

## **The State of Education for Crises-affected Children and Adolescents in Nigeria**

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### **Introduction**

Imagine being a 12-year-old child forced to flee your home due to violence, losing not just your sense of security but also your education. This is the lived reality for millions of Nigerian children living in conflict-affected regions. Since 2009, when Boko Haram launched its insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria, communities in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states have endured relentless attacks on schools, including bombings, abductions, and killings, which have devastated the education system. Over the past 15 years, more than 2,295 teachers have been killed, and over 19,000 have been displaced. Almost 1,400 schools have been destroyed, many of which remain closed due to severe damage or ongoing insecurity. Between 2009 and 2015, more than 910 schools were destroyed and at least 1,500 were forced to close, disrupting education for nearly 1 million school-age children. At the peak of the crisis, more than 57% of schools in Borno State were shut down, leaving over half of the state's learners without classrooms. By early 2016, about 952,000 children had been affected by prolonged school closures. Approximately 2.8 million children in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa remain in need of education-in-emergencies support. For these children, education is no longer a guaranteed right but a rare privilege, thousands of schools remain shuttered, many teachers have fled; and countless students face an uncertain future.

This crisis reflects a broader national emergency. Nigeria currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, an alarming 20 million, many of whom are affected by armed conflict, displacement, and economic hardship<sup>1</sup>. These children and adolescents face not just the immediate threat of violence but also the long-term consequences of interrupted learning, which could trap them in cycles of poverty and marginalization, especially among already vulnerable populations. The right to education, once promised in national commitments and global goals, now hangs in the balance for a generation of Nigerian children.

### **The challenges facing crisis-affected children in Nigeria**

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<sup>1</sup> Unicef (2024). Nigeria Appeal: Humanitarian Action for Children - Nigeria. Available From: <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/nigeria>

The barriers to education for crisis-affected children in Nigeria are complex and deeply rooted. While conflict-related destruction of school infrastructure is a serious concern, deeper structural and socio-economic challenges exacerbate the crisis.

- i. **Conflict and Insecurity:** In conflict zones, children fear for their safety on their way to school. In Borno state, over [1,700 children have been abducted by gunmen since 2014 with 17 mass school abductions recorded in six years](#). The abduction of schoolgirls, [attacks on education facilities, and the recruitment of children](#) into armed groups<sup>2</sup> have created an environment of persistent fear, severely limiting children's access to education and undermining their ability to learn.
- ii. **Displacement:** Over [2.2 million](#) people are internally displaced in Northeast Nigeria due to insurgency and violence. [51%](#) of the displaced population are school age children between 3 to 17 years. Many of these children in displacement camps often lack access to formal education, with makeshift learning centres unable to meet the high demand. [60%](#) of children in IDP camps have no access to education, and host community schools face extreme capacity constraints, unable to accommodate additional displaced children
- iii. **Economic Hardship:** For many families, education is a luxury they cannot afford. The economic impact of conflict forces children to work, beg, or engage in unsafe activities to support their families. [Child labour report](#) shows that 57.1% of children ages 4 to 14 years in the northeast region of Nigeria are engaged in one form of economic activities. 27.9% of these children are engaged in full-time work while 29.3% are working and schooling simultaneously<sup>3</sup> in order to make ends meet.
- iv. **Gender Disparities:** Girls are disproportionately affected by the education crisis. [60% \(more than 10 million\)](#) of the out of school children in Nigeria are girls. Cultural norms and safety concerns have prevented and discouraged parents and guardians from sending their girls to school. As a result, many face early marriage as an alternative to education.
- v. **Psychosocial Barriers:** Apart from the disruption of the educational activities caused by crises, the prolonged exposure to violent conflicts, displacements, loss of lives, properties, and livelihoods also affect the mental health and wellbeing of children in these areas. [Children exposed to conflict often suffer from trauma, making it difficult for them to focus and learn](#). In addition, many schools lack counsellors or trauma-informed teachers to help students cope with their experiences.

### **Innovative Solutions:**

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<sup>2</sup> Onapajo, H. (2025). Child Soldiers of Boko Haram: Why (and How) Children Join Armed Groups in Northeastern Nigeria. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 00219096251318237.

<sup>3</sup> National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2022. Nigeria Child Labour Survey. Available From: <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/pdfuploads/CHILD%20LABOUR%20REPORT%20FINAL.pdf>

Despite these challenges, efforts are underway to bring education to Nigeria's most vulnerable children. Some of these efforts include;

- i. **Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs):** These are flexible, age-appropriate programs designed to provide access to basic education for disadvantaged, out-of-school, and over-age children and youth. They use accelerated learning methodologies to help individuals catch up on missed education, often due to factors like poverty, conflict, or marginalization. These programs condense years of learning into shorter periods, helping out-of-school children catch up and reintegrate into formal education. AEPs aim to equip learners with foundational skills and knowledge, enabling them to reintegrate into formal education or gain skills for vocational training. So far, AEPs in Nigeria have reached hundreds of thousands of out-of-school children, particularly in the northern regions and have made significant strides in addressing educational disparities among vulnerable populations. For example, the Education Crisis Response (ECR) Program which ran for 3 years from 2014 to 2017 reached more than 80,000 out of school children in Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe and Yobe state and helped transition over 30,000 back into formal education<sup>4</sup>. Also, the Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Program which is running from 2021 - 2026 has served over 34,000 out of school children in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa state<sup>5</sup>.
- ii. **Safe Schools Initiative (SSI):** This is a program designed to protect students and educational institutions from violence and attacks, particularly in response to the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls abduction. The SSI is a collaborative effort involving government, private sector, civil society organizations, and international partners, and has led to the construction of fortified learning spaces and the deployment of security personnel to ensure a safe learning environment for children<sup>6</sup>.
- iii. **Community-Based Learning:** NGOs and local organizations are implementing alternative education models, including mobile schools, radio learning, and digital platforms, to reach children in remote or insecure areas. For example, UNICEF is supporting radio learning classes and clubs as alternative learning pathways in north-east Nigeria<sup>7</sup>. These radio classes provide out of school children in IDP camps with access to education. The radio clubs are led by the children with supervision from a community-based mentor where children listen to pre-recorded education programs.

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<sup>4</sup> Education Crisis Response (2017). 'Education Crisis Response Project: Meeting Learning Needs in Crisis-affected Northeast Nigeria'. Final Report. Washington, DC: USAID.

<sup>5</sup> Atiku Institute for Development (2025). Opportunity to Learn (OTL). Available From: <https://aid-aun.org/index.php/projects/education/otl>

<sup>6</sup> Ogunode, N. J., Ayeni, E. O., & Daniel, A. A. (2024). Safe School Initiative Programme and Human Security in Nigeria. Information Horizon: AMERICAN Journal of Library and Information Science Innovation, 2(5), 110-121.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, 2023. Radio Learning Brings Hope and Education to Displaced Children like Awana in North-East Nigeria. Available From: <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/radio-learningbrings-hope-and-education-displaced-children-awana-north-east-nigeria>

- iv. **Psychosocial Support and Trauma-Informed Education:** Recognizing the impact of conflict on mental health, some schools and alternative learning centres are incorporating psychosocial support into their curriculum. Teachers and facilitators are being taught and trained on how to weave-in socio-emotional learning activities during lessons to help traumatized learners heal and strengthen their resilience. For example, the Education Crisis Response (ECR) Program trained over 1,000 non-formal facilitators on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to enhance their capacity to support the psychosocial well-being, resilience, and academic engagement of conflict-affected children.

While these innovations have made significant strides in tackling the out of school crises for vulnerable children in conflict-affected regions, several gaps and issues still persist in their implementation. Firstly, funding shortage impedes the sustainability of these programs. Most of these innovations are donor-driven with limited financial commitment from the government. In some cases, they are seen as NGO-led interventions rather than an integral part of the education system. Another issue lies in the coordination of these programs. Different stakeholders including government, NGOs, and donors often operate independently, leading to overlaps and duplication in the delivery of innovations. In addition, poor learning facilities including accessible and conducive learning space and learning materials often affect the effectiveness of education solutions. Furthermore, inconsistent and weak monitoring and assessment systems make it difficult to track learner progress which could affect their transition back into formal education. Finally, many vulnerable children, particularly in hard-to-reach, remote, and high-risk areas remain unreached due to the unavailability of basic infrastructure such as roads and commute networks.

### **A Call to Action:**

The fight for education in crisis-affected areas of Nigeria requires urgent attention and the participation of everyone. Government, civil society organizations, and individuals all have a role to play in ensuring equal access to quality education for vulnerable children.

1. **Advocate for Policy Change and Accountability:** CSOs and individuals can engage policymakers to push for stronger policies that prioritize education for displaced and conflict-affected children. Governments should be pressured to uphold commitments to inclusive and conflict-sensitive education.
2. **Promote Community Engagement:** CSOs should work with local leaders, parents, and youth to support and encourage learning as well as address social barriers like child marriage or child labour.
3. **Increase Funding:** Governments should prioritize education in emergencies by increasing and making a budgetary commitment to the long-term funding of innovations and initiatives that provide catch-up learning opportunities for children who have missed school due to conflict.
4. **Raise Awareness and Support:** Individuals can use social media to spotlight the educational needs of children in conflict zones. In addition, they can provide support

by volunteering as educators or mentors; offering time to teach or tutor displaced children.

5. **Support Teacher Training and Recruitment:** CSOs can provide help by sourcing for and empowering local educators with the necessary skills needed to teach trauma affected children. Mental health and psychosocial support should be integrated into education programs to help children cope with trauma.
6. **Provide Learning Materials and Resources:** Governments, CSOs, and individuals can help provide school kits, books, stationeries, and other learning materials to vulnerable children who are unable to afford them.

Education is not just a privilege; it is a fundamental human right. Ensuring that every child in Nigeria, regardless of their circumstances, has access to quality education is not just an investment in the future, but a moral responsibility. We cannot afford to let a generation of children be lost to conflict and crisis. The time to act is now.