, collaboration, and mutual respect, they foster improved community relations, leading to an overarching sense of social harmony.

Subsequently, a nation that invests in its children's health not only molds a more robust and resilient future generation but also sees a decline in healthcare expenditures in the long run. Preventative care, proper nutrition, and early childhood health interventions result in a reduction in chronic illnesses and diseases, ultimately enhancing life expectancy³.

²UNICEF. (2019). A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education. New York: UNICEF

³WHO. (2019). Investing in early child development: An imperative for sustainable futures. Geneva: World Health Organization.



By prioritizing education and child-centered learning methodologies, a country shift towards building a knowledge-based economy. Such an approach equips children with critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovative skills, positioning them as future leaders, innovators, and contributors to technological advancements⁴. In essence, child-centred development isn't just an investment in children—it's an investment in the future.

Children are the building blocks of a nation's human capital. By investing in specific child-specific social protection instruments, children can be guaranteed access to education, healthcare, nutritious foods, and overall well-being translating to a skilled and productive workforce in the future. A well-educated and healthy population is essential for driving economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness.

Child-centered development programs can help break the cycle of poverty. When children have access to quality education and healthcare, they are better equipped to escape the poverty trap. A reduction in child poverty means fewer social welfare expenditures and a stronger, self-reliant population. Directly targeting child poverty can diminish overall economic inequalities. Countries like Brazil have witnessed positive shifts due to initiatives like Bolsa Familia, which curtailed child labour and augmented school attendance.

Investing in child development leads to a more capable and productive labour force. A healthy and educated workforce is more likely to find well-paying jobs, leading to higher incomes and increased tax revenues for the government. This, in turn, reduces the burden on social welfare programs.

A society where children receive adequate care and education is more likely to be stable. Reduced inequalities and equal opportunities for all can help mitigate social unrest and violence, which can have devastating economic consequences.

Child-centred development is an investment in Nigeria's long-term economic resilience. It ensures a pipeline of skilled professionals, reduces the burden on healthcare systems, and enhances the overall quality of life, making the nation more attractive for investments and economic activities.

⁴OECD. (2018). The Future of Education and Skills 2030. Paris: OECD Publishing

Case Studies on Child-Centered Development

Child-centered development is not just a theoretical concept; its benefits have been tangibly realized by countries that have chosen to prioritize it. Notable examples include Finland, often touted for its innovative educational system. Finnish schools emphasize a child-centered approach, focusing on holistic development, well-being, and individualized learning. This approach has not only produced students who consistently rank among the top performers in international assessments but has also fostered a culture of lifelong learning and resilience.

South Korea's transformation from a war-torn country to a global powerhouse is evidence of return on investments in children. Its commitment to universal education and child welfare in the latter half of the 20th century resulted in remarkable socio-economic advancements, with a significant leap in literacy rates and GDP growth.

Similarly, Brazil's Bolsa Familia programme, which provides income support to poor families if they ensure their children attend school and receive vaccinations, has had significant quantitative impacts. Since its inception, there has been a marked reduction in child labour and a substantial increase in school enrolment, especially for girls⁵.

Such countries present compelling case studies, exemplifying that a genuine commitment to child-centered development can lead to transformative impacts, not just for individual children but for society at large.

Change Strategies for Investments in Children

The future of any country lies in the hands of its children. Recognizing this, it is imperative for Nigeria to strategize and lay down actionable plans that safeguard child rights and prioritize sustainable child-centred development. While sectoral efforts are key to realizing sectoral objectives, a holistic approach guarantees augmented impacts and reach for Nigeria's children. Several key strategies can be employed to ensure that children are at the center of national developmental goals including.

Child-centered policy and programmatic reforms: Nigeria's burgeoning youthful population demands policies tailored to safeguard their rights and promote their well-being. Several African nations, such as Rwanda and Ghana, have successfully implemented child-friendly policies that ensure health, education, and protection rights for every child⁶. While sectoral policies exist in Nigeria the enforcement and implementation of early childhood development, nutrition, and education measures becomes imperative to guarantee their effectiveness.

Child-sensitive social protection initiatives can profoundly influence child development, ensuring that children, irrespective of their socio-economic background, receive the foundational support they need for holistic growth. These initiatives recognize the unique vulnerabilities children face and actively seek to address the multidimensional aspects of child poverty. Universal child benefits, a subset of child-sensitive social protection, play a pivotal role in this regard. By offering financial assistance to all families with children, regardless of income or social status, universal child benefits ensure that every child has an equitable start in life. This financial cushion can help families cover essential costs related to nutrition, health, and education, which are critical for cognitive, emotional, and physical development during formative years.

⁵Lindert, K., Linder, A., Hobbs, J., & de la Brière, B. (2007). The nuts and bolts of Brazil's Bolsa Familia Program: Implementing conditional cash transfers in a decentralized context. World Bank Social Protection Discussion Paper, (0709).

⁶UNICEF Africa. (2018). Child Welfare Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Moreover, universal child benefits, by virtue of their inclusivity, have the potential to create long-lasting societal impacts. These benefits can help reduce income inequalities by offering every child a level playing field, leading to greater social cohesion in the long run. When families are confident that their basic needs will be met, they can make more informed choices about their children's futures, such as keeping them in school longer or investing in supplemental educational resources. Over time, societies with robust child-sensitive social protection measures, like universal child benefits, will likely witness improved human capital, higher economic productivity, and a more harmonious social fabric.

Health Investments

Prioritizing child-centered health investments is a strategic economic decision. The nation's vast youth demographic presents both a challenge and an opportunity. With over 40% of the population being under the age of 15, investing in child health becomes crucial to harnessing the potential demographic dividend. Adequate health investments targeting children lay the foundation for a healthier, more productive future workforce that can drive the nation's economic growth.

Historically, Nigeria has grappled with high child mortality rates, malnutrition, and a myriad of preventable diseases that affect children. By ensuring a child-centric approach to healthcare, Nigeria can significantly reduce morbidity and mortality rates. These health interventions, especially when implemented in the early stages of a child's life, have long-term benefits including better cognitive development, increased educational attainment, and higher lifetime earnings.

Moreover, child-centered health investments can lead to substantial societal benefits for Nigeria. Healthy children grow into healthy adults who can significantly contribute to the broader economic transformation. By reducing the economic burden of preventable diseases, the nation can redirect resources to other critical sectors like education and infrastructure.

Education investments: As the most populous country in Africa, with approximately half of its population under the age of 18, strategic investments in child-centered education are paramount. Such investments include creating an educational ecosystem that nurtures every child's potential, considering their diverse needs and backgrounds. A holistic approach to education, integrating both cognitive and socio-emotional learning, can mold a generation of innovative thinkers, leaders, and responsible citizens.

However, the current educational landscape in Nigeria, marked by out-of-school children numbers being the highest globally, calls for urgent and comprehensive interventions. Investment in child-centered education would mean more than just enrolment but rather guaranteeing quality, inclusivity, and retention. Moreover, integrating technology and digital literacy from an early age can prepare Nigerian children for a rapidly evolving global job market, ensuring they are not left behind.

The ripple effects of such investments in child-centered education are manifold. An educated child in Nigeria is less likely to fall into the traps of extremism, early marriages, or child labour. They are more likely to contribute positively to the nation's GDP, engage in civic responsibilities, and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. For Nigeria to realize its vision of being a leading global economy, its richest resource – its children – must be equipped with the knowledge and skills that a robust, child-centered educational system can provide.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Child-centered development requires multi-dimensional approaches and substantial resources. By establishing PPPs, Nigeria can tap into private-sector investments, efficiencies, and innovation while capitalizing on the widespread reach of public sector initiatives.

A Call to Action for Nigeria's Children

There is an urgent need to promote child-centered development in Nigeria thus a commitment call through the implementation of a National Child Centred Development Compact seeks to accelerate action towards the envisaged investments. These Compact aims to drive comprehensive and coordinated efforts, with strategic implementation and monitoring mechanisms at all levels of government, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, to guarantee the well-being of children in Nigeria. Ahead of the endorsement, focused discussions on child-centred investments will be undertaken. The dialogues will seek to;

- » Result in recommendations to guide the execution of national action plans for child-centred development.
- » Discuss the challenges that have impeded the delivery of health, education, and protecting Nigerian children at risk;
- » Explore strategies to advocate the strengthening of political will and holistic synergy amongst key stakeholders;
- » Proffer ways to prioritise evidence-based planning and accountability mechanisms at all levels for accelerating the actualisation of child-centred development;
- » Strengthen collective efforts on the actualisation of child-centred development;
- » Craft a child-centred cabinet that ensures the attainment of child-centred development.

The dialogue sessions are schematised into two: a Policy Debate and a Ministerial Roundtable. Each session aims to prioritize the rights and welfare of children in development strategies and improve their access to quality basic social services including identity, education, and healthcare, and mitigate the challenges affecting their well-being to ensure child-centred development at federal and state levels.

This document is drafted in collaboration with the UNICEF

