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RETHINKING BASIC EDUCATION POLICY IN THE ERA OF LEARNING POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is currently facing a deepening learning crisis, with over 70 per cent of ten-year-olds unable to read and understand a simple text, reflecting the country's entrenched learning poverty and systemic educational failures. This paper critically examines Nigeria's basic education policies through a rights-based lens anchored in the "4 A's" framework of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Despite constitutional guarantees and policy commitments, widespread inequities, poor learning outcomes, weak governance, and underfunding persist. The paper argues for a paradigm shift that legally operationalizes the right to quality education and links it to enforceable standards and performance outcomes. The paper's recommendations include increasing and equitably allocating education funding, reforming teacher training and welfare, revising the curriculum to focus on foundational and life skills, strengthening data-driven governance and accountability, and integrating inclusive, technology-enabled strategies for hard-to-reach learners. The conclusion emphasizes that realizing the right to education is not merely a legal formality but a transformative imperative for sustainable development, national cohesion, and the attainment of SDG-4. Nigeria's success in reversing learning poverty will have profound implications for regional stability and global educational equity.

Keywords: Learning poverty, Rights-based education, Nigeria, Basic education reform, SDG-4

Introduction

In the 21st century, the promise of universal basic education is increasingly under threat not for lack of global commitment, but due to widening inequalities, weak policy enforcement, and persistent learning

deprivation. At the heart of this crisis is a troubling phenomenon known as learning poverty defined as the inability of a 10-year-old to read and understand a simple text (World Bank & UNESCO, 2023). This concept shifts the focus from mere school attendance to the quality and depth of learning, making it a pivotal benchmark for evaluating educational outcomes and human development potential. As of 2023, seven out of ten children in low- and middle-income countries are classified as learning poor, a significant deterioration from pre-pandemic levels (World Bank & UNESCO, 2023). This growing crisis is not just a statistical concern it represents a violation of children's fundamental right to education and knowledge.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the situation is particularly grim. The region is home to over 98 million out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth, accounting for 40% of the global total (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2023). Among these, Nigeria stands out not only as Africa's largest democracy and most populous nation but also as the country with the highest number of out-of-school children in the world approximately 20.2 million as of 2023 (UNICEF, 2023). More than a demographic crisis, this reflects deep-seated policy and governance failures that have undermined the Universal Basic Education (UBE) system since its formal establishment in 1999 and legal codification in the UBE Act of 2004.

Basic education refers to the early foundational levels of schooling usually covering six years of primary and three years of junior secondary education. It is globally recognized as a cornerstone for lifelong learning, civic participation, and socio-economic mobility. The international community, through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), has committed to ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all" by the year 2030 (UNESCO, 2021). However, achieving SDG-4 requires that countries not only expand access to schools but also ensure that learning actually occurs in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. In Nigeria, the National Learning Assessment (2022) revealed that only 28% of Primary 4 pupils were able to read at grade level, and less than 40% demonstrated minimum proficiency in basic numeracy (FME & UNICEF, 2022). These statistics reflect more than a skills gap; they represent a silent emergency of lost futures.

Compounding this crisis are entrenched regional, gender, and socio-economic disparities. Northern Nigeria, in particular, faces a volatile mix of insecurity, cultural barriers, poverty, and poor infrastructure, which severely limits educational access and outcomes especially for girls and children in conflict-affected communities (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Uwezo Nigeria, 2023). Despite successive policy reforms, including the Safe Schools Initiative, the Almajiri Education Programmeme, and UBEC interventions, structural challenges such as underfunding, poor teacher quality, weak

monitoring, and fragmented implementation continue to undermine results.

In this context, the rights-based approach becomes a vital analytical lens. Rooted in international human rights instruments including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child this framework views education not merely as a service to be delivered, but as a legally enforceable and ethically grounded right that must be guaranteed to every child, regardless of geography, gender, or income level. A rights-based review interrogates whether Nigerian policies are truly inclusive, participatory, accountable, and aligned with principles of equity and justice.

The relevance of this paper is therefore self-evident. As Nigeria enters a new phase of national development planning and education reform debates intensify, there is a critical need to revisit and rethink the assumptions, strategies, and institutional architectures underpinning the country's basic education framework. More than ever, Nigeria's future depends on whether its children can learn, thrive, and compete in a fast-changing global knowledge economy.

Defining and Measuring Learning Poverty

The concept of learning poverty, introduced jointly by the World Bank and UNESCO in 2019, encapsulates the percentage of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10, a pivotal age when children are expected to transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (World Bank, 2022). It has since evolved into a multidimensional indicator that not only captures basic literacy and numeracy shortfalls but also reflects broader system failures in foundational education delivery. According to the latest estimates, 70% of children in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are learning-poor, while the rate in Sub-Saharan Africa stands at a staggering 89% (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2022). The key indicators used to measure learning poverty include age-specific reading proficiency (often measured through tools such as EGRA – Early Grade Reading Assessment), school enrollment data, grade progression, and completion rates. Data is sourced from large-scale national learning assessments, household surveys (e.g., MICS by UNICEF), regional assessments (e.g., PASEC, SACMEQ), and administrative records compiled and harmonized by organizations like the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), UNICEF, and the World Bank Learning Poverty Database.

Crucially, learning poverty extends beyond mere illiteracy. It is inherently multidimensional encompassing both literacy and numeracy deficits, and implicating children's ability to acquire higher-order thinking skills critical for 21st-century life and work. For instance, the inability to decode basic words in early primary grades severely undermines later comprehension of abstract texts and weakens cognitive development, resulting in compounded learning gaps over time (Kaffenberger & Pritchett, 2021). The failure to develop foundational skills translates into

diminished human capital returns, severely curtails productivity, and entrenches intergenerational cycles of poverty. In effect, children born into disadvantaged settings remain trapped in poverty not only economically, but cognitively and socially.

Global Trends and Vulnerable Populations

The global landscape of learning poverty is shaped by a complex interplay of systemic, structural, and shock-related factors. In recent years, three critical global stressors armed conflict, climate change, and public health crises have intensified existing disparities and undermined learning continuity for millions of children. Armed conflicts, particularly in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, Middle East, and parts of South Asia, have destroyed schools, displaced learners, and disrupted teacher deployment. According to UNICEF (2023), over 222 million children globally are currently affected by crises that obstruct sustained access to quality education. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the crisis. At the height of school closures, more than 1.6 billion learners were affected worldwide (UNESCO, 2021). In LMICs, learning losses amounted to an estimated 0.3 to 0.9 years of schooling, with the most marginalized students facing the brunt of the disruption due to lack of digital infrastructure and supportive learning environments at home (World Bank, 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, pandemic-era school closures and under-resourced remote learning programmes likely reversed hard-won gains in primary education, with millions failing to return to school post-pandemic.

The burden of learning poverty is not evenly distributed. Vulnerable populations especially girls, children with disabilities, rural learners, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and children living in poverty are disproportionately excluded from quality learning opportunities. For example, girls in conflict zones are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys, while 90% of children with disabilities in LMICs are estimated to be out of school entirely (UNESCO, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Even when enrolled, these groups often face discriminatory curricula, inaccessible facilities, undertrained teachers, and socio-cultural barriers that reinforce exclusion.

Nigeria offers a concentrated microcosm of this global crisis. As both a contributor and casualty of learning poverty, it hosts the largest population of out-of-school children globally and faces structural deficits in literacy, equity, and teacher preparedness. More than 70% of Nigerian primary school children do not achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics, despite formal schooling (World Bank, 2023). Vulnerabilities are sharply gendered and regional, with the northern states marked by insecurity, early marriage, and low female literacy recording the worst outcomes. Children displaced by insurgencies, rural nomadic populations, and pupils with special learning needs remain excluded from mainstream policy responses. These realities

highlight that learning poverty in Nigeria is both a national education emergency and a global development concern.

A Paradox of Scale: Population and Economy versus Learning Crisis

Nigeria presents a profound paradox in the discourse on learning poverty. As Africa's most populous nation estimated at over 223 million people and its largest economy with a GDP of approximately $477 billion in 2023 (World Bank, 2024), Nigeria commands significant geopolitical and economic influence. Yet, it simultaneously harbors one of the world's most acute education crises. The country accounts for the highest number of out-of-school children globally, with UNICEF (2023) estimating over 10.2 million children aged 6–14 out of school. Even among those enrolled, learning outcomes remain critically low. The 2022 World Bank/UNICEF Nigeria Learning Assessment revealed that less than 25% of Grade 6 pupils could read at a second-grade level, while only about 20% could solve basic numeracy problems (World Bank, 2023). This mirrors the broader Sub-Saharan trend but is especially disheartening given Nigeria's relative wealth and investment capacity. The prevalence of learning poverty in Nigeria is estimated at 70%, matching the average for low-income countries and far exceeding what would be expected for its level of development (UNESCO, 2023).

Ambitions versus Reality: The Universal Basic Education Policy

Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy, launched in 1999 and backed by the UBE Act of 2004, was a bold commitment to ensure free and compulsory basic education for all children. It sought to boost enrollment, reduce gender disparity, and promote literacy as a driver of national development. The establishment of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and introduction of matching grants for states were designed to operationalize the policy at scale. However, the results have been disappointing. Despite nearly two decades of UBE implementation, systemic challenges persist: chronic underfunding, teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and governance inefficiencies undermine the policy's intent (Adedeji & Oluwadare, 2023). Moreover, poor monitoring and limited accountability mechanisms allow inefficiencies to persist unchecked. Many schools, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas, lack basic amenities like classrooms, textbooks, and qualified teachers. Consequently, the UBE framework remains more aspirational than transformational, falling short in producing measurable learning gains.

Out-of-School Children: Regional and Gendered Realities

Nigeria continues to grapple with the world's highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC), a phenomenon that underscores the deep-rooted crisis in access to basic education. As of 2023, an estimated 10.2 million Nigerian children aged 6–14 were out of school (UNICEF, 2023). This figure has remained persistently high over the last decade despite policy interventions under the Universal Basic Education (UBE)

framework. A deeper examination reveals stark regional disparities: The North-East and North-West geopolitical zones account for nearly 70% of the total OOSC population (UBEC, 2023). These regions are disproportionately affected by insecurity, insurgency, and socio-cultural norms that devalue formal schooling especially for girls.

Gender disparities are particularly glaring. In the North-East, for example, over 60% of girls aged 6–15 have never attended school, compared to 39% of boys in the same age group (UNICEF, 2023). Early marriage, religious conservatism, and armed conflict especially with the Boko Haram insurgency have disrupted school access for millions of children. Additionally, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and children in rural or nomadic communities often lack physical access to schools, with over 50% of IDP children out of formal education in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022).

Learning Outcomes Deficits: Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Beyond access, the most distressing dimension of Nigeria's education crisis is the low level of actual learning among those enrolled. Foundational skills in literacy and numeracy remain grossly deficient. The World Bank's (2023) Nigeria Learning Assessment reveals that less than 25% of Grade 6 pupils can read a Grade 2-level text, while only about 20% demonstrate proficiency in basic arithmetic operations. Data from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) conducted across states such as Kano, Lagos, and Ebonyi indicate that only 14–30% of pupils meet minimum reading benchmarks by Primary 3 (RTI International, 2022). In some rural areas, particularly in the North, nearly 70% of pupils in Primary 4 are unable to read a single word of a simple passage in English or any Nigerian language (UBEC, 2023). These deficits in early literacy and numeracy accumulate over time, creating a learning crisis that extends well into secondary school and beyond.

Equity Gaps: Who Gets Left Behind?

Educational access and quality in Nigeria are profoundly shaped by socio-economic status, geography, gender, and disability reflecting systemic inequities that entrench learning poverty. Children from the poorest quintile of households are nearly five times more likely to be out of school than those from the wealthiest (World Bank, 2022). These inequalities are compounded by urban-rural divides: while 86% of urban children complete primary education, the figure drops to 45% in rural areas (UNESCO, 2023). Children with disabilities face a double burden of exclusion. According to Human Rights Watch (2021), over 90% of children with disabilities in Nigeria are not enrolled in school, often due to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive learning devices, and inadequate teacher training on inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, language of instruction policies and the absence of mother-tongue-based education for minority language groups further disadvantage millions of children in linguistically diverse regions.

Girls remain one of the most vulnerable demographics. Although national enrolment gaps have narrowed, gender parity masks significant subnational inequalities. In Sokoto and Yobe States, for instance, only 1 in 4 girls completes primary school (UNICEF, 2023). The combined impact of poverty, insecurity, harmful cultural norms, and lack of menstrual hygiene facilities leads to high dropout rates among adolescent girls.

SDG-4 Performance: A Failing Trajectory

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. However, Nigeria's current trajectory suggests a high risk of failure to achieve nearly all SDG 4 targets, particularly Target 4.1, which aims for all children to complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education with relevant learning outcomes. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), Nigeria is off-track on 8 of the 10 SDG 4 benchmarks, including completion rates, learning proficiency, gender parity, and trained teacher availability. Alarmingly, less than 40% of public primary school teachers meet the minimum qualification standards set by the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), contributing to persistently low instructional quality (Adedeji & Olanrewaju, 2023). Furthermore, inadequate public education financing Nigeria spends only 1.9% of its GDP on education, well below the 4–6% recommended by UNESCO continues to hinder progress toward SDG 4 (World Bank, 2024). Unless urgent reforms are undertaken addressing both the quantity and quality dimensions of education, Nigeria's learning crisis will continue to threaten its human capital development and render the SDG-4 agenda unattainable.

Nigeria's Basic Education Policy: Intentions vs. Realities

Nigeria's commitment to basic education is firmly articulated within its national policy and legal architecture. The 1999 Constitution, though placing education under the non-justiciable socio-economic rights in Chapter II, obligates the state under Section 18 to "eradicate illiteracy" and provide free and compulsory universal primary education. Further reinforcing this is the Child Rights Act of 2003, which domesticated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and guarantees every Nigerian child the right to free, compulsory, and quality basic education (UNICEF, 2022).

The cornerstone of Nigeria's modern basic education framework is the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004. This Act mandates nine years of uninterrupted, free, and compulsory education for all children of school age, covering six years of primary and three years of junior secondary education. It aims to improve access, reduce disparities, and enhance quality and equity in learning outcomes. The Act established the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), tasked with coordinating implementation and managing the UBE Intervention Fund financed by 2% of Nigeria's Consolidated Revenue Fund. However, states must provide

50% counterpart funding to access these federal grants, a condition that continues to hinder fund utilization, particularly in poorer states (UBEC, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Nigeria's policy aspirations are also aligned with international legal instruments. The country has ratified key global agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), all of which emphasize education as a fundamental human right. More recently, Nigeria reaffirmed its commitment through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (UNESCO, 2023).

Despite these robust legal and policy commitments, glaring implementation gaps persist. One of the most critical is inadequate funding. Nigeria consistently allocates less than 7% of its annual national budget to the education sector, far below the UNESCO benchmark of 15–20% (UNESCO, 2023; BudgIT, 2024). Moreover, the release and use of allocated funds are often mired in delays, opacity, and inefficiency. A 2023 report by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) revealed widespread misappropriation and underutilization of basic education funds across several states, undermining service delivery (ICPC, 2023).

The teacher crisis further intensifies the situation. Nigeria faces a national shortage of over 277,000 qualified teachers at the basic level, with rural and conflict-affected areas the most underserved (UBEC, 2023). Many existing teachers lack proper pedagogical training, and issues such as poor remuneration, irregular salary payments, and lack of professional development opportunities have led to widespread absenteeism and low morale (ActionAid Nigeria, 2022). The national pupil-teacher ratio in public primary schools stands at 1:46, exceeding the optimal threshold and compromising instructional effectiveness (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022).

The state of school infrastructure also reflects systemic neglect. According to the UBEC National Personnel Audit (2022), over 50% of public basic education schools in Nigeria lack access to clean water, functional toilets, and electricity. Many schools are overcrowded and dilapidated, with insufficient seating, blackboards, or instructional materials. These harsh learning environments discourage attendance and constrain learning, particularly for girls and children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2023). Another fundamental issue is curriculum quality and relevance. Nigeria's basic education curriculum remains largely rote-oriented, emphasizing memorization over critical thinking, creativity, and life skills (Adedeji & Oluwadare, 2023). It often fails to reflect local languages, socio-economic contexts, or the needs of diverse learners. Moreover, insufficient investment in curriculum reform, digital content, and

innovative pedagogies has stalled educational transformation in a world rapidly evolving through technology (OECD, 2022).

Governance and accountability deficits also persist at all levels of the education system. Poor coordination among federal, state, and local actors results in fragmented implementation. Corruption in teacher recruitment, procurement, and school project execution remains widespread (Transparency International, 2023). Data management is weak; many states lack reliable, disaggregated data on enrollment, learning outcomes, or infrastructure needs, making evidence-based policymaking difficult (NBS, 2023). Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are either non-functional or poorly institutionalized.

Compounding these systemic challenges is the growing **insecurity** in many regions of the country. The activities of Boko Haram in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, and farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt have led to the destruction of over 1,500 schools and the displacement of thousands of teachers and learners (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Girls are disproportionately affected, as families increasingly withdraw them from school due to fears of abduction. The situation in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps is no better; less than 40% of school-age children in camps have access to formal learning, and most of the makeshift schools lack trained teachers, learning materials, or proper classrooms (UNHCR, 2023).

Deconstructing the Deficits through the 4 A's Framework

A robust understanding of the right to education in Nigeria demands a critical application of the "4 A's" Framework-availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability as developed by Katarina Tomaševski, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education. This framework remains central to assessing the extent to which the Nigerian government has fulfilled its human rights obligations in delivering quality, equitable, and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021).

Availability

in this study, availability entails the presence of sufficient educational institutions, trained teachers, learning materials, and physical infrastructure. In Nigeria, stark deficiencies persist in this dimension, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. According to the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2023), over 50% of public primary schools lack functional classrooms, toilets, or potable water, while many are dilapidated and overcrowded. The National Personnel Audit (NPA) revealed a shortage of over 277,000 qualified teachers in basic education schools nationwide (UBEC, 2019). These deficits are more acute in the North-East and North-West regions, which are simultaneously grappling with high rates of out-of-school children and insecurity. Such shortfalls constitute a direct violation of the state's obligation to make education physically and adequately available, particularly to marginalized populations (World Bank, 2022).

Accessibility

Despite the legal guarantees of free and compulsory basic education under the UBE Act (2004), education in Nigeria remains far from universally accessible. Hidden costs including levies for uniforms, textbooks, examinations, and school maintenance disproportionately affect poor families and contradict the principle of cost-free education (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Furthermore, geographic barriers in remote regions, compounded by insecurity and internal displacement, restrict physical access to schools. Girls in Northern Nigeria face cultural and economic constraints, leading to disproportionately high dropout rates (UNICEF, 2022). Likewise, children with disabilities encounter systemic exclusion due to the absence of inclusive facilities and trained support staff. These realities signify a failure to uphold non-discriminatory access to education and to remove structural, economic, and social barriers, contrary to international norms articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006).

Acceptability

The principle of acceptability demands that education be of quality, relevant, and delivered in safe and respectful environments. Unfortunately, Nigeria's basic education system faces a persistent quality crisis. Foundational literacy and numeracy remain weak, with data from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) showing that over 70% of Grade 4 pupils cannot read a simple sentence or solve basic arithmetic problems (USAID, 2021). The widespread use of rote learning, poor teacher training, and an outdated curriculum that fails to promote critical thinking have undermined learner engagement and performance (Adedeji & Olanrewaju, 2023). In many schools, learners are exposed to environments marred by corporal punishment, sexual violence, and psychological abuse, particularly in informal schools and overcrowded urban centres (UNESCO, 2022). This violates the right of the child to receive education that is respectful of their dignity, culturally relevant, and safe.

Adaptability

in this study, adaptability refers to the responsiveness of the education system to the evolving needs of learners and society. Nigeria's basic education policy largely lacks the flexibility to accommodate vulnerable groups such as nomadic children, Almajiri pupils, children in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, and children with learning disabilities. For instance, despite the existence of Nomadic Education and Almajiri School Initiatives, these remain poorly funded, under-resourced, and inadequately integrated into mainstream education (FME, 2023). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the system's unpreparedness to provide remote or alternative learning options, leading to massive learning losses, especially among rural and disadvantaged children (UNICEF & World Bank, 2021). The inability to

dynamically adapt to emergency contexts or provide tailored pedagogy and materials for diverse learners constitutes a major breach of the adaptability component of the right to education.

Accountability and Redress

Central to a rights-based framework is the notion of accountability. However, Nigeria's education governance suffers from a weak culture of accountability and limited access to legal or institutional remedies for rights violations. Mechanisms to monitor educational delivery, evaluate school effectiveness, and penalize non-performance at federal, state, and local levels are either absent or ineffectively enforced. Parents and communities often have little knowledge of their rights or the capacity to demand educational justice (Global Campaign for Education, 2022). Corruption, political interference, and weak data systems further erode transparency and undermine trust in public education (Transparency International, 2022). Without enforceable accountability structures or functional grievance mechanisms, rights violations persist with impunity, undermining the constitutional and international legal obligations Nigeria has committed to.

Pathways to Rethinking Policy: Towards a Robust Rights-Based Framework

Addressing Nigeria's deep-seated learning crisis requires more than incremental policy tweaks it necessitates a transformative, rights-based rethinking of education policy anchored in the legal obligations of the state and the entitlements of all children. A rights-based framework must move beyond rhetoric to redefine policy through enforceable standards, strategic investments, inclusion, and accountability.

First, Nigeria must reaffirm its commitment to education as a justiciable right rather than a charitable service. This implies moving the "right to education" from aspirational policy language to legally enforceable provisions embedded in national law, with clear performance benchmarks aligned with the 4 'A's framework-Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Adaptability (Tomasevski, 2006; UNESCO, 2023). The Federal Government should institutionalize independent oversight bodies empowered to monitor compliance and provide accessible redress mechanisms for children whose right to education has been violated (UNICEF, 2021a).

Strategic and equitable public investment is central to realising these commitments. Nigeria must substantially increase its education financing to align with the international benchmark of 15–20% of the national budget (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2023). However, funding must not only be adequate but also transparent and targeted. Prioritising foundational learning for disadvantaged children particularly in conflict-affected and marginalised regions is essential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and educational deprivation (World Bank, 2022). Where Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are adopted, they must be tightly regulated to prevent the commodification of education

and ensure compliance with equity and quality standards (Right to Education Initiative, 2020).

Addressing the chronic teacher crisis in Nigeria requires a paradigm shift from mere recruitment drives to comprehensive professionalisation. This includes instituting rigorous pre-service and continuous in-service teacher training focused on inclusive, child-centred pedagogies and 21st-century skills. Teachers must be motivated through competitive remuneration, timely salary payments, opportunities for professional growth, and a conducive working environment (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). Additionally, robust frameworks for teacher performance, accountability, and support should be established to combat absenteeism and inefficiency, especially in underserved communities.

Curriculum reform must place foundational literacy and numeracy at the core of early-grade education while expanding to include critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, digital literacy, and life skills aligned with global learning competencies (Brookings Institution, 2023). Rote learning should be replaced with learner-centred instructional approaches that connect knowledge to real-life contexts. Moreover, assessment systems must evolve from high-stakes examinations to formative and diagnostic assessments that inform instruction and policy in real time (UNESCO, 2022).

Governance, accountability, and data systems represent another critical front. Education delivery should be decentralised to empower local authorities and School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs), supported by adequate training and resources. Transparency mechanisms, including periodic audits, anti-corruption frameworks, and the publication of disaggregated education data, are essential for rebuilding public trust and ensuring effective service delivery (BudgIT, 2023). The revitalisation of Nigeria's Education Management Information System (EMIS) is urgent to support data-driven policy formulation, monitoring, and evaluation (World Bank, 2022).

To uphold equity, Nigeria must institutionalise gender-responsive education strategies. This involves dismantling structural barriers to girls' education through scholarships, safe school environments, and menstrual hygiene management. Inclusion must also extend to children with disabilities, requiring investment in assistive technologies, adapted learning materials, accessible infrastructure, and specially trained teachers (UNICEF, 2021b). Furthermore, the state must integrate education-in-emergencies policies to provide uninterrupted learning for children in conflict-affected and displacement settings, as well as culturally relevant, flexible education pathways for hard-to-reach populations such as nomadic, Almajiri, and out-of-school children (INEE, 2022).

Finally, digital transformation offers a powerful lever for expanding access and improving quality. Appropriate, inclusive,

and locally adaptable educational technologies (EdTech) should be scaled to bridge learning gaps, support teacher training, and provide open digital content for underserved learners (Adedeji & Oluwadare, 2023). However, digital equity must remain central in addressing the digital divide through infrastructure, electricity, and device access in rural and low-income areas is imperative.

Conclusion

Nigeria's basic education sector remains ensnared in a paradox: while the country has made laudable constitutional and policy commitments to guarantee every child's right to quality education, learning poverty continues to erode this promise. According to the World Bank and UNESCO (2022), over 70 percent of children in Nigeria are unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten, a staggering indictment of systemic failure. This reality underscores the urgency for a comprehensive rights-based reorientation of Nigeria's basic education policy, one that goes beyond infrastructure provision or enrollment drives to uphold the substantive content of the right to education. This paper has systematically deconstructed the implementation failures of Nigeria's Universal Basic Education framework through the 4 A's lens of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. In each dimension, the system falls short: there are not enough trained teachers or schools in underserved regions; hidden fees and insecurity obstruct access; pedagogy remains rooted in rote memorization rather than meaningful learning; and education systems are ill-equipped to respond to the diverse and evolving needs of learners, especially the most vulnerable (UNICEF, 2023; Global Education Monitoring Report [GEM], 2022). These failures amount not just to administrative shortcomings, but to violations of children's rights.

A paradigm shift is therefore imperative. Reimagining basic education through a rights-based lens entails not only the reaffirmation of legal commitments but also the operationalization of enforceable standards, equity-driven financing, pedagogical innovation, and strong accountability mechanisms (Ohito & Yusuf, 2021). Education must no longer be viewed as a charitable service but as a binding state obligation central to human dignity, economic resilience, and democratic development. The stakes are high. Nigeria's inability to effectively tackle learning poverty risks undermining the continent's broader development agenda and derailing global efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2023). Conversely, success in this endeavor will yield immense dividends for national stability, regional integration, and global progress. Ultimately, fulfilling the right to education is not merely about compliance with domestic or international law it is about unlocking human capabilities, fostering inclusive growth, and laying the foundation for a just and prosperous society. Nigeria must act now, decisively and deliberately, to transform its policy frameworks from

aspirational texts into instruments of real empowerment.

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