



## Is Nigeria on track to achieving quality education for all? Drivers and implications

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### Abstract

This study examines the dimensions and drivers of exclusion in basic education in Nigeria using the Demographic Health Surveys of 2008 and 2013. It also maps the synergies and trade-offs between education and other relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and assesses global systemic issues that are relevant to achieving quality education goals in the Nigerian context. The measure of quality education is constructed following Pritchett and Sandefur's approach (2017). The study finds that only 24% of Nigerians aged 15–24 with primary education have competent literacy skills.

Further, the findings show disparities across gender, with 19% of females able to read a complete sentence compared to 32% for males; region, with the south (27%) performing better than the north (22%); and locality, as 31% of youth in urban areas meet the literacy benchmark compared to 21% in rural areas. Analysis of synergies and trade-offs reveals that achieving quality education reinforces efforts to end poverty (SDG 1), good health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), and access to decent work (SDG 8). Among the dominant global systemic issues influencing quality education outcomes in Nigeria, both technology and foreign aid have the potential to enhance the delivery of quality education. However, technology could also widen existing gaps in exclusion depending on the existence and effectiveness of pro-poor public policies.

**Keywords:** Quality education, Sustainable Development Goals, Leave No One Behind, Nigeria, global systemic issues.

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## Introduction

Quality education is a key enabler for sustainable growth and development. The 2030 Agenda rightly recognises this with SDG 4. Despite the importance accorded to education, Nigeria's educational performance is abysmally low in terms of quality and quantity. Poor educational outcomes are illustrated by the existence of more than 10.5 million out-of-school children in 2018, which is the highest number globally (Adekunle, 2018). On the quality side, educational performance is even more worrisome. According to the World Economic Forum (2017), Nigeria ranks 124th out of 137 countries in terms of the quality of primary education.

To achieve the ambitious targets set by SDG 4, it is essential to understand the status and conditions of quality education in Nigeria. This study examines the facets and critical drivers of exclusion in quality education at the primary level of education in Nigeria. It specifically draws on three areas of analysis: facets and drivers of exclusion in quality education, synergies and trade-offs between education and other SDGs, and the influence of global systemic issues on the quality of education. These are crucial to understanding the extent to which individuals and groups are left behind and the role of national and global actors in designing appropriate policy interventions.

The first component of the research focuses on the identification of groups that are excluded from quality education and the drivers of that exclusion. At present, there is a lack of evidence about those who are not getting a quality education in Nigeria, due to the absence of disaggregated data on learning outcomes. Therefore, a starting point for this study is to generate a measure of quality education based on available household data. Following Pritchett and Sandefur's methodology (2017), we use the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) to construct a quality measure based on the cohort of youth (15–24 years old) that have completed primary education and can read a short statement about everyday life. The study goes further to identify the sections of the population that have low learning outcomes and the drivers of poor education quality.

The second component of the research examines the overall interconnection between SDG 4 and certain other goals (SDGs 1, 3, 5, 8, 13 and 16). Understanding possible synergies and trade-offs between these SDGs might help shape policy direction in terms of setting priorities or eliminating redundancy. Synergies imply that achieving a goal is indirectly linked to improved outcomes in other areas, thereby assisting policymakers to avoid duplicating efforts and saving resources. On the other hand, trade-offs point to conflicting goals and, therefore, highlight areas for policy reprioritisation.

The third component of the study delves into key global systemic issues and how they influence the quality of education in Nigeria.

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A major innovation in the SDG implementation process is the emergence of crucial means of implementations in tandem with the goals. For SDG 4, finance, teacher training and technology have been identified as main enablers, with a major role for global actors. Mapping out the connections between positive and negative global systemic issues and education performance in Nigeria will indicate the key policy gaps and the critical role for multilateral institutions in delivering an inclusive and quality education for all.

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the dimensions of exclusion from quality education as well as the key drivers in the Nigerian context.
- To examine the intersectionality among the SDGs and identify areas of synergies and trade-offs between SDG 4 and other goals.
- To appraise the key global systemic issues affecting education in Nigeria and explore the state and adequacy of various means of implementation to meet the SDG target on quality education.

### Box 1. SDG progress in Nigeria

Nigeria has undertaken several measures to ensure that the SDGs are achieved. The government deliberately integrated the SDGs into its current development agenda, the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan 2017–2020 that aims at improving the economy as well as investing in human capital. In addition, the Office of the Senior Special Adviser to the President on SDGs leads the execution of the goals as well as the integration of the global agenda into national development policies. Recent efforts have also been made to enhance domestic financing sources through improvements in tax collection. The government launched the Voluntary Assets and Income Declaration Scheme, which offers amnesty to tax defaulters willing to meet their tax obligations.

Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, & Fuller (2018) show that Nigeria is not currently on track to achieve the SDGs, with the country accounting for 19% of the global gap to meeting SDG 1 (End Poverty). With regards to SDG 4 (Quality Education), Nigeria has the largest number of out-of-school children globally. Several gaps remain as the SDGs have not been mainstreamed into sectoral and sub-national development plans. For instance, the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004, which is the main legal framework for the basic education system, has not been reviewed to ensure compliance with the SDGs. Further, there is a large funding gap that could hinder the implementation of the SDGs. According to estimates from UNESCO in 2015, Nigeria will require between USD 58 and USD 96 billion annually to implement the SDGs. The federal budget in 2018 amounts to USD 25 billion, leaving a financing gap of between USD 33 and USD 71 billion annually, assuming the budget finances mainly SDG-related sectors. Lastly, there should be more opportunities for the involvement of other stakeholders, including academia and think tanks, for the provision of data and technical assistance, and the private sector for the provision of finance.

## Research methodology and results

Understanding who among youth are left behind and why when it comes to accessing quality education in Nigeria requires a disaggregated analysis of educational performance. However, drawing on specific aspects of educational achievement to measure has been conceptually challenging, given the multidimensional nature of quality education, which encompasses educational inputs, processes and outcomes. In this regard, the study focuses on outcome-based measures of quality education based on the global indicator 4.1.1. While the outcome-based measures are best constructed with internationally comparative assessments such as PISA or TIMSS,<sup>2</sup> these are not available for Nigeria. To address these gaps, Pritchett and Sandefur (2017) and Oye, Pritchett, & Sandefur (2016) suggest an innovative approach to constructing such an outcome-based measure of quality education using the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS), available in Nigeria. Following their approach, a quality education indicator was constructed for this study using the 2008 and 2013 DHS, from the proportion of the youth population between 15 and 24 years old, who have completed primary education and acquired basic literacy skills.

Based on the quality measure developed, quantitative techniques were applied to identify the specific groups with the least attainment in quality education. Different exclusion criteria that literature suggested as important in the Nigerian context were explicitly examined. A binary regression analysis was used to estimate cross-group differences and identify key aspects of exclusion. For example, while there might be differences in sub-group performance, the sub-group with statistically less significant educational attainment at 5% was considered as being currently left behind. Taking cognisance of the limitations in survey data in identifying all possible facets of exclusion, the analysis of Leave No One Behind (LNOB) was complemented with stakeholder interviews.

The framework used by Nilsson, Chisholm, Griggs, Howden-Chapman, McCollum, Messerli, P. & Stafford-Smith (2018) and the International Council for Science (ICSU, 2017) was adopted for the analysis of synergies and trade-offs between SDG 4 and other goals. The framework provides a systemic approach for identifying causality and intersectionality, which could point to areas of coherence or conflict among various SDGs. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1, and it involves categorisation of interactions between goals on a seven-point cardinal scale. Positive interactions are assigned scores of +1 (if "enabling"), +2 (if "reinforcing") or +3 (if "indivisible"), while interactions characterised by trade-offs are scored with -1 ("constraining"), -2 ("counteracting"), or -3 ("cancelling"); neutral interactions between SDGs are assigned 0. The scores were assigned through an extensive qualitative peer-review by the CSEA research team. The analysis focuses on interactions between SDG 4 and SDGs 1, 3, 5, 8, 13 and 16.

<sup>2</sup> PISA refers to The Programme for International Student Assessment, while TIMSS refers to Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. They are both international assessments of educational systems and students' knowledge around the world.

Figure 1. Seven types of interactions between SDG targets

### Interaction labels and meanings



Source: Nilsson et al. (2016)

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To analyse the global systemic issues affecting educational performance in Nigeria, a conceptual framework was developed highlighting important global issues identified in the existing literature and through expert interviews, their implication for education outcomes at the national and sub-national levels, and the transmission mechanisms through which their effect propagates within the education system. The analysis focused on three systemic concerns: technology, arms proliferation, and development finance.

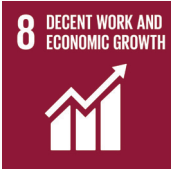


Results show that gender, location of residence, and region are the main dimensions of exclusion. For instance, only 19% of females can read a complete sentence compared to 32% for males. Across regions, the south-east has the highest number of primary school leavers with literacy competency at 36%, followed by the south-west (24%), north-west (24%), south-south (21%), north-central (23%), and north-east (20%). On average, educational performance is slightly better in the south than in the north. Concerning the location of residence, 31% of the youth in the urban areas with primary education

meet the literacy benchmark, compared to 21% for rural areas. On aggregate, only 24% of Nigerians aged 15–24 with primary education have competent literacy skills. Furthermore, the stakeholder engagement elicited additional groups that are excluded but not identified in the quantitative analysis due to data limitations. These are nomadic groups, disabled people, Almajiri students and internally displaced children.

Analysis of synergies and trade-offs reveals that achieving quality education reinforces and is inseparable from other SDGs in Nigeria (Table 1). We found no instance in which SDG 4 constrained, counteracted, or cancelled other goals. For example, literate females are less likely to be poor, more likely to access health care facilities for pre- and post-natal care, and are more likely to be employed. Also, a more literate population results in a reduction in sexual violence against women. In addition, people who are more educated tend not only to be more concerned about the environment, but also to engage in activism that promotes and supports political decisions that protect the environment. Equally important, quality education aids adaption to the consequences of climate change.

**Table 1. Interactions between quality education and other SDGs and targets**

| SDG   | Target category  | Direction | Interactions identified   | Score |
|---|--|-----------|---|-------|
|  | Eradicate extreme poverty for all (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4) | 1 → 4     | Progress on the quality of education is indivisible from poverty reduction insofar as at low levels of income, rising incomes inevitably lead to better quality of education.   | +3    |
|  | Better health (2.1, 2.2, 2.3)                          | 4 → 3     | Higher level of education for mothers reduces the rate of infant mortality in Nigeria. Education provides mothers with knowledge on the appropriate nutrition and care for their infant.  | +2    |
|  | Women safety and worth (5.1, 5.2, 5.4)                 | 4 → 5     | Improving the quality of education is fundamental to improving women's rights in society. Education provides women with the knowledge, information and control they need to fend for themselves in their family and in society. | +3    |

|   |   |        |  |    |
|---|---|--------|--|----|
|  | Innovation and growth (8.1, 8.2, 8.4)               | 4 → 8  | The quality of education influences the level of knowledge spillovers and entrepreneurship. This helps in boosting international competitiveness and attracts foreign direct investment. | +2 |
|  | Climate strategies and education (13.1, 13.2, 13.3) | 4 → 13 | Education is a primary process through which individuals are provided with skills and knowledge that equip them to mitigate the impacts and adapt to the consequences of climate change. | +2 |
|  | Peace, justice and institutions (16.1, 16.2, 16.3)  | 4 → 16 | Education fosters peace and stability in a society by equipping individuals with the knowledge and developing attitudes, skills and behaviour that enhance oneness.                      | +2 |

Elaborated by the authors.



**Failure to implement pro-poor public policy will undermine the effectiveness of technology in improving education for all.**

With regards to global systemic issues, the study found that technology has the potential to enhance the delivery of quality of education, but could also widen existing gaps in access and thus contribute to exclusion. Fundamentally, policy responses will influence the role of technology in achieving quality education. In Nigeria, failure to implement pro-poor public policy will undermine the effectiveness of technology in improving education for all. On financing, there are gaps between what is required to meet SDG 4 and what is available. Between 2015 and 2030, it is estimated that about US\$34 billion will be needed annually to achieve SDG 4 targets relating to early childhood, primary and secondary education (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). However, Nigeria's total federal budget for 2018 is USD 25 billion, with education accounting for only 7% of this amount (Budget Office of the Federation, 2018). This highlights an important role for global actors to step up their engagement in delivering quality education. Lastly, violent conflicts such as those orchestrated by the Boko Haram terrorist group in recent years have negatively affected educational outcomes in Nigeria due to their effect on displaced children and education systems. However, violent conflict is facilitated by arms proliferation among non-state actors and illicit trade through international criminal networks. Again, these trends suggest another entry point for global actors to step in and ensure no one is left behind in accessing quality education in Nigeria.



## Conclusions and implications

Findings on leaving no one behind indicate that there is a regional disparity in education quality in Nigeria. However, the quality gap observed at the regional level is much lower than the gaps in quantity (enrolment) reported in the literature. This implies several things. First, the small differences in quality across region reinforce the point that education quality is broadly low in Nigeria, irrespective of the region. Second, from DHS estimates, median years of schooling in the north is zero and six years in the south. Most of those with at least six years of schooling in the north come from middle-income to rich households. This implies that children from poor households, which make up the majority in northern Nigeria, are not in school and therefore excluded from the studied population. In essence, while the quality of education in the south is low, the north faces a deficit in both quantity and quality.

Women are another group identified as being excluded from quality education in Nigeria. We found cultural factors to be the key driver for the exclusion of women; in particular, the age of sexual debut is a proxy to capture the effect of early marriage and courtship. This shows that harmful cultural practices and covert discrimination, since girls have no choice on the age at which they get married, are making girl children drop out of school and excluding them from quality education.

The last excluded group identified is that of children in rural areas. The weak performance of rural residents can be explained by the wealth gap, lack of economic opportunities, and lack of access to good social and economic infrastructure. These conditions then translate into poor learning environments and teacher absenteeism, since the majority of teachers prefer to live in urban centres.

On synergies and trade-offs, positive interactions exist between SDG 4 and other SDGs. This implies that efforts to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education in Nigeria should be to the benefit of a broader sustainable development agenda. From a practical perspective, one relevant deduction is that policymakers must take action towards creating an enabling environment that fosters integrated and holistic thinking towards meeting the SDGs in Nigeria. There is a need for policymakers to go beyond the simple acknowledgement of the mere existence of SDG interactions to mobilising additional resources, implementing new laws, and planning and evaluating methodologies that promote a broader sustainable development agenda. With respect to educational policy, in particular, there is a need to carefully design and select policy instruments, so that the effects on other sustainability dimensions are as intended (e.g. policies on improving the quality of education should not be allowed to drive up the cost of education for the poor). Also, the promotion of policy coherence and an integrated assessment is fundamental to addressing potential policy spillovers across sustainability domains and sectors. To this end, policymakers are tasked to ensure that institutions engage in inclusive practices and formulate policies that promote an integrated approach to the 2030 Agenda.



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**Nigeria needs to encourage global partnerships and motivate global actions as far as achieving SDG 4 is concerned.**

Technology, development assistance, and arms proliferation have been identified as the global systemic issues that affect local efforts towards achieving the SDGs in Nigeria. The impact of technology-enabled resources and infrastructure on quality of education is dependent on the existence of pro-poor public policy. Specifically, already vulnerable groups, including poor and rural residents, may be further left behind if necessary measures are not present to allow them access to technology-enabled educational resources and infrastructure. In addition, curtailing the underlying enabler of violent conflict—arms proliferation—that leads to displacement of people is of particular relevance for Nigeria's efforts towards achieving quality education goals. Therefore, the issue of arms proliferation requires urgent and collaborative efforts to control the menace and check its enablers, such as illicit financial flows. As international stakeholders partner to develop a robust strategy for containing and reducing the threat of illegal financial flow and arms proliferation so that no one is left behind, development assistance, specifically finance and technical assistance, is also required from them. Development assistance is instrumental in developing countries' efforts at improving standards and narrowing rates of exclusion from quality education.

Overall, the disaggregation of data and findings reveals that there are interlinkages between various facets of exclusion as well as interactions between SDG 4 and the other SDGs. This means that aspects of exclusion cannot be treated as mutually exclusive. Some individuals may suffer multiple dimensions of exclusion. Therefore, policy interventions should not target a single dimension, but consider all aspects of exclusion to be effective. Also, in the attainment of equitable, quality education in Nigeria, an integrated and holistic approach is fundamental to achieving a broader sustainable development agenda. Nigeria needs to encourage global partnerships and motivate global actions as far as achieving SDG 4 is concerned. Specifically, more local and donor resources are needed to get Nigeria on track to ensuring quality education for all.

## Recommendations

Going forward, the following specific policy recommendations will be crucial to delivering SDG 4 in Nigeria:

*Actionable intervention to priority groups.* Based on the various facets of exclusion identified, the priority group will depend on the number of vulnerability criteria an individual falls into. For example, women in rural areas and from northern Nigeria will constitute a priority group. Interventions will need to focus on schools and communities. At the school level, adequate funding to the education sector, provision of gender-friendly school facilities, and the deployment of qualified teachers who are incentivised to stay within affected community areas will be crucial policy interventions. At the community level,

providing adequate infrastructural facilities and improving economic opportunities in rural and northern Nigeria will be essential. Also, educating communities on harmful cultural practices and customs that affect education development within their areas will be another important intervention. Key influencers such as community and religious leaders could play a significant role in this.

*Actionable response to state institutions.* Building the capacity of SDG-related government agencies such as the Office of the Senior Special Adviser to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDG) so that they are more active at the sub-national level and participate in formulating education policies is critical to ensure that SDG 4 is wholly integrated into development plans. Also, incentivising collaborations between OSSAP-SDG and other institutions with the core mandate of promoting basic education is key to achieving policy coherence.

Considering the global systemic issues affecting education quality in Nigeria, national and international efforts should concentrate on:

- Technology
  - The government should complement the deployment of education technology with appropriate pro-poor public policies. Specifically, this needs to target those groups (like rural dwellers) that have been identified as at risk of being left behind in quality education in Nigeria. Infrastructure and workforce to ensure effective use of these resources must also be provided.
  - Global education stakeholders should work towards creating alliances that lower the barriers to accessing relevant educational resources that are currently protected under intellectual property rights. This effort can take a cue from the global public health architecture that delivers high-tech health interventions at low or no cost to beneficiaries worldwide.
- Arms proliferation
  - Arms proliferation is an enabler of violent conflict. Underlying motivations for violence, such as poverty and ethnic clashes, have to be squarely addressed by the Nigerian government, possibly with support from the international community.
  - There is a need for enhanced efforts by states and multilateral agencies to work collaboratively to curb the proliferation of arms through better accounting of the arms trade as well as through the control of illicit arms trade enablers, such as illicit financial flows and porous borders.
- Foreign aid
  - It is necessary to put concessionary financing for low- and middle-income countries, especially for the social sectors, back on the global agenda. Initiatives already exist that are gaining momentum, such as the International Finance Facility for Education, but these need the buy-in of global actors, especially donor countries.

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The 'State of the SDGs' is a conceptually innovative, policy relevant empirical research initiative. The initiative unpacks some of the critical relationships underpinning the 2030 Agenda. The aim is to identify those who are 'left behind' within diverse contextual realities, to reveal the complex relationship of trade-offs and synergies among specific SDGs, and to explore the global governance factors affecting implementation within a country.

Southern Voice is grateful for contributions from the Think Tank Initiative and the Hewlett Foundation in support of this work.

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