

Article

# Household Poverty, Educational Inequality and School Participation in Nigeria: Evaluating the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals 1 And 4, 2015–2024

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**Abstract:** This paper studied Nigeria's household poverty, educational inequality and school participation and assessed the progress of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 and 4 for the country from 2015 to 2024. This study was prompted by Nigeria's formal commitment to the 2030 Agenda amidst the persistence of multidimensional poverty, unequal educational opportunity, high out-of-school rate and weak learning outcome. A qualitative research design was used as only secondary evidence from the National Bureau of Statistics, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and International Labour Organization and official Nigerian SDG reports and peer reviewed studies were used. Content and thematic analysis were used in the interpretation of the data. The guiding questions were: Is household poverty a direct and opportunity cost to school participation? Does educational inequality amplify the poverty-school participation dynamic through spatial, gender, socioeconomic and institutional disparities? Does SDG 1 and SDG 4 implementation make a partial contribution, but is insufficiently integrated? The results indicate that 28.7 percent of children between six and 15 years of age were out of school and 27.0 per cent were both poor and out of school. Exclusion is further heightened by child labour, the rural nature of residence, insecurity, low spending on education and a lack of access to learning. The paper argues that Nigeria will need to implement integrated social protection, more equitable financing of education, interventions at the local level, and more robust accountability mechanisms to link household welfare to attendance, retention, and completion of education and learning outcomes, for SDGs 1 and 4 to be achieved.

**Keywords:** household poverty, educational inequality, school participation, Sustainable Development Goal 1, Sustainable Development Goal 4, Nigeria

## Introduction

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted, which made poverty eradication and inclusive quality education mutually reinforcing development priorities. Sustainable Development Goal 1 is to end poverty in all its forms, and SDG 4 is about ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all [1]. This linkage

between both objectives is especially significant in Nigeria as household economic conditions affect the enrolment, attendance, and retention and progression of children in schools while education affects future productivity, employability, and intergenerational mobility. The poverty situation in Nigeria is still large. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, about 63 per cent of Nigerians, which is about 133 million people are multidimensionally poor. The country's SDG country profile also reveals that multidimensional poverty rose from 53.7 per cent in 2017 to 62.9 per cent in 2021 [2]. These conditions directly impact the ability of households to afford transport, uniforms, books, meals and other expenses in nominally free education.

A second and close challenge is educational inequality. This is reflected in differences in access and participation by household wealth, geopolitical zone, rural or urban residence, gender, disability, insecurity, and school availability and quality. Kazeem, Jensen and Stokes showed that socioeconomic differences in the school attendance of Nigerian girls and boys were significantly greater than gender differences and that family wealth and parental education levels were the strongest predictors of school attendance. It is more recent evidence that this inequality has remained. UNICEF found 10.2 million children in primary school who were out-of-school and 8.1 million in junior-secondary school, and about 74 per cent of 7- to 14-year-old children were not able to read or do basic mathematics. According to Nwoke, household economic conditions, insecurity, geopolitical differences and public education expenditure all drive the out-of-school phenomenon. Therefore, the participation of the school should be measured, not only at the time of the enrolment, but also in terms of the regular attendance, retention, progression, completion and meaningful learning of the students.

In the period 2015–2024, Nigeria has adopted a number of policies, such as the implementation of the Universal Basic Education framework, national social investment programmes, school feeding, cash transfers, interventions in girls education and mainstreaming of SDGs in national development plans. The 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) in Nigeria clearly highlighted the relationship between poverty, education and employment, as well as inadequate investment in education and significant out-of-school issues [3]. A subsequent independent assessment of SDG 4 saw progress on teacher certification and stakeholder collaboration but persisting limitations on teacher quality, teaching materials and capacity [4]. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics is also showing that national SDG 4 targets are not progressing fast enough. The results do raise questions as to whether policy initiatives have been coordinated sufficiently to tackle the household and institutional factors that drive educational exclusion.

The issue is thus one of disconnection between formal policies of poverty reduction and the inclusion of education and the persistent focus of poverty in the exclusion of children from school. National Bureau of Statistics revealed that 28.7 per cent of children aged 6–15 were out of school and 27.0 per cent of these were poor and out of school. Another dimension is added through child labour data. When analyzing the school attendance rates of children ages 6–14 who were not in child labour, the NBS and ILO revealed that 81.4 per cent of children were attending school while only 75.1 per cent of children in child labour attended school. This indicates that there is competition between household livelihood strategies and schooling. Moreover, poor learning outcomes limit the potential gains from school attendance and insecurity has led to school closures and a disruption of participation in affected states. It is therefore also a challenge of a multidimensional nature and one that cannot be addressed by school expansion alone.

The study is a review of SDGs 1 and 4 in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024, interrogating the relationships between house hold poverty and school participation and educational inequality. It interrogates whether poverty reduction and education policies have been integrated enough, whether changes observed reflect substantive progress and how the spatial and socioeconomic inequalities

affect national outcomes. The paper is important because sector-by-sector evaluation may mask the modes of reproduction of disadvantage. A household might access a public school but it still is unable to maintain a school attendance due to transportation transportation expenses, food insecurity, and child labour. On the other hand, social protection can have a positive impact on household consumption levels without delivering educational benefits if schools are unsafe, inaccessible, and/or poor quality. The study bridges the two goals together and offers therefore a more comprehensive instrument to assess Nigeria's progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

### **Household Poverty**

Household poverty is a lack of control over the resources and capabilities needed to lead an acceptable life. Current poverty studies do not just measure income, but also include multiple deprivations in education, health, housing, employment, sanitation, nutrition and security. Sen views poverty as incapacity to do and invites the focus to become what people and households actually do with the resources they have. In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics used multiple dimensions of poverty and determined that the level of overlapping poverty was 63 per cent. Poverty has direct effects on education in terms of spending limitations, and indirect effects in terms of opportunity costs. Households may still pay for uniforms, books, transportation, food and exams, even if tuition is not actually paid for. According to Nwoke, inflation, unemployment and the high cost of living may cause poor households to choose to live above board rather than education. Poverty may affect both access to and retention in school, therefore.

### **Educational Inequality**

Educational inequality refers to inequalities in access, resources, participation, learning and completion that are systemic. Inequalities in Nigeria run concurrently as geographic, socioeconomic and gendered. Kazeem et al. discovered that poor children had significantly lower attendance in schools compared to their wealthier counterparts, and that both factors of household wealth and parental education had a significant impact on attendance. Similarly, Ojuolape and Mohd, in examining children's schooling in Kwara State, also found access, cost, parental employment and parental educational attainment as significant factors relating to enrolment. These earlier results have been echoed by contemporary national evidence, including a high proportion of out-of-school children [5] and significant foundational learning gaps [6], as well as high levels of exclusion throughout the education system [7]. Educational inequality is thus more than the availability of a school place. It relates to whether children of different social status face similar attendance, progression and learning. Poor education quality can re-create poverty by curbing the economic potential of already disadvantaged students.

### **School Participation**

School participation encompasses enrolment, regular attendance, retention, progression and completion. It depends on the demand for education within the household, as well as the availability, quality and accessibility of education. The National Bureau of Statistics and ILO show the correlation between reduced attendance and child labour, serving as a good example of the livelihood pressures that compete with education. Nwoke further reveals insecurity, economic conditions in the homes, unemployment, and public spending as other factors that affect Nigeria out of school challenge. Hence, the participation in school is dynamic, children can be enrolled and then attend the school irregularly, repeat grades or withdraw. Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicate that rates of exclusion are higher at higher education levels, implying that the risk of exclusion compounded both by direct and opportunity costs. It is important to include, therefore, whether children stay in the education system long enough to learn essential skills and progress through each stage of the system as a measure of SDG 4, rather than just looking at how many are enrolled in education.

### **Sustainable Development Goal 1 and 4**

The SDG1 and SDG4 are in fact separately institutionalized but substantively interdependent. There is a strong connection between SDG 1 (extreme and multidimensional poverty, vulnerability, social protection and access to economic resources) and SDG 4 (equitable access, completion, learning, skills and educational facilities) [8]. In Nigeria's 2020 Voluntary National Review, the interaction between poverty, education, employment and regional disparities was clearly acknowledged as an aspect of the out-of-school challenge. Another way of showing the interlinkage is through the use of school attendance and years of schooling in multidimensional poverty measurement as shown by the National Bureau of Statistics. It is suggested that in households that are still economically weaker, education policy alone cannot stop exclusion. Conversely, absence of sustainable mobility in the absence of quality educational opportunities for children is a poverty reduction issue. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Nigeria's current education expenditure is inadequate for providing universal high-quality education and the IMF predicted that a significant amount of additional funds would be needed to achieve SDG 4. Therefore integrated implementation is vital to the realization of both goals.

### **Empirical Review**

Evidence from empirical studies is consistent that socioeconomic status affects the participation of schools in Nigeria. With data from a national survey, Kazeem et al. discovered that children in rich households were much more likely to attend school than children in poor households and that the distance to school was more of a constraint for poor and rural children. Findings are relevant despite the study unfolding before the SDGs as it highlights structural inequalities that were anticipated to be tackled by the SDG policy commitments. Similar findings were obtained by Ojuolape and Mohd in Kwara State, where access, the cost of schooling, parental employment and parental education were found to be significant contributors to child schooling. These results contradict the arguments that argue that non-participation is mostly due to cultural preferences—the opposite is true, household resources and institutional accessibility are central.

In recent years, there has been national evidence to reinforce the poverty-participation argument. According to the 2022 National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 16.60 million children aged 6-15 were out of school while 15.62 million children aged 6-15 were in poverty and out of school. The National Bureau of Statistics and International Labour Organization also revealed that participation of children in child labour was negatively associated with attendance and that the attendance rate of rural children in child labour was lower compared to those who did not participate in child labour. Based on critical review of the out-of-school phenomenon, Nwoke (2024) posits that household economy, unemployment, insecurity, geopolitical disparities and public education spending collectively impact educational access. This cross-over of survey findings and academic research suggests that educational non-enrolment is a result of multiple constraining elements on the household and institutional levels.

Monitoring progress towards SDG 4 is also mixed. According to the independent SDG 4 evaluation in Nigeria, evidence of policy and institutional success, such as teacher certification and partnerships with stakeholders, remained but was also characterized by ongoing gaps in instructional quality and the availability of teaching materials [9]. The International Monetary Fund [10] contended that Nigeria's funding of education was not commensurable with its demographic burden and infrastructure requirements. Despite the efforts of many systems including those in Africa, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicates that countries across the world, including Nigeria, are lagging behind on national education targets and Nigeria has high out-of-school rates. UNICEF brings in insecurity, as it reports attacks and school closures in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. Overall,

the literature shows some policy developments but not enough change in the structural conditions that shape participation.

Another empirical issue relates to the distinction between participation and learning. UNICEF estimates that about three-quarters of children in Nigeria ages 7–14 are having trouble with basic literacy or numeracy, meaning that going to school does not ensure educational capability. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also reported low learning outcomes compared to countries. Low quality learning can affect household decisions; when families see the quality of schooling as low, the opportunity cost of continuing may seem less attractive, particularly for adolescents who can work or apprentice. So poverty impacts on schooling; and the quality of schooling can influence the household demand. Empirical evidence in the literature thus suggests a reciprocating interpretation whereby poverty, inequality, participation and learning mutually strengthen each other.

#### The Theoretical Framework: Capability Approach

The study draws on Sen's Capability Approach that assesses development by people's substantive freedoms to be and to do, and not only by income [11]. Education is an inherent asset and a means to increase future economic, social and political opportunities. Poverty on the other hand, limits the formal rights and available resources to actual opportunities. If a household cannot afford food, transport, security, learning materials and if they can't free a child from income generating duties, then it does not matter if the public school is free or not. Likewise, the educational inequality is a result of unequal conversion factors: the same policy may have different effects in rural versus urban regions, for the rich versus the poor, or for communities facing security threats versus those that were not. The framework thus has a validity to evaluate SDG 1 and 4 collectively, as it asks if the policy implementation increases the children's actual freedom to enrol, attend school, learn, progress and complete school.

There are good links between poverty and educational disadvantage and school exclusion in the literature reviewed, but there are significant gaps. First, many of the studies conducted in Nigeria focus on poverty or on out-of-school children or on child labour or on financing education, but the SDG framework needs to consider interdependence. Secondly, previous studies on the national level regarding attendance are of a descriptive nature and do not assess the era of SDG implementation (post-). Thirdly, recent studies including Nwoke and Ojuolape and Mohd shed light on the out-of-school problem but do not systematically assess the combined implementation of SDGs 1 and 4 for the 2015–2024 period. Fourth, indicators often provided in policy reports reflect national indicators and do not adequately link to household level mechanisms, like labour allocation, vulnerability and opportunity costs. Lastly, enrolment is often preferred over the much larger spectrum of attendance, retention, completion (and learning). This paper fills these gaps by combining official statistics, implementation evaluations and scholarly evidence in a thematic assessment of the two SDGs and by employing various types of graphical evidence to question the propositions.

#### Propositions

Proposition 1: In Nigeria, poverty in the family poses a significant limitation on school attendance because of the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of education.

Proposition 2: Educational inequality serves as a mediator and reinforcer of the influence of household poverty on school participation across the region, socioeconomic, gender and institutional dimensions.

Proposition 3: Progress towards universal school attendance was constrained by poor poverty reduction and educational inclusion integration in the SDGs implementation between 2015 and 2024.

## Methodology

The research approach used was qualitative in examining household poverty, educational inequality and school participation in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024 in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 4. Qualitative approach was deemed suitable since the research aimed to interpret the evidence and policy outcomes and pattern of educational participation instead of the production of primary quantitative data. It also allowed for the systematic analysis of the associations between socioeconomic factors in the household and educational outcomes over the course of the study.

**Sources of Data:** Secondary data was only used and were sourced from credible institutional and academic sources. These were reports and datasets from the National Bureau of Statistics, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UNICEF, International Labour Organization, World Bank, United Nations and other relevant Nigerian SDG institutions. Empirical and theoretical evidence was also found in the peer-reviewed journal articles that were consulted. The materials were selected based on the following criteria: relevance of materials to poverty, school participation, educational inequality, child labour, learning outcomes and implementation of SDGs 1 and 4.

**Pictorial Evidence:** Pictorial evidence was found from verified statistics in the secondary sources selected. Key patterns related to household poverty, child labour, school attendance and educational inequality were presented using various types of graphical presentations such as pie charts, line graphs and bar charts. The figures were not presented as separate entities but were incorporated into the Results and Discussions under the proposition where they supported the argument. The figures were numbered and labelled appropriately, sourced and then interpreted in the discussion.

**Method of Analysis:** Content and thematic analysis were used in the study. Documentary evidence relevant to the study was examined by content analysis and information pertaining to the major variables of the study were determined. Thematic analysis was then used to group the evidence under the three propositions. Household poverty and school participation, educational inequality and differentiated exclusion, and SDGs 1 and 4 implementation were the major themes. The evidence from various sources was analysed for convergence and variation and emerging patterns.

**Trustworthiness of the Study:** Source triangulation was used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Information from national institutions and from international organisations and peer-reviewed academic studies was compared. Specific focus was placed on the date, definition, and how statistics were measured that were reported. If different organisations gave different estimates then such differences were accepted and not interpreted as equivalent measurements. This process helped to validate the interpretations and to minimize the use of only one institution or one publication as sources for evidence.

**Limitations of the Method:** This study was completely based on secondary data. Some indicators could not be compared directly due to variations in the data-collection period, definitions, population coverage and estimation procedures. Household experiences were also not directly examined because of the lack of primary interviews. However, the evidence from the use of multiple credible institutional data and scholarly studies were adequate for identifying trends and assessing the implementation of SDGs 1 and 4 in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024.

## Results and Discussions

### Proposition 1: Household Poverty Significantly Constrains School Participation

There is strong evidence in favor of the first proposition. Even when basic education is provided free of charge, household poverty impacts school participation through a series of direct,

indirect and opportunity costs. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that there were 57.8 million school-going children aged 6-15 in Nigeria with 28.7 per cent of them out of school. What is more important is that 27.0 per cent of the same population were also multidimensionally poor and out of school. The nearness of the percentages is of analytical significance, as nearly all of the measured out-of-school population in this age group was found in poor households. Nwoke also posits that inflation, unemployment, and high cost of living drive families who are struggling with their finances to focus on food and other basic survival measures than on education. Ojuolape and Mohd identified that the employment status of parents and the economic status of the household affects the enrolment status of children, thereby showing that availability of formal schools does not reduce the barriers on the demand side.

School Participation among Nigerian Children Aged 6-15

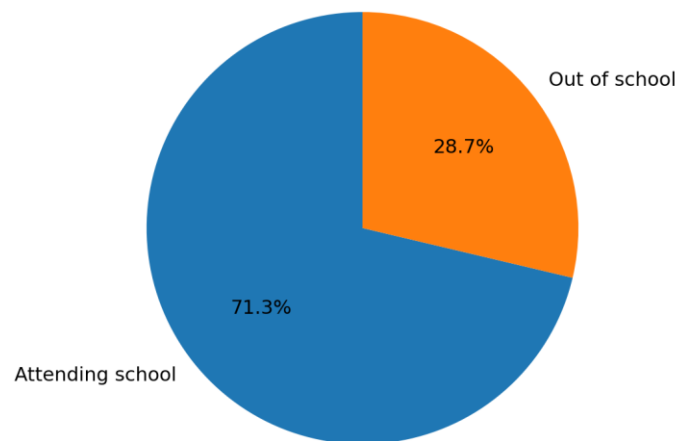


**Figure 1.** School Participation among Nigerian Children Aged 6-15

*Source: Author's visualisation based on National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index.*

The structure of the school participation in age group 6 to 15 is displayed as a part to whole relationship in Figure 1. The out-of-school share of 28.7 per cent is over one-quarter of all school-age children, and so cannot be considered as a residual or fringe within a universal system. The combination of the MPI results showing 27.0 per cent of all school-age children were poor and outside of school, sheds light on the disproportionate nature of exclusion in the multidimensionally deprived households. The visual evidence contributes to the proposition since it shows that the lack of participation is coupled with high levels of poverty in households. It further warns that SDG 4 cannot be assessed in isolation from SDG 1 – a school-place strategy which does not consider household purchasing power and food security and livelihood vulnerability, will not necessarily translate into sustained school attendance.

The linkages between poverty and participation are manifested in the daily school expenses. It can be a significant burden for households with irregular income or food and housing costs to cover uniforms, footwear, exercise books, transportation, levies and expenditure related to examinations. Sen's Capability Approach can provide some understanding of the above phenomenon, which is nominally free education does not necessarily provide for real educational freedom. What is important is that it is not whether or not there is a public school, but whether the child has the actual ability to access it on a sustained basis. If a family has to decide between sending children to school and feeding the family, they have limited options. There is evidence of one of the most severe levels

of deprivation across the country, both in terms of the dimensions of poverty and its geographical distribution, in the World Bank poverty analysis and also in its own multi-dimensional poverty analysis [12]. Thus, a modest level of education expenditures could in fact be unaffordable, given the household's available resources.

Opportunity costs are also key, especially when children get older. Children can provide support to poor families through work in agriculture, small scale trading, domestic labour, caring for younger children, family businesses or paid labour. This trade-off is reflected in the 2022 Nigeria Child Labour Survey. According to National Bureau of Statistics and International Labour Organization, 81.4 per cent of children aged 6-14, who were not in child labour attended school compared to 75.1 per cent of those who were in child labour. But the gap is not merely a statistical association; it's a reflection of the competition between household livelihood strategies and the time and energy that children need to be educated. Nwoke also places the issue of child labour in the overall socioeconomic crisis of out-of-school children. Household survival is reliant on children's economic contribution, the long-term benefits of education are discounted against consumption needs.

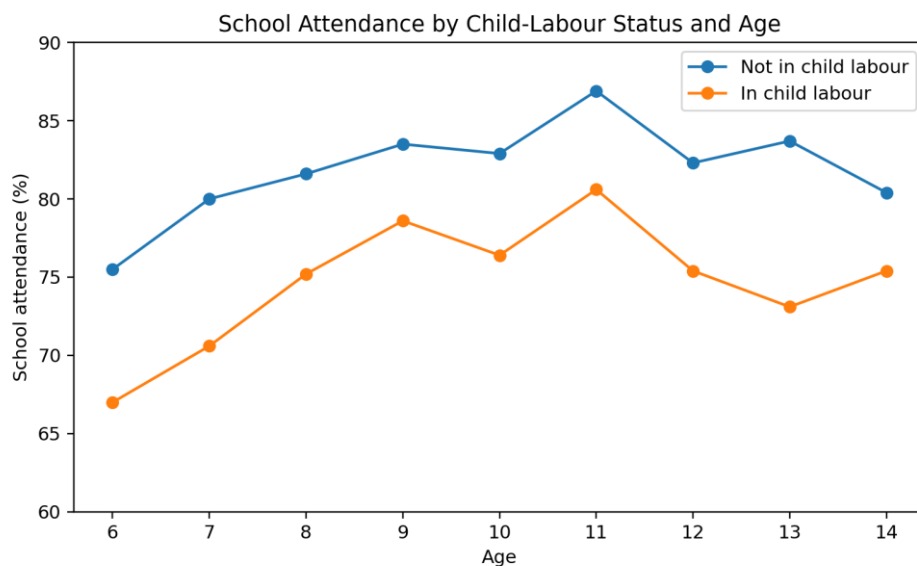


**Figure 2.** School Attendance by Child-Labour Status and Age, Nigeria

*Source: Author's visualisation based on National Bureau of Statistics and International Labour Organization (2023), Nigeria Child Labour and Forced Labour Survey 2022.*

Figure 2 shows the age-specific (6-14) association between labour and participation. From all of the ages presented, the attendance of children in child labour was lower compared to that of children not in child labour. The difference was particularly noticeable for children aged six (75.5 per cent for non-child labour and 67.0 per cent for children in child labour) and at age thirteen (83.7 per cent for children not in child labour and 73.1 per cent for those in child labour). The continued gradient in age-sequence supports the notion that the labour demands do not only impact one transition point, but the labour demands systematically compete with schooling. The figure also illustrates the importance of paying attention to household income security and implementation of child labour standards as part of an education policy that is sensitive to poverty.

The evidence on child labour further elaborates on the interdependence of SDG1 and SDG 4. Poverty reduction policies may influence the shadow price of children's time, in that it may be possible to make families less reliant on the earnings or unpaid work of children. On the other hand, if social protection is not adequate, then it is possible that education interventions have difficulties

maintaining participation after a successful enrolment drive. This policy interconnection was reflected in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Nigeria in 2020, which included out-of-school children as a concern that transcends poverty, employment and education [13]. However, the continued presence of multidimensional poverty implies that the magnitude and scope of interventions to protect against the pressures faced by households was insufficient in many parts of 2015–2024. This is especially crucial in times of economic crisis when there is a risk that inflation and unemployment, or food insecurity, can lead to an opportunity cost of school attendance, which can trigger non-attendance or dropout by the kids who were already enrolled.

The results thus challenge limited views of non-participation as due to lack of parental interest. Household choices are made in a limited economic setting. Ojuolape and Mohd reported that parental education level is an influencing factor, but highlighted employment, access and cost. Kazeem et al also found that the effect of household wealth on attendance was particularly strong, and that distance to school had a greater impact on the attendance of poor children. The connection from the older and newer evidence is important: in terms of the socio-economic structure of educational exclusion, this is still recognisable despite the expansion of policy. Hence the first proposition is accepted. Household poverty limits participation not in one way, but in multiple ways through both financial and labor costs, vulnerability to shocks, and/or lower ability to absorb the costs of ongoing schooling and parental employment conditions.

### **Proposition 2: Educational Inequality Mediates and Intensifies Poverty Effects**

The second proposition is also approved. Poverty does not play out in an uniform educational landscape, but it is exacerbated and/or mitigated by factors such as place of living, infrastructure of the area, gender relations, distance of school, insecurity and quality of available educational provision. Kazeem et al. discovered that being poor and living in rural areas both had a negative effect on school attendance, with poorer children suffering a greater disadvantage from longer trips to school. UNICEF still considers geography, poverty and gender important aspects of educational marginalisation over a decade later. Similarly, Nwoke states that geopolitical differences are at the heart of the out-of-school challenge in Nigeria. These findings suggest that overall national averages can mask widely divergent educational opportunity structures within families and localities.

Household poverty and weak educational supply often have an overlap and a rurality is a particularly important mediator. Rural areas can lack quality teachers, as well as strong electricity connections and digital connectivity, have less schools, longer distances to travel, and fewer transportation options. These factors make participation more expensive. A poor household in the urban area can be under extreme financial pressure, while still being near several schools, while a poor rural household can be under similar financial pressure and have to add extra time and transport costs. Kazeem et al indicated that geography of education is a greater challenge for the poor and rural children. Ojuolape and Mohd also suggest an increase in the provision of schools in or close to rural communities. Educational inequality thus acts as a multiplier: poverty limits resources and weak local provision boosts the amount of resources needed to access.

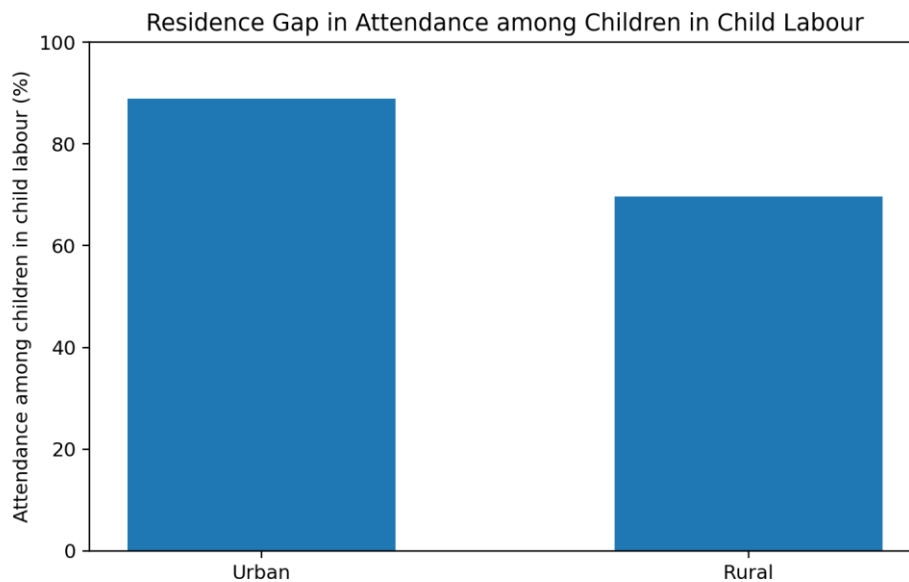


**Figure 3.** Residence Gap in School Attendance among Children Engaged in Child Labour

*Source: Author's visualisation based on National Bureau of Statistics and International Labour Organization (2023), Nigeria Child Labour and Forced Labour Survey 2022.*

The relationship between labour status and place is shown in figure 3. Of the children aged 6-14 who were in child labour, 88.9 per cent of children living in urban areas attended school while only 69.7 per cent children living in rural areas attended school. The gap of 19.2 percentage points is sizeable and suggests that the impact of child labour on education is not the same everywhere. Rural children may face a double disadvantage when they are burdened with the pressure of labour, have less access to school and live in a poor household. This is crucial for the second proposition as it offers direct evidence of the spatial context as a mediator in the relationship between economic vulnerability and participation. Thus, unless such national interventions consider the higher effective costs for rural households, uniform interventions are not likely to yield uniform results.

The situation is complicated by regional inequality. Nigeria's 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) highlighted significant inequalities in educational outcomes and made an explicit connection between out-of-school and poverty and regionality [14]. UNICEF further states that insecurity as a potent regional mechanism, with attacks on education and related insecurity causing 113 schools to be closed in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. In such situations, problem is not only that the poor families do not have the money for school, but the institutional provision of safe education is also jeopardized. Household poverty then may become relevant to displacement, loss of livelihoods and greater distances to alternate schools. Nwoke mentions Security as one of the main reasons for the existence of out-of-school population. Therefore, in conflict regions, poverty-sensitive policy not taken into account of school safety and conflict vulnerability will have limited effectiveness.

Gender is another dimension of inequality, but inequalities of gender are not independent of those of wealth and geography. Kazeem et al. reported that there was a significant gender difference in attendance, but that socioeconomic differences were more important. UNICEF's evidence in education shows that the level of female participation is weak in some areas of North-East and North-West where poverty and restrictive social factors can overlap (UNICEF, n.d.). This does not mean a similar impact of poverty, rurality and locality norms on gender at the national level; it means that the impact of poverty, rurality and locality norms on gender is particularly pronounced. Policy implication: When designing interventions for girls' education, don't frame them as sensitisation campaigns only! Household economic support, safe schools, accessible sanitation, proximity, and

community engagement are all things that they need. Formal equality of entitlement is not enough in a Capability Approach context if conversion factors vary systematically by gender and location [15].

There is also an issue about the quality of learning which relates to education inequality. According to UNICEF, only about 74 per cent of children in the age group 7-14 years in Nigeria could read and write basic English words and had a basic reading proficiency. Similarly, the International Monetary Fund indicated that poor learning outcomes and inadequate educational resources were among the key limitations to Nigeria's human-capital development. The effects of poverty can be exacerbated by low quality in at least two ways. Firstly, if public schools are under-resourced, poor families don't have as many options as wealthier families, who can choose to send their children to private schools, hire tutors, buy books, and pay for online learning. Secondly, low learning outcomes may lower the perceived return to school, particularly when considering opportunities for work or apprenticeship for adolescents. Inequality in quality can therefore be a source of inequality in participation, by making it less worth their while for households to keep children in school.

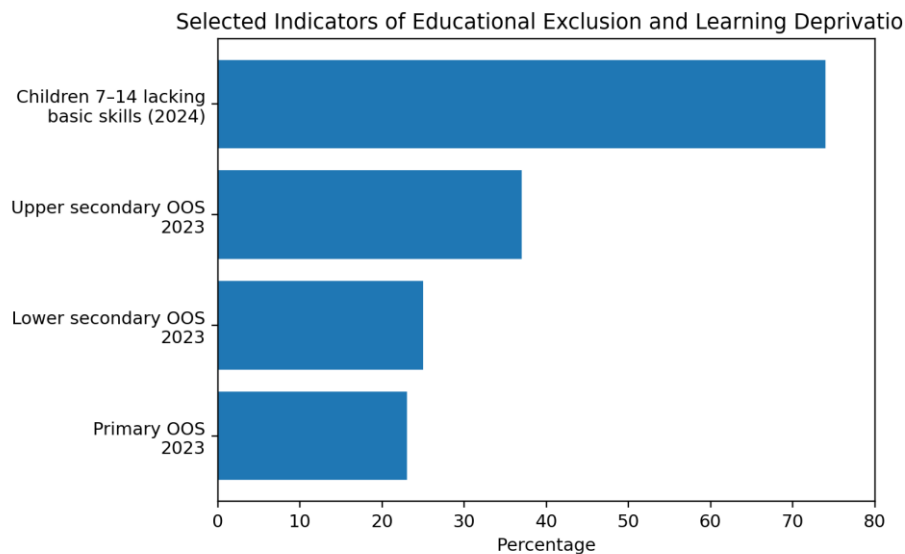


**Figure 4.** Selected Indicators of Educational Exclusion and Learning Deprivation

*Source: Author's visualisation based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025) and UNICEF (2024a).*

Figure 4 compares some of these indicators to differentiate between physical exclusion and learning deprivation. Modelled out-of-school rates are still significant at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels and the reported proportion of children aged 7-14 who are unable to read or write basic text and who do not have basic numeracy skills is significantly higher. While the indicators are based on different measurement systems and cannot be directly added, their juxtaposition is analytically useful. It shows that there are two aspects to educational inequality: children not going to school, and children who go to school but who do not learn basic skills. This second layer is particularly pertinent to poor households, who may be less able to make private payments to cover poor school quality. This figure thus reflects a multidimensional approach to educational inequality, as opposed to an enrolment-only approach.

Hence, the second proposition is accepted. Educational inequality plays a partial role in poverty as it is mediated by the unequal distribution of schools, teachers, safety, infrastructure and learning quality. It also exacerbates poverty levels due to rural-urban differentials in costs and differential ability to pay for alternatives to school attendance. This discovery is significant in terms of implementing SDG 4. Equity can not be achieved by equal per-capita allocation if the starting conditions are significantly unequal. There is a need for disadvantaged regions to be compensated with financing and context-specific interventions to overcome the greater barriers. The independent

assessment of SDG 4 for Nigeria revealed that progress and institutional capacity were different in the states that contributed to the evaluation as case studies, underscoring the need for subnational implementation [16]. Without intentional policy action to narrow spatial and socioeconomic disparities and their implications for poverty to school out-of-school measures, national progress will therefore remain limited.

### **Proposition 3: SDG 1 and SDG 4 Implementation Produced Partial but Insufficiently Integrated Progress**

There is significant support for the third proposition from evidence. After 2015, Nigeria has set the SDGs as part of national development discourse, institutional mechanisms, plans and programmes have been set up to implement the SDGs. Fed. Rep. of Nigeria in the country's Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2020 identified poverty and education as priority goals for the nation and noted that the two objectives work hand in hand. The Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs also prepared an implementation plan for 2020- 2030 and had an independent evaluation of SDG 4. These measures reflect the policy commitment and institutionalisation. But institutional adoption is not outcome attainment. This failure to reach scale and integration in implementation during the period under review is reflected in the persistence of multidimensional poverty, high levels of out of school children and regional inequality and learning deprivation.

Continuing size and level of multidimensional poverty is the most significant evidence for SDG 1. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, 133 million Nigerians were multidimensionally poor while the United Nations Statistics Division reports an increase in headcount from 53.7 per cent in 2017 to 62.9 per cent in 2021. While there are factors to consider due to the differences between the various measurements, and the economic and social circumstances of the extraordinary COVID-19 season, the evidence does not indicate that poverty is quickly being eliminated. School attendance is one of the dimensions of poverty, so the continued deprivation of the poor sets up a vicious circle: poor households have less access to school and poor school conditions make it harder for the poor to have access to better schooling in the future. This circularity illustrates why income or consumption indicators are not sufficient to measure SDG 1.

There is evidence of partial progress and persistent exclusion with regards to SDG4. The continuing out-of-school rates at primary and secondary school levels are reported by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (\) and, more generally, countries are off track with respect to national education benchmarks. UNICEF estimates that there are 10.2 million children of primary school going age (PSGA) and 8.1 million junior-secondary going age (JSGA) out of school. These discrepancies are due to variations in how ages are defined, the sources and methodology of estimation, but suggest the same underlying point: exclusion rates are still quite high. Furthermore, the 2025 SDG 4 Scorecard showed an increase in the estimates for out-of-school, highlighting the need for better population and education data [17]. This strengthens the point that single point estimates should be interpreted with caution and to pay attention to consistent monitoring in Nigeria.

Education financing is a limiting factor to implementation quality. Nigeria's VNR 2020 noted that Nigeria's education expenditure was low compared to the needs. The International Monetary Fund estimated that significantly higher spending on education is needed to enhance enrolment, infrastructure, class sizes and teachers' pay, and bring it closer to the SDG. The issue of financing is important as Nigeria has a very large school-age population and substantial infrastructure gaps and subnational inequality. If there is a lack of public expenditure, costs are passed on indirectly to the households in the form of private tutoring, private schooling, transport and learning materials. This cost shifting is regressive in nature, with the wealthier households able to cover the cost, while the

poorer households are at higher risk of irregular attendance, low learning and withdrawal. Insurance of adequate public financing is thus a direct connection to the household poverty dynamics of SDG 1 and SDG 4 implementation.

The independent assessment of SDG 4 paints a more nuanced picture. While noting positive institutional progress such as teacher certification and government, civil society and other stakeholder relations, it did highlight ongoing challenges in teacher preparation, learning materials and the quality of data (Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs & UNICEF,). This indicates that it's not just a monetary issue when it comes to implementation. Governance, coordination, monitoring and subnational administrative capacity will influence the extent to which allocated resources become operational, functioning schools and better participation. Nwoke further suggests the need for enhanced expenditures tracking and accountability, noting that the implementation of policies has not been robust enough despite the proliferation of policies. Therefore, there exists a gap between programme and household level impacts, as attested by the literature.

Social protection is the main link between SDG 1 and SDG 4, and evidence points towards a missing link. Direct and opportunity costs can be reduced via cash transfers, school feeding and related interventions but their educational impact is subject to interventions being targeted, regular and to coverage and quality of local schools. The idea of course is that the cash transfer might better equip a poor family to buy books and thus cut down on their need to have children work, but it is not going to do much to help a family if the school is not working due to the fear of insecurity or a shortage of teachers. On the other hand, if the school is well-equipped, the family might not be able to afford to pay for transport and/or cannot afford to lose the income from the child going to school. The evidence of child labour provided by the National Bureau of Statistics and the International Labour Organization shows the need for household welfare to be part of education policy. Integrated implementation involves the use of a common approach to identifying vulnerable children through the social-protection register and education-management system and monitoring attendance and retention of vulnerable children as a result of support.

This integration was found to be weak during the COVID-19 shock. Nigeria's 2020 VNR has been prepared in an era where the pandemic and oil-price shock have severely affected public finances, people's livelihoods and education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2020). School closures led to greater reliance on remote and digital learning; access to electricity, devices and connectivity was not even. This made it difficult for poor and rural households to replace the in-person school attendance with home-based digital learning. While the present study does not aim at identifying a causal effect of COVID-19, it illustrates how shocks can affect and exacerbate SDG 1 and SDG 4 outcomes at the same time. Loss of household income can drive up child labour and cut back on spending on education, just when school systems are in need of extra resources to sustain learning for children. Resilience should thus be considered as a criterion for both goals in terms of implementation.

A similar interaction occurred in response to security shocks. UNICEF reported that Borno, Adamawa and Yobe experienced some school closures due to insecurity and attack on education. Conflict can wipe out livelihoods, disrupt families, close schools and endanger children physically to attend school. For poor households, there are fewer resources to move children to alternative school or pay for alternatives. In this way, the lack of security becomes a poverty-enhancing mechanism when it comes to education. Insecurity is, therefore, a key issue in Nigeria's out of school problem as identified by Nwoke ). This strengthens the case for SDG1 and SDG4 to be beyond the responsibility of the poverty and education sectors alone, and that other ministries such as school safety,

humanitarian response, child protection and local security governance are needed to keep children in school in conflict affected zones.

Another weakness relates to the measurement of success. Programme inputs, numbers of beneficiaries or enrolment efforts have been the stories used to describe implementation, but SDG 4 needs to focus on learning and completion. UNICEF also notes severe foundational learning deprivation and the International Monetary Fund (2020) pointed to the poor learning outcomes. Without learning, the capability enhancing role of education is not fulfilled if participation grows. Likewise, if social protection increases consumption and doesn't increase children's engagement in or performance at school, the positive impact on intergenerational poverty reduction may be limited. An integrated monitoring framework, thus, should link with household welfare indicators to school attendance, school progression, school completion and learning outcomes. This would enable policymakers to see if support was provided and if it made a difference to the education path poor children take.

The year 2015 through 2024 can hence be described as an age of institutional buy-in and partial success, i.e. no institutional change. Nigeria created SDG plans, completed voluntary national reviews, had social programmes and universal basic education pledges. However, the fact that large-scale multidimensional poverty and educational exclusion remain, indicates that the combined implementation architecture was not sufficiently robust to deal with a number of challenges including demographic growth, fiscal constraints, regional inequality, insecurity and household vulnerability. While Nigeria faces a challenge in its own right, UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring Report highlight the overall picture of inadequate progress towards SDG 4 across the world, making the country's implementation especially impactful for SDG 4 achievement globally. The third proposition, thus, is accepted: progress has been made, but too few efforts have been made to integrate poverty reduction and educational inclusion to move towards universal school participation.

The three propositions, when considered collectively, present a system of propositions which reinforce each other. Poverty leads to direct and opportunity costs of attending school; educational inequality leads to differential education costs of attending school in specific places, for specific groups and fragments of public policy implementation prevents public policy from breaking the cycle. The results corroborate Sen's position to assess development using substantive capabilities. The mere presence of a school or that a child has been recorded as being on the roll does not mean that the child is included in the school. Inclusion involves the ongoing capacity to attend, learn, progress and complete education without having to leave because of household deprivation, labour demands, unsafe environments or institutional weakness. The key policy take-home is that Nigeria's SDG framework needs to shift from operating in parallel in the various sectors, to a more child-focused approach that considers poverty, education, labour, security and social-protection data to identify and assist vulnerable learners.

## Conclusion

The study findings lead to the conclusion that SDG 1 and SDG 4 were closely tied in Nigeria's experience of SDG implementation in the 10 years from 2015 to 2024 through the lens of the household poverty. Poverty limited households' ability to afford direct school expenses, while livelihood insecurity/dependency on child labour limited house-holde's ability to support school attendance. These pressures were exacerbated by educational inequality, as the 'effective cost of participation' was higher for those living in rural areas, in more disadvantaged regions, who were insecure, who were women, who lived far from the school and where school quality was weak.

Nigeria has institutionalized the SDGs, has made voluntary reviews and has implemented programmes for social and education, but evidence shows that there is limited progress. Multi-dimensional poverty, along with high levels of out-of-school children and foundational learning gap, highlights that SDG 1 and SDG 4 are not possible through stand-alone administrative processes. What Nigeria needs is an integrated approach framework where social protection, education financing, and school safety and teacher quality and household welfare monitoring are all integrated. This would shift the policy focus from access to the ability of ALL children to enrol, attend regularly, learn, progress and complete education.

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