

# PROVIDING EDUCATION FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

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## Abstract

The persistent rise in the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Nigeria remains a major developmental concern, with no single, comprehensive strategy yet able to address the challenge effectively. Insecurity, poverty, socio-economic inequality, religious beliefs, cultural practices, displacement, and environmental pressures have collectively worsened the situation. The immediate and long-term consequences are profound, posing serious threats to national development, social cohesion, and internal security. This paper examines the strategic role libraries can play in mitigating educational deprivation among out-of-school children in Nigeria. Drawing on existing literature, policy reports, and documented interventions by governmental and non-governmental organizations, the study demonstrates how libraries through mobile and outreach services, skills-based workshops, and community partnerships can deliver inclusive, non-formal educational opportunities to marginalized children beyond the confines of the conventional school system.

**Keywords:** out-of-school children (OOSC), non-formal education, mobile libraries, learning hubs, vocational workshops, UNESCO

## Introduction

The right to education is enshrined in international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which affirms that every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education (UNICEF, 2018). Despite this normative framework, Nigeria remains a focal point of global concern. Recent assessments indicate a persistent

increase in the number of children excluded from formal schooling particularly in conflict-affected and economically marginalized regions (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF Nigeria, 2025).

The concept of out-of-school children (OOSC) refers to children of official school age who are not enrolled in or attending any formal educational institution. As of late 2025, global estimates indicate approximately 250 million children and youth remain out of school. Nigeria has one of the highest populations of OOSC estimated to be over 10 million divided into the following categories of children who have never entered a formal school system, children who were once enrolled in schools but discontinued their education halfway, and children who are technically enrolled in schools but have been absent for long stretches, placing them at high risk of discontinuing their education.

Libraries serve as a vital "lifeline" for out-of-school children (OOSC) by acting as non-formal educational hubs that bridge the gap between exclusion and formal schooling by providing mobile library services, community reading hubs, vocational workshops amongst others. World Bank (2024) reports that educational exclusion in Nigeria is closely associated with regional poverty, insecurity, and weak social protection systems, creating urgent policy and operational challenges for education delivery.

### **Context and scale of the problem**

Education is internationally recognized as a fundamental human right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms every child's right to free and

compulsory basic education. However, this right remains unrealized for millions of children in developing countries, including Nigeria.

Nigeria has repeatedly been identified as having the highest number of out-of-school children in Sub-Saharan Africa. Estimates placed the figure at over 10 million in 2020, with recent assessments suggesting an increase to more than 13 million children most of who reside in the northern regions where poverty and insecurity are most severe. These statistics highlight a widening gap between policy commitments and practical outcomes.

Recent reports paint a concerning picture of educational exclusion in Nigeria. UNICEF Nigeria (2025) reports that approximately 10.2 million Nigerian children of primary school age were out of school as of 2020, a figure corroborated by national policy briefings (Nwajiuba, 2020). More recent regional and global syntheses indicate that when adolescents of secondary school age are included, the total number of out-of-school children may exceed 13 million and, in some estimates approach 18 million children (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Insecurity including mass abductions, attacks on schools, and prolonged armed conflict has significantly disrupted education particularly in northern Nigeria. UNESCO (2024) notes that fear of violence has heightened parental reluctance to enroll or retain children in school, while poverty further constrains household capacity to absorb schooling costs.

## **Drivers of exclusion**

There are several factors responsible for exclusion of children from the formal educational system especially in a developing country like Nigeria. Amongst these factors are:

**Socioeconomic deprivation:** Pervasive poverty and the direct and indirect costs of schooling continue to incentivize child labour and school withdrawal particularly among rural and low-income households. Empirical studies demonstrate that parental income and education levels significantly influence enrolment and retention outcomes (Aina, 2004; Ranabhat, 2014). The World Bank (2024) further reports that economic shocks, including those following the COVID-19 pandemic, have intensified dropout rates across several Nigerian states.

**Insecurity and violence:** Armed conflict, kidnapping and attacks on learning institutions have directly displaced pupils and forced school closures, particularly in northern Nigeria. Obiezu (2018) documents the impact of insurgency on schooling in the North-East, while UNESCO (2024) and UNICEF Nigeria (2025) confirm that insecurity remains a leading driver of educational exclusion nationwide. In the month of November 2025, over three hundred students and staff were abducted from schools in Kebbi and Niger States. This spate of abduction has forced several state governments to shutdown schools to avoid risking the lives of students and their teachers. Several parents have also withdrawn their children from schools pending when the security situation improves. This is beside the infamous Chibok and Dapchi mass abductions.

**Cultural and religious preferences:** Local cultural values and preferences for religious or traditional instruction over Western-style schooling remain significant in some communities. Ross (2014) argues that historical associations between Western education and external influence continue to shape educational choices in parts of northern Nigeria,

contributing to lower enrolment rates particularly for girls. UNESCO (2024) similarly identifies socio-cultural norms as persistent barriers to universal education.

**Displacement and environmental shocks:** Communal violence, climate-related displacement, flooding, desertification and seasonal migration interrupt educational continuity and increase vulnerability to permanent exclusion. The World Bank (2024) reports that climate-induced displacement disproportionately affects agrarian communities where children are frequently withdrawn from school during migration periods.

### **Libraries as non-formal education providers**

Libraries provide non-formal educational platforms to support the education of out-of-school-children through the following channels:

**Mobile libraries and outreach:** Mobile library units, including book vans, carts and pop-up reading corners, have been widely adopted as outreach mechanisms in contexts where formal schooling infrastructure is weak or disrupted (Aina, 2004; UNESCO, 2022). In Nigeria, such models can transport reading materials, educational media and basic digital tools to communities cut off from formal schooling due to insecurity or distance.

**Learning hubs and community reading clubs:** Community learning hubs hosted within libraries or repurposed local venues can deliver remedial literacy, numeracy and psychosocial support for out-of-school children. UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that safe,

community-based learning spaces are particularly effective for re-engaging marginalized learners.

**Skills and vocational workshops:** Skills-oriented programmes delivered through libraries such as ICT training, tailoring, carpentry and entrepreneurship provide pathways for older out-of-school children to acquire employable competencies while continuing literacy education (Aina, 2004; World Bank, 2024).

**Partnerships and referral systems:** Libraries can function as referral hubs, linking families to conditional cash transfer schemes, alternative basic education programmes and re-enrolment pathways. Cross-sector collaboration is identified as a critical success factor in education inclusion initiatives (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

### **Policy implications and recommendations**

**Integrate libraries into national OOSC strategies:** Ministries of education should formally include libraries and mobile services in national action plans to reduce the number of out-of-school children.

**Scale mobile and hybrid delivery models:** Pilot mobile libraries in high-need LGAs and conflict-affected corridors; evaluate and scale up based on learning outcomes.

**Fund human resources and capacity building:** Invest in training librarians in remedial pedagogy, community engagement and psychosocial first aid.

**Forge cross-sector partnerships:** Encourage collaborations among state libraries, NGOs, faith-based organizations and donors to develop culturally relevant materials and learner pathways.

**Monitor, evaluate and publish evidence:** Establish simple, cost-effective monitoring systems to track attendance, learning outcomes and re-enrolment rates for participants in library-based programmes.

## Conclusion

Libraries in Nigeria are strategically positioned to complement formal schooling and support children excluded from classrooms by providing accessible community-based and non-formal learning opportunities. Evidence from international development literature demonstrates that when adequately resourced and integrated into broader education and social protection systems, libraries can contribute meaningfully to reducing educational exclusion and strengthening human capital development (Aina, 2004; UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2024). Strengthening library infrastructure and policy integration should therefore be considered a critical component of national strategies to address the out-of-school children crisis in Nigeria.

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