International Journal of Innovative Development and Policy Studies 14(3):324-332, July-Sept, 2026
© SEAHI PUBLICATIONS, 2026 www.seahipublications.org ISSN: 2467- 8465

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.22963363

Effects of Poverty on Education: A Study of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
This study examined the effects of poverty on education with emphasis on out-of-school children in Nigeria. Poverty was identified as a major barrier to children's access to basic education. Many children from poor households suffer from poor feeding, inadequate healthcare, and lack of school materials. These conditions reduce their interest in schooling and increase absenteeism. Some children engage in street hawking and child labour during school hours to support family income. This situation negatively affects their academic performance and school participation. Poverty also limits parental ability to provide educational support for their children. Malnutrition and poor health were found to reduce concentration and learning ability. Children living in poverty experience stress and low motivation toward schooling. The study also identified poor funding of education, corruption, and insecurity as contributing factors. Weak implementation of child rights laws further increases the number of out-of-school children. Unemployment, inequality, and inflation also worsen poverty and limit educational opportunities. The findings revealed that poverty contributes to school dropout and poor educational outcomes. The study concluded that poverty significantly affects access to and quality of education in Nigeria. It recommended improved social support programs and educational interventions to reduce out-of-school children.
Keywords: Poverty, Education, Out-of –School Children

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a way of life characterized by low calorie intake, inaccessibility of adequate health facilities low quality education system, low life expectancy, unemployment and underemployment. Poor feeding and poor healthcare can induce fear and loss of interest in school (Iroanya, 2024). Many Nigerian children go to school with little or no food, a lot go to bed without food. The hardship has caused many Nigerian children to hawk around the street to make some earn a living during the school hours, while others become perpetual street seller. Inability of parents to provide common food or basic needs of these children to keep the body, soul and mind alive is an indicator while many Nigerian children troupe out of school for survival. Children from low-income families do not often acquire the necessary stimulation to learn the social skills required to prepare for school. Major challenge(s) is the parental inconsistency to keep these children in school, as a result of lack or inadequate family income. Parents struggle to get the basic meals for these children.

Living in extreme and persistent poverty has a strong impact on how and when the children eat (Balasanyan,2021). Malnutrition will definitely constitute hindrance for better performance

academically. The children prefer to hawk around the streets in their quests to survive the heat of poverty level bedevilling their parents, which forced them loose focus on absolute consecration and devotion to their academic pursuit. Thus, poor feeding likely reduces the intrinsic motivation to be in school and so many children of school age troupe out of school on daily basis.

Poverty significantly affects children in accessing primary education in Nigeria. According to UNESCO (2021), Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children in the world, with approximately 10.5 million children not enrolled in school. A significant proportion of these children come from poor households, where parents prioritise survival over education (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2020). At the same time, the inability to afford school-related expenses, such as uniforms, textbooks, and transportation, further limits children's ability to attend school regularly (Amoo et al., 2022). Poverty forces many children into child labour, which directly conflicts with school attendance and performance (Umaru & Mohammed, 2021).

Factors or Causes of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

There are many factors responsible for out-of-school children in Nigeria. Some of the factors include; poor funding of education, corruption, poor implementation of Child Rights law, insecurity problems, Lack of political will to address the problems, high rate of poverty, and high fertility rate.

Poor Funding for Education

Poor funding of education in Nigeria has contributed to the high number of out-of-school children. Ogunode & Stephen (2021) highlight that Nigeria's budget allocation for education is inadequate, falling below UNESCO's recommended 26% for developing countries. Corruption at the administrative level exacerbates the issue, as funds meant for basic education are often misappropriated by officials and politicians. This diversion of resources leads to a shortage of funds for primary school administration. Raliyat, Umma, & Aisha (2022) note that 26 out of 36 states failed to provide matching funds needed to access N33.6 billion in federal funding for educational infrastructure and programs between 2015 and 2021. Ogunode (2020) argues that Nigeria's low investment in education, evidenced by the 7.9% budget allocation in 2022, is a major factor hindering educational development.

Corruption

Corruption in Nigeria is a significant factor contributing to the high number of out-of-school children. Ogunode & Stephen (2021) attribute this issue to corruption in the administration of Basic Education initiatives. Other studies, such as Ololube (2016) and Ogunode, Josiah & Ajape (2021), also emphasize that corruption in educational institutions hampers development. For example, in 2016, Kwara State returned N1.83 billion in UBE grant funds after diverting its N1.45 billion counterpart funding. Transparency International has documented that 66% of education funds in Nigeria are stolen by corrupt officials, affecting education quality, access, and outcomes. Corruption manifests in various forms, including resource misallocation, procurement fraud, examination malpractices, and teacher absenteeism. A UNESCO report shows that corruption leads to poor-quality education, with Nigeria among 37 countries losing educational investments as children fail to learn, costing governments $129 billion annually.

Poor Implementation of the Child Right Act

The poor implementation of the Child Rights Act is another key factor contributing to the high rate of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Despite the 2003 Child Rights Act mandating nine years of compulsory education, many states have failed to enforce or domesticate this law, especially in the northern region where out-of-school children are most prevalent. Raliyat, Umma, & Aisha (2022) and Ogunode (2020) point out that some northern states, including Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Kano, and Zamfara, have not yet domesticated the Act. Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of a Child have been incorporated into Nigerian law through the Child Rights Act, its enforcement remains weak, hindering efforts to ensure compulsory education for all children.

Insecurity Problems

The rising number of out-of-school children in Nigeria is largely due to increasing attacks on educational institutions and student abductions. Ogunode (2020) and Raliyat, Umma, & Aisha (2022) highlight that worsening security in states like Kano, Akwa Ibom, Katsina, and Kaduna has exacerbated the problem. Over 4,000 schools in the North-West have been closed due to insecurity, leaving hundreds of thousands of students without access to education. Events like the Chibok school kidnapping have led to a decline in interest in education, disrupted academic schedules, and resulted in poor learning outcomes. Amnesty International emphasizes that these attacks, particularly in Northern Nigeria, where over 70% of dropouts occur, severely threaten the education system.

CAUSES OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Unemployment

Livelihoods in Nigeria are deteriorating, leading to a higher cost of living and a lower standard of living. Many people face unemployment, which contributes to increased poverty. Unemployment-induced poverty has led to a rise in crime and violence, with many youths turning to criminal activities like armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and internet fraud. The income from these illegal activities is usually insufficient to meet their basic needs.

Corruption:

In Nigeria, government funds are frequently misappropriated by leaders who prioritize the interests of their family and friends over the welfare of the masses. Most government revenue comes from natural resources, but instead of being used for development, it is distributed among political office holders and their inner circles. This neglect of the general population results in widespread poverty. The mismanagement and embezzlement of funds by political leaders have exacerbated corruption, deepened poverty and inequality, and contributed to rising crime rates.

Non-Diversification of the Economy:

Poverty in Nigeria is largely attributed to the country's lack of economic diversification. Before 1970, agriculture was the primary driver of the economy, but by 1984, oil exports had risen to 97% of the country's export revenue. This dependency has persisted, with the oil and gas sector contributing 97.5% of export revenues, 81% of government revenues, and 17% of GDP by 2008. Leaders have neglected other income sources, making Nigeria reliant on oil exports a phenomenon known as "Dutch disease," where natural resource dependence diminishes economic competitiveness. As a result, those outside the oil sector, especially in agriculture, have been impoverished, with their products becoming less relevant.

Inequality:

After Nigeria's economic growth between 1965 and 1975, income disparity increased, deepening poverty in the country (Oluwatayo, 2008). There is a significant income inequality between rural and urban areas. People in rural areas rely heavily on agriculture, a declining sector due to the dominance of oil, and they often lack investment in skill acquisition like their urban counterparts. This leaves them more vulnerable to poverty and contributes to social and economic issues such as violence and corruption.

Demographic:

Overpopulation is a key demographic factor contributing to poverty in Nigeria. The population growth rate has outpaced economic growth, keeping poverty levels consistently high. In rural areas, larger family sizes reduce per capita income and lower the standard of living. Rapid population growth also increases unemployment, leading to lower wages and further decreasing income levels.

Poor Agricultural Infrastructure:

Agriculture is the backbone of Nigeria economy. But out dated farming practices, lack of proper irrigation infrastructure and even lack of formal knowledge of crop handling has affected the productivity in this sector tremendously. As a consequence there is redundancy and sometimes complete lack of work leading to decreased wages that is insufficient for meeting daily needs of a labourer’s family plunging them into poverty.

Inflation

Inflation may be defined as an increase in prices of commodities coinciding with the fall in the purchasing value of money. As a direct consequence of inflation, effective price of food, clothing items as well as real estate rises. The salaries and wages do not rise as much in keeping up with the inflated prices of commodities leading to effective decrease of the per capita income.

Effect of Poverty on Education

Children raised in poverty may struggle with social skills, including politeness and empathy (Jensen, 2009). This lack of empathy makes it difficult for them to collaborate effectively with classmates, leading to feelings of inadequacy when they are excluded from group activities. As a result, they may give up on tasks prematurely. Poor social skills and peer rejection can negatively impact their academic performance. Children living in poverty face various chronic stressors, such as unsafe neighbourhoods, financial strain due to low-income parents, family instability, and overcrowded households. These stressors lead to academic and behavioural problems, including higher absenteeism, difficulty concentrating, poor memory, and lack of motivation. Limited parental interaction and fewer cognitive stimulation opportunities also lower children's confidence, contributing to future academic failure. Chronic stress ultimately results in underperformance and disinterest in school, significantly impacting academic achievement.

Children raised in poverty are more apt to experience cognitive lags due to significant changes in brain structure in areas related to memory and emotion. Poverty may make it difficult for parents to purchase toys and books to promote cognitive stimulation for their children, thereby causing the children to have a lesser vocabulary and a more directed speech (Johnson et al., 2016). Developmental delays are more prevalent for children raised in poverty as opposed to those raised in more affluent homes. Poor performance on tests when asked to show their knowledge, behavioural problems in the classroom, mental health issues, and emotional problems are also viewed more frequently in those children who have been raised in a lower economic home. Children raised in poverty experience changes in brain structure in areas related to memory and emotion (Brito & Noble, 2009). Living in poverty upsets brain development and will result in behavioural problems in the classroom (Dike, 2017). Stress causes our bodies to release a chemical called cortisol (Jensen, 2009). The build up of cortisol in our body results in sending weaker neuron signals to the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. Both the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus are crucial for learning, cognition, and working memory. Recurring stress can result in shrinking of neurons in the frontal lobes of a child's brain. This area of the brain is responsible for the child's ability to make judgments, plan, and control impulsivity. It can also cause damage to the hippocampus, which may, in turn, cause a reduction in learning capacity. The amygdala is also affected by the effects of stressors in the body (Jensen, 2009). The amygdala is the area of the brain that is responsible for controlling emotions. All of these alterations to the neurons in the brain cause an imbalance in the healthy status of the brain. This imbalance, in turn, may shape the patterns of communication and language.

Education and Economic development

Education is a basic need as well as a fundamental human right. It is the bedrock of all the other physiological needs. Education is valued as a source of economic progression and social mobility. Education contributes to poverty reduction by increasing the value of efficiency of the labour force and thus enhances economic growth. This economic growth is expected to translate into higher income lowering poverty levels. This is because the more educated an individual is the more productive he is expected to be both in the labour market and the household. Therefore, more education provision can raise income levels in general and remove groups from absolute poverty. Education remains one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and laying the basis for sustained economic growth since income inequality is significantly and negatively related to education dispersion and the average educational attainment of the population.

Education attainment is becoming increasingly important, relative to other factors, in sharping young people life chances. Changing economic and social conditions, information and communication technologies, the globalization of economic activity, greater personal responsibility and autonomy in all aspect of life have given knowledge and skills an increasingly central role in the economic success of individual and nations. In addition to the growing economic of human capital, the social returns to learning, in the form of enhanced personal wellbeing and greater social cohesion, are also significant (OECD, 2005).

Social Benefit of Education

Education brings social benefits that improve the situation of the poor, basic (primary and lower-secondary) education helps reduce poverty by increasing the productivity of the poor, by equipping people with the skills they need to participate fully in economy and society, lower fertility, improved health care of children, and greater participation of women in the labour market (World Bank,2008). Education is an investment that can help foster economic growth, contribute to personal, social development and reduce social inequality. Like any investment, it involves both cost and returns. Some of the returns are monetary, and directly related to the labour market, while others are personal, social and cultural or more broadly economic. Some returns accrue to the individual while others benefit society in general, for example in the form of literate and productive population (OECD 1996)

Education and Productivity

There are very strong relationship between education and productivity, workers with more skills are more productive, and greater productivity leads to greater income. Higher level of education corresponds with healthy people, lower rate of mortality and lower rate of crime (Michael & Grossman 2010). The children of more highly paid are less likely to be poor and more likely to be better educated and therefore less likely to rely on public assistance (Barbar & Samuel 2000).

In agriculture, evidence suggests positive effects of education on productivity among farmers using modern technologies, but less impact, as might be expected, among those using traditional methods. In Thailand, farmers with four or more years of schooling were three times more likely to adopt fertilizer and other modern inputs than less educated farmers (Birdsall, 2003). Similarly, in Nepal, the completion of at least seven years of schooling increased productivity in wheat by over a quarter, and in rice by 13% (Jamison and Moock, 2004). Education is also an important contributor to technological capability and technical change in industry. Statistical analysis of the clothing and engineering industries in Sri Lanka showed that the skill and education levels of workers and entrepreneurs were positively related to the rate of technical change of the firm (Deraniyagal, 2005). Education alone, of course cannot transform an economy. According to Lucas 2008, for example, the higher the level of education of the work force the higher the overall productivity of capital because the more educated are more likely to innovate, and thus affect everyone's productivity. This implies that increased education of individuals raises not only their own productivity but also that of others with whom they interact, so that total productivity increases as the average level of education rises (Perotti, 2008).

Poverty and Students Achievement

At the student level, a meta-analysis of 75 independent samples from 58 published journal articles conducted by Sirin (2005) found a medium to strong relationship between family socioeconomic status and students' achievement. In another study that applied descriptive quantitative analyses to longitudinal data, Michelmore and Dynarski (2017) found a negative, linear relationship between the number of years eligible for subsidized meals and eighth-grade test scores. Research conducted by Reardon (2011) indicates that the gap in standardized test scores between students from low-income families (at the 10th percentile of the income distribution) and their peers from high-income families (at the 90th percentile) was found to be 40 percent larger than it was 25 years ago.The test score gap between students from low-income and high-income families was twice as large as the test score gap between Black and White students (Reardon, 2011).

At the school level, researchers have used the school aggregate of students eligible for subsidized meals (i.e. the proportion of students receiving free or reduced-price meals) to assess the contextual effect of

concentrated poverty, with varied findings. In one study, researchers found that students in high socioeconomic status schools had more positive academic growth compared to their counterparts in low- and mixed-socioeconomic status schools (Belfi, Haelermans, & Fraine, 2016). Another study found that serving a higher proportion of students eligible for subsidized meals was negatively related to fifth-grade students' reading achievement, though the relationship was not statistically significant for mathematics (Jensen, 2009).. Similarly Sirin (2005) found slightly higher rates of reading growth in low poverty schools compared to high poverty schools, but school poverty concentration was not statistically related to growth rates for mathematics.

Solutions to the Problems of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

1. Provision of Free or Subsidized Education

Offering free or subsidized education eliminates the burden of school fees, making education more accessible to children from low-income families. When education is affordable or free, more students from disadvantaged backgrounds can enrol, as it alleviates the need to choose between schooling and basic survival.

2. School Meal Programs

Hunger and malnutrition are major barriers to education, especially in poor regions. School meal programs ensure students receive at least one nutritious meal daily, which promotes attendance and enrolment. These programs also help reduce dropout rates by addressing a key need for students living in poverty.

3. Cash Transfer Programs

Conditional and unconditional cash transfer programs provide financial support to low-income families, often contingent upon their children attending school. These initiatives reduce the financial strain on families and encourage them to prioritize education over child labour or other economic activities, thereby increasing school enrolment.

4. Reduction of Child Labour

Poverty often forces children to work rather than attend school. Strict enforcement of child labour laws, combined with financial assistance to families, can reduce reliance on child labour. This enables children to focus on their education, leading to higher enrolment rates.

5. Access to Affordable Healthcare

Poor health can hinder regular school attendance. By improving access to affordable healthcare, students can stay healthier and attend school more consistently. Programs such as vaccinations, clean water initiatives, and improved sanitation also help keep students in school.

6. Provision of Learning Materials and Uniforms

Even when education is free, the cost of school supplies, uniforms, and books can be too high for low-income families. Offering free or subsidized learning materials and uniforms can reduce these costs and encourage higher school enrolment, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

7. Transportation Assistance

In rural or low-income communities, long distances to school often create significant barriers to attendance. Providing affordable or free transportation such as school buses or bicycles can help ensure that travel distance and costs do not prevent students from going to school.

8. Flexible Schooling Options

In many poverty-stricken areas, children have additional responsibilities, such as caring for siblings or working to support their families. Offering flexible schooling options, such as evening or part-time classes, allows students to balance education with their other duties, increasing enrollment.

9. Improvement of School Infrastructure

Poorly maintained schools or a lack of basic facilities can discourage attendance. Investing in well-equipped, safe, and accessible schools with essential infrastructure like clean water, sanitation, and electricity can make schools more appealing and increase enrollment.

10. Scholarship and Financial Aid Programs

Scholarships and financial aid targeted at disadvantaged students help reduce financial barriers to education. Providing scholarships based on need or merit ensures that students from low-income families can attend school without the stress of tuition or related expenses.

11. Community Awareness and Advocacy Programs

Community awareness programs highlighting the value of education can motivate parents to give priority to enrolling their children in school. Addressing cultural and societal beliefs that undervalue education especially for girls is essential for improving enrolment rates.

12. Investing in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is a key to building a strong foundation for future learning. By investing in pre-primary education, particularly for disadvantaged children, governments can better prepare them for primary school, boosting enrolments and success rates.

Tackling poverty through these strategies can significantly improve school enrollment by removing financial, social, and logistical barriers. These efforts ensure that children not only have access to education but also help break the cycle of poverty, enabling future generations to benefit from the opportunities education provides.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the urgent need to address the unfairness in public school education caused by poverty in Nigeria. This is possible through implementing planned support systems and policies aimed at alleviating the effects of poverty, as well as improving educational outcomes for all children regardless of their poverty line as well as background they received a high-quality public education. Also, the link between poverty and education among primary school pupils in Nigeria is undeniable. Poverty not only limits access to education but also affects the quality of education received, leading to poor learning outcomes and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. The study revealed that poor feeding and health exerts a higher level of impact on the educational access for out of school in Nigeria. The study therefore recommended among others school feeding programmes should be initiated by state governments in order to reduce the rate of hunger among young children so that more out of school children can have access to good education. Additionally, efforts should be made by state governments to rehabilitate healthcare facilities and subsidize the cost of health services so that good healthcare can be made available to improve the health of out of school children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Government should expand free and compulsory basic education by providing uniforms, textbooks, and learning materials to children from poor households to reduce the financial burden on parents.
2. Conditional cash transfer programs should be strengthened to support low-income families, especially those with school-age children, to encourage school enrolment and regular attendance.
3. School feeding programs should be expanded in rural and low-income communities to attract out-of-school children and reduce the effect of poverty on education.
4. The government should create more employment and poverty alleviation programs for parents, since improved household income will increase the ability of families to send their children to school.
5. Community leaders and religious organizations should intensify awareness campaigns on the importance of education and discourage child labour and early marriage.
6. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should collaborate with government to provide scholarships and educational support for vulnerable children.
7. More schools should be built in rural and underserved areas to reduce distance to school, which often discourages poor children from attending.

8. Flexible learning programs such as evening classes and non-formal education should be introduced for children engaged in economic activities.

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