

"It is not a must to take your child to school": The context of school deprivation among out-of-school children in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Learning poverty is the inability to read and comprehend a short, age-appropriate text at age 10. One of the two parameters for measuring Learning Poverty is school deprivation (SD) which is the proportion of primary school-aged children who are out of school. Globally, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) estimates that 59 million children of primary school age and 62 million of lower secondary school age are not attending school or might not be able to attend school owing to numerous factors.¹ Out-of-school children (OOSC) can be conceptualized in many different ways using the three dimensions based on school exposure and this includes: those who attended school in the past and dropped out, those who never attended school but will enroll in school in the nearest future, and those who never enrolled.²

Nigeria has institutional and legislative frameworks at national and sub-national levels to address educational disparity and ensure universal basic education. The UBE Act 2004, among others, provides free and compulsory 9-year continuous education for every Nigerian child, and these efforts are aimed at reducing the burden of school

deprivation. Despite these efforts, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) report in 2018 indicated that about 10.5 million children were not in school, which means one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria.³ Further gender analysis estimates that over 6 million out-of-school children are girls which spotlights gender disparities associated with the risk of educational exclusion.⁴ School deprivation in Nigeria is driven by intersecting factors such as economic barriers and social and gender discriminating norms enabled by patriarchy.² The school deprivation crisis among OOSC children limits the technical skills required to thrive in the competitive labour market and build the human capital needed for sustained, inclusive economic growth in the nation.⁵ The context and complexities of school deprivation among OOSC in Nigeria are poorly understood, and evidenced-based strategies to provide an inclusive education are urgently needed.² This brief provides an in-depth understanding of the context and drivers of school deprivation among OOSC in Nigeria and offers actionable policy and program recommendations.

Methods

The qualitative method explored the context of school deprivation among out-of-school children (OOSC) across selected states in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, including Gombe, Sokoto, Ekiti, Edo, FCT, and the Anambra States. Interviews were conducted using a Participatory Learning and Action approach to explore the context of school deprivation among the OOSC in the study states. The study was designed to elicit information from OOSC using a participatory tool (a vignette) to facilitate expression and meanings among the OOSC. Multi-stakeholder dialogues (MSD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) with the relevant government ministries, departments, and agencies obtained insights into the context and drivers of school deprivation. In-depth interviews (IDI) with OOSC ages 16 and below and their parents obtained experiences and opinions on drivers of school and learning deprivations and vulnerabilities. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with community structures revealed normative drivers influencing school enrolment and drop-out. A total of 60 IDIs, 29 KIIs, 94 FGDs, and 5 MSDs were conducted. The findings in this brief are part of a larger study designed to understand the context of "At risk children" in Nigeria.

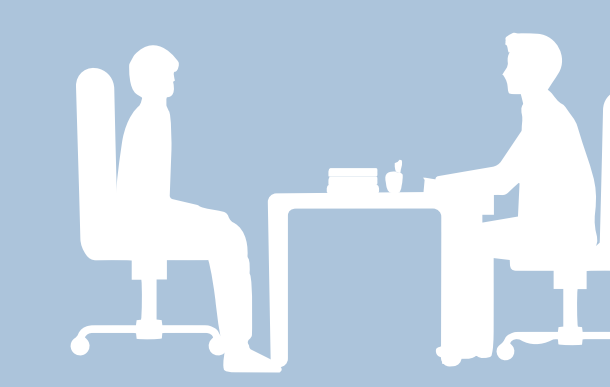
Strict measures ensured participants' confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the National Health Research Ethical Committee (NHREC). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and

analyzed using Dedoose software. In addition, thematic analysis explored emerging patterns and themes within the data.

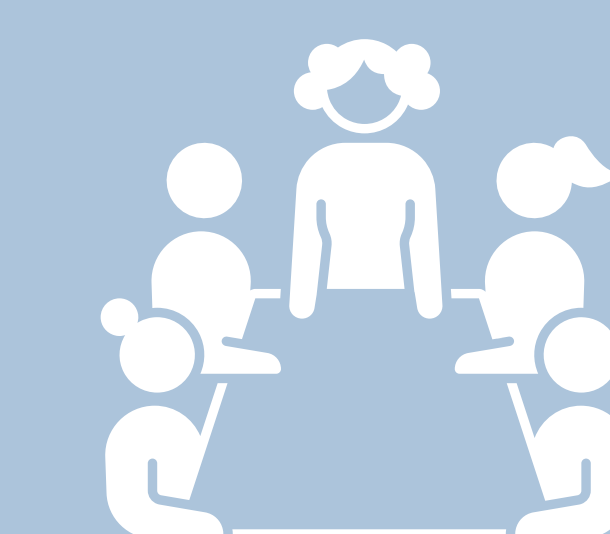
Participatory Learning & Action Approach



60 In-depth Interviews



29 Key Informant Interviews



94 Focus Group Discussions

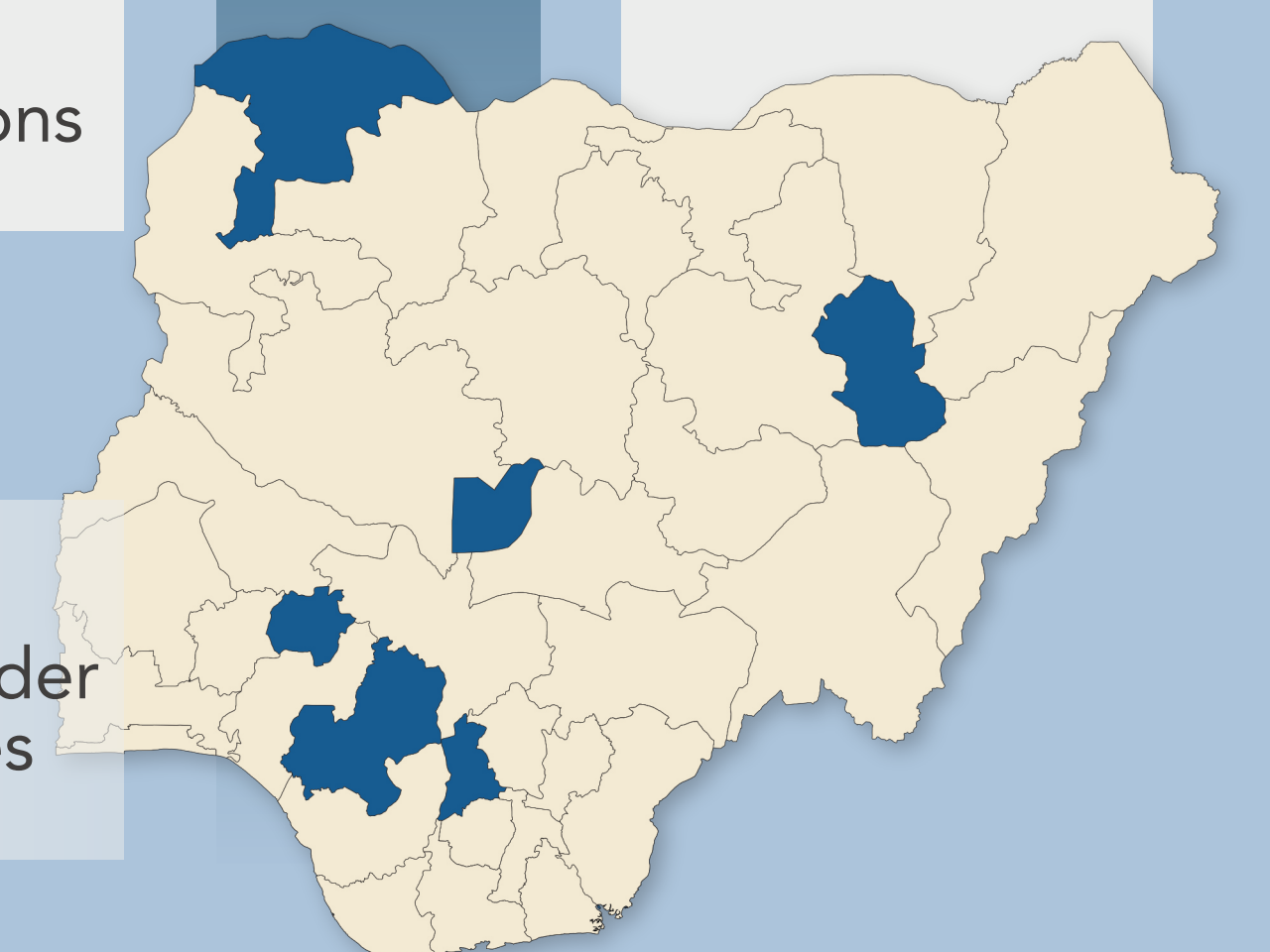


5 Multi Stakeholder Dialogues

Qualitative

6 states:

Gombe
Sokoto
Ekiti
Edo
Anambra
FCT



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Findings

Many intersecting factors cause school deprivation among OOSC. Findings are organized using the social-ecological model to classify four levels of school deprivation context: institutional, community, interpersonal and individual level factors.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL FACTORS

Across all states, factors such as long distance to school, corporal punishment, poor infrastructure, lack of specialized teachers/facilities for children with disabilities, and sexual harassment issues affected school retention and enrolment. The availability of adequate infrastructure and strict adherence to sexual harassment policies reduced the inclination to drop-out of school.

"When the school building collapsed, it was not repaired, and the children were not taken to another school. Although it was later repaired, the children never returned" **Government Stakeholder, Ekiti**

In some cases, girls dropped out of school because of frequent molestations by teachers, which sometimes resulted in unintended pregnancy and adverse health outcomes. A community leader narrated:

"Our girls do not go to school again because teachers abuse them, some of them get pregnant in the process, and the teachers deny the pregnancies, so they stop going to school" **- Community Leader, Female, Ekiti**

COMMUNITY LEVEL FACTORS

Community-level factors for school deprivation varied according to socio-cultural context. In the North-East and North-West, Islamic education was prioritized over formal education. Gender norms were the core risk factors keeping a girl child out of school. A parent and a community leader shared opinions on girl-child education.

"We are from a place where it is not a must to take your child to school, especially girls, it is not important. If she gets Islamic education that is ok for her" **- Parent, Male, Sokoto**

"...you will prefer to send your male child and marry out your daughter; this preference exists..." **Community Leader, Male, Gombe**

Some girls experienced schooling deprivation due to existing gender discriminating norms, which exposed them to the potential risk of abuse, such as child marriage and illegitimate child labour, resulting in poor social and economic outcomes. In addition, the violence and conflict in the North-East contributed to parents' reluctance to enroll their children in school, with girls majorly affected. Also, nomadic households contributed primarily to the schooling deprivation profile for boys. In the South-East, there was a rural-urban migration pattern for apprenticeship which was peculiar to children from low-income households.

INTERPERSONAL LEVEL FACTORS

Across the states, poor household socio-economic status, parental death, low value placed on education, and family size were intimately linked to non-enrollment and early drop-out. **A household's financial status is an early warning sign of school deprivation.**

"In our house, we are 3, and no one is going to a western school; from farming to hawking then roaming around town" **- OOSC, Male, Gombe**

When parents had to choose between male and female, priority was given to the male, particularly in the North. When prioritizing resources, girls were considered after boys and were described as *"another man's property as she would be married off early."* In some cases, girls were used for economic gains or as a means of exchange in the family.

Children from large households had poor learning achievements and were likely to drop out. Consistent across the states was the tendency to place household financial demands on children as they were expected to contribute to household economic activity, increasing boys' engagement in manual labour while the girls hawked. A stakeholder reiterated that some children were never enrolled in school because they were burdened with caring responsibilities, catering to the needs of family members, especially those living with disability.

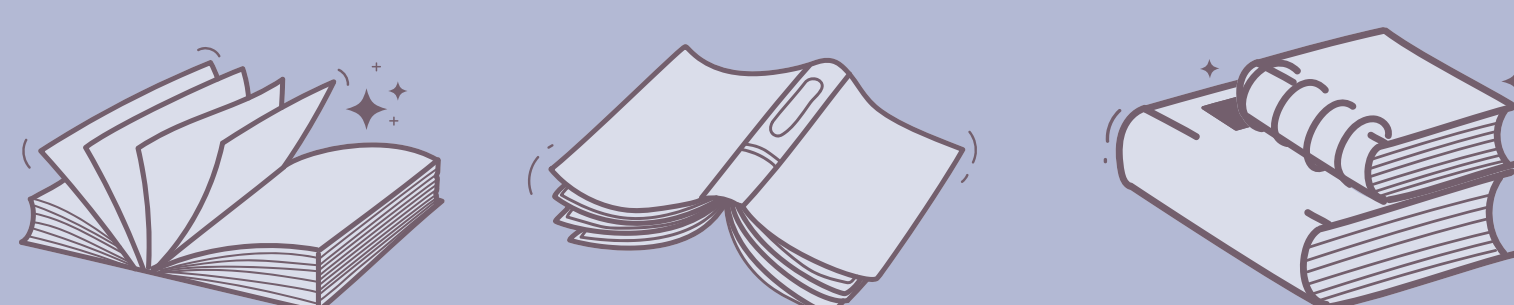
"Some parents do not send their children to school because most often the children contribute to the survival of the family, they will rather hawk to get something for the survival of the family" **- Government Stakeholder, Male, Ekiti**

"I was going to school before my dad's death. My mom doesn't have money to pay my fees, so I stopped going to school" **- OOSC, Female, FCT**

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL FACTORS

Malnutrition, ill-health, and poor academic achievements were critical findings facilitating school drop-out. **Drop-out risk surveys are essential in identifying and mitigating the risks of school disengagement.** A parent expressed an instance where his child stopped schooling due to ill health *"My first child became spiritually sick; we are still yet to get a cure, that was what stopped my child from going to school..."* **- Parent, Male, Sokoto**

In addition, a quest to make money, which in most cases was



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induced by parents, strongly influenced drop-out. Children who were already in school and were not beneficiaries of the school feeding program had low attention span and poor comprehension during school hours. When poor comprehension became a daily experience, it increased fatigue and disinterest in school, resulting in truancy and the risk of drop-out. Class repetition was an institutional strategy designed to reinforce learning for poor-performing children;

however, this might become counterproductive for school retention. A school teacher in Sokoto state attributed school disengagement to the stigma associated with repeating classes

"Some dropout from school because they were demoted and maybe the students are feeling shy to repeat the class with their juniors" – **School Teacher, Male, Sokoto**

Recommendations for Policy and OOSC Programs

1. The compulsory, free universal basic education should be free of additional charges and levies imposed on pupils as these charges create an additional burden on parents and guardians.
2. One reason for non-enrollment for rural dwellers is the long distance from school. Therefore, establishing schools in rural areas would reduce the commute time to school, providing equal opportunities for children in rural locations.
3. School-related gender-based violence is linked to school dropout. To ensure school retention, the government should ensure that the school environment and pathways to schools are safe for girls.
4. An early warning system should be instituted to map children with a high propensity to drop-out of school to ensure programs implemented utilize a needs-based approach.
5. Scale up and strengthen current interventions and strategies such as the home-grown school feeding program that facilitate school attendance.
6. Interventions should be targeted toward strengthening household economic well-being by designing livelihood programs, particularly for households with low socio-economic backgrounds.
7. Social and behavior change communication strategies should target harmful social and gender norms limiting girls' and boys' participation in school.
8. Strengthening the activities of the National Commission for Nomadic Education to cater to children from nomadic households through integrated learning approaches such as on-site schools will increase school enrollment.
9. There is the need to ensure there is a diverse spectrum of non-formal education opportunities available for OOSC through mapping of different programs, identifying which approaches are effective and scaling them for impact. The different interventions should target different categories of OOSC. Flexible learning strategies or skills acquisition programs through non-formal education should be treated as viable alternatives to formal education.
10. Child labour impacts on school attendance, interventions should target economic empowerment for parents since the perpetuation of child labour is linked with poor socio-economic status.

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