The Economic Cost of Leaving Children Behind: Why West Africa Must Invest in Accelerated Education

Evidence from Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria shows why the cost of educational exclusion belongs in the financing debate.

At the 2nd High-Level Conference on Scaling Education Initiatives in Emergencies (EiE) in West Africa, held in Accra, Ghana, on 29–30 September 2026, one message stood out: governments cannot afford to treat educational exclusion as a problem that can wait. The challenge is not only how to finance education, but also what is lost when children are left without a realistic route back to learning.

For governments and development partners facing poverty, insecurity and competing fiscal demands, the immediate costs of education are visible: teachers, learning materials, safe spaces and infrastructure all require resources. The economic consequences of continued exclusion are less visible, but they also matter. When children miss the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills, they may face narrower future employment and income opportunities.

Our research, "The Economic Cost of Non-Investment in Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) for Out-of-School Children in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria," compares the resources required to expand accelerated education with a modelled estimate of schooling-related labour income that may remain unrealised if exclusion persists. The purpose is to make the cost of inaction part of the financing conversation, not to suggest that every programme will automatically deliver the same economic return.

The scale and unequal burden of educational exclusion

The study examines three countries with different educational and fiscal circumstances. Using the selected national data in the analysis, the estimated primary-school-age out-of-school populations are approximately 1.65 million in Burkina Faso, 473,000 in Ghana and 9.07 million in Nigeria. The figures refer to different reference years, not estimates for a single common year.

- Burkina Faso: Conflict-related disruption and constraints on education provision make it difficult to reach excluded children and sustain their progression.
- Ghana: Complementary education offers an established route for reaching underserved learners, although poverty and geographic inequalities remain important barriers.
- Nigeria: The scale of the out-of-school population creates a substantial financing challenge, compounded by regional, rural and socioeconomic disparities.

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National averages also obscure who is most likely to miss out. The study's distributional analysis finds substantial differences by household wealth and place of residence. The rural–urban gaps in primary-school-age out-of-school prevalence are approximately 33.76 percentage points in Burkina Faso, 10.10 points in Ghana and 24.52 points in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the estimated prevalence is 57.7% among children in the poorest household wealth quintile, compared with 5.5% among children in the richest quintile.

These gaps have practical consequences. Children facing the greatest barriers may also be the hardest and most expensive to reach. Distance, insecurity, household poverty and limited access to receiving schools can make both participation and sustained progression more difficult. Financing plans therefore need to consider not only how many children are excluded, but where they live and what support they need.

Where accelerated education can help

Accelerated Education Programmes provide flexible, condensed learning opportunities for children and young people whose circumstances make conventional schooling difficult. They can offer a route for learners who have never enrolled, have dropped out or have experienced prolonged interruptions. In contexts affected by conflict, displacement or limited school access, AEPs can help learners recover learning and reconnect with recognised education pathways.

An AEP place is a starting point, not the final outcome. Its longer-term value depends on whether learners acquire relevant competencies, complete the programme, transition into formal education or another recognised pathway, and continue learning. This is why investment decisions should consider the full pathway from enrolment to sustained progression, rather than counting programme places alone.

What would it cost to expand accelerated education?

The research estimates the resources required to reach 25%, 50%, 75% and 100% of the identified out-of-school population in each country, using documented programme-level cost benchmarks harmonised to a common price basis. Under the full-coverage scenario, the estimated investment requirements are:

Country	Estimated investment for full coverage
Burkina Faso	US$279.54 million
Ghana	US$23.64 million
Nigeria	US$935.57 million

Source: Author's Computation.

Nigeria has the largest estimated requirement because its identified out-of-school population is substantially larger than those of the other two countries. Ghana's lower estimate reflects both its smaller target population and its lower documented programme-cost benchmark.

These figures are indicative estimates based on observed programme costs applied to larger populations; they are not approved national budgets or precise forecasts of nationwide implementation. Actual costs may differ as programmes expand. In particular, reaching remote, underserved or conflict-affected communities may require additional resources, while the scope for shared systems or economies of scale may affect costs in other settings. The estimates should therefore be used as planning benchmarks and refined through subnational costing, rather than treated as a guaranteed price tag.

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The economic cost of non-investment may be considerably larger

The study places the estimated resources required for full AEP coverage alongside a separate estimate of the present value of schooling-related labour income associated with an assumed additional two effective years of schooling. Under the preferred model specification, the estimated economic costs of non-investment are:

Country	Model-implied economic cost
Burkina Faso	US$1.10 billion
Ghana	US$482.17 million
Nigeria	US$4.11 billion

Source: Author's Computation.

Compared with the estimated resources required for full AEP coverage, the model-implied economic cost is approximately 3.93 times the investment requirement in Burkina Faso, 20.40 times in Ghana and 4.39 times in Nigeria. These estimates highlight why the financing debate should consider the potential economic consequences of continued exclusion alongside the immediate cost of providing education.

The size of the modelled value varies by country. Ghana records the highest preferred economic-cost-to-investment ratio, reflecting its relatively low programme-cost benchmark together with the transition and schooling-return assumptions used in the model. Burkina Faso and Nigeria also show substantial model-implied values, but their results are more sensitive to assumptions about progression and the benefits associated with additional schooling. Under the study's conservative combined sensitivity scenario, the ratio falls to 0.90 in Burkina Faso and 0.53 in Nigeria, while Ghana's remains above one at 5.42.

The findings do not mean that AEPs in Burkina Faso or Nigeria are necessarily uneconomic. They show that estimates depend on the conditions under which programmes operate and learners progress. Nor are the ratios conventional benefit–cost ratios, guaranteed returns on spending or estimates of observed GDP losses. They are comparisons between programme-cost benchmarks and a conditional model of labour income associated with additional schooling. The value will only be realised to the extent that learners gain skills and sustain their education, and that these gains translate into improved economic opportunities.

What the findings mean for education investment

The central policy question is not whether governments should choose between investing in education and avoiding expenditure. It is how to direct available resources towards effective, equitable and sustainable pathways for children who are currently excluded. The study's estimates make a strong case for taking the consequences of exclusion seriously, while recognising that delivery conditions and fiscal capacity differ across countries.

Fiscal feasibility is one consideration. The estimated full-coverage requirement represents approximately 1.06% of the public education expenditure benchmark used for Ghana, 25.82% for Burkina Faso and 19.78% for Nigeria. These percentages indicate the relative scale of additional investment; they do not show how much current spending can readily be reallocated. They point to the need for realistic financing plans that link ambition to the capacity to deliver and sustain provision.

Rather than treating partial coverage as an endpoint, governments and partners can use a phased strategy to build towards broader coverage. First, identify districts and communities with the highest levels of exclusion and the fewest viable learning alternatives. Second, protect continuity for learners already

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enrolled and finance the transition into receiving schools, including certification, learner tracking and support after reintegration. Third, cost delivery locally so that budgets reflect insecurity, distance, poverty and school capacity. Fourth, set clear milestones for expanding to additional areas, based on evidence about actual costs, learning, completion, transition and retention.

These steps should be supported by stronger domestic ownership, predictable multi-year partner commitments and integration with national education plans. Programme-level costing should also be linked to longitudinal information that follows learners through AEP participation, reintegration and subsequent schooling. Over time, this would strengthen estimates of long-term outcomes and help policymakers distinguish programmes ready for expansion from those that need redesign or further evaluation.

Conclusion: The cost of inaction belongs in education budgets

The evidence from Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria suggests that the human-capital value associated with continued educational exclusion may be substantial relative to the resources required to expand AEPs. The magnitude of that value depends on whether children can enter programmes, complete them, transition successfully and continue learning. The analysis captures only part of education's wider value: it does not monetise potential benefits relating to health, social participation or intergenerational outcomes, and its earnings-based estimates depend on assumptions that may not hold equally across labour markets.

The policy message is clear: the cost of expanding education matters, but so does the cost of leaving children behind. Governments and development partners should use these estimates as a prompt for action and further evidence, not as a guarantee of returns. They should prioritise effective AEPs, target children facing the greatest barriers, fund the transition to sustained learning, and build credible multi-year financing plans that can expand provision over time.

Investing in excluded children should not be judged by enrolment numbers alone. It should be judged by whether investment helps them return to learning, remain in education and build the skills and opportunities that exclusion has denied them.

About the research: This article draws on the study "The Economic Cost of Non-Investment in Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) for Out-of-School Children in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria," presented at the 2nd High-Level Conference on Education in Emergencies: Research Evidence to Scale Education Innovation and Investment in West Africa.

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