



# 13.2 Million Time-Bombs

## Policy Recommendations

1. The government should fully implement the [Child Rights Act 2003](#) that makes education free and compulsory throughout primary and junior secondary school levels.
2. Enlightenment campaign should be used to educate parents and children on the need to modernise the Almajiri syndrome.
3. Vocational and apprenticeship training should be revived, making skill acquisition compulsory for every student.
4. The government should ensure that the rule of law prevails, with those discouraging children from attending schools, punished by the law.
5. Political commitment is needed to solve the problem of out-of-school children especially in Northern Nigeria.

**Nextier SPD Policy Weekly** provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of Nextier SPD.

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Ten years on, the ‘war on terror’ in Northern Nigeria rages on with twists and turns. Even if the state eventually wins the current war, it might not be able to secure the peace because of the millions of out-of-school children in the region who are like ticking timebombs or dormant volcanoes waiting to erupt.

Globally, [one out of five adolescents](#) (ages 12-15) is out-of-school compared to one out of 10 within the primary school age bracket. Nigeria, Pakistan, India and Sudan are responsible for this bleak social reality. Nigerians under the age of [15 years account for 45 percent](#) of the population (of about 171 million people). Although primary school enrolment has increased in recent years, net attendance hovers around 70 percent. The number of out-of-school children increased from 10.5 million in [2010 to 13.2 million in 2015](#) despite the global development agenda of achieving Education for All that year. In fact, Nigeria accounts for 45 percent of out-of-school children in West Africa and this is the highest in the world. [7.9 million \(or 69 percent\)](#) of them are in Northern Nigeria comprising [60 percent of teenage girls](#). Many of these girls were withdrawn from school to be married off or suffer the impact of the [low value perception of girl-child education](#).

Even back in the pre-independence era, Northern Nigeria was educationally less developed than Southern Nigeria. The prospect of educational development in the region has been further eroded by incessant conflicts including the Boko Haram insurgency in the last decade. This edition of Nextier SPD Weekly examines the dangers associated with out-of-school children and makes recommendations on how the social malaise can be addressed.

Successive governments in Nigeria (and their development partners) have

been concerned about poor human capital development in the sprawling Northern region. The region is plagued by debilitating illiteracy, diseases, and other socioeconomic deprivations. Unlike Southern Nigeria where Western-type secular education is dominant, lower-level education in Northern Nigeria has been provided largely through the [Madrassas](#). Secular educational institutions have begun to gain a strong foothold in the region albeit with some resistance. For instance, the Goodluck Jonathan administration [built 165 Almajiri Integrated Model Schools](#) in the region in an effort to modernise that educational system; yet, many parents prevented their children and wards from attending the schools as they feared that the Islamic piety of their wards would be corrupted by the integrated curriculum. Similarly, a few weeks ago, the Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), an organisation that seeks to “promote, protect, and project the rights of Muslims”, vehemently opposed the initiative by Bishop Matthew Kukah to facilitate the training of 10 million Almajirai (plural for Almajiri) who roam the streets of most northern cities soliciting for alms under the guise of acquiring Islamic knowledge. The MURIC acknowledged the predicaments faced by the street urchins but said, “*We cannot pretend to be so naïve as to entrust our Muslim children to the hands of Christians. As far as we are concerned, Kukah’s Almajiri dream is a Trojan horse*”. Yet, it is alleged that the Almajirai and other youth, with little or no means of legitimate income, are increasingly mobilised by disgruntled politicians and [insurgent groups to perpetrate violence](#) against state and society.

The most worrisome aspect of having these 13.2 million out-of-school children without a government-led social intervention programme, is that Nigeria could be incubating a generation that can be used to perpetuate violence. If Nigeria’s history with Boko Haram is used as context, these





out-of-school children could become an army of rural and urban bandits, recruits for terrorist groups, etc. What is evident is that the 21st century will be tough for anyone who is not able to get on the education ladder out of poverty and misery. For instance, [in July 2018, the Nigerian army handed over to UNICEF 183 child “foot soldiers”](#) who were freed from Boko Haram terror group. In the absence of a well thought-out educational and vocational programme, these children could easily return to the business of terrorism. As indicated in the Nextier SPD Weekly titled, [“In the Red Zone”](#), state failure in providing functional qualitative education that will lift people out of poverty may result in [“rising violent conflicts, insurgencies, organised crime, etc”](#).

Some drastic measures need to be deployed to address the challenge of the increasing number of out-of-school children.

1. The government should fully implement the [Child Rights Act 2003](#) that makes education free and compulsory throughout primary and junior secondary school levels. Even though several states including those in the North have adopted this law, it has remained non-justiciable, leading to weak implementation. Education must be a right and failure to deliver such should be the ground for legal action against the state.
2. Enlightenment campaign should be used to educate parents and children on the need to modernise the Almajiri syndrome. Gone are the days when children were relinquished to little known Imams for religious tutelage. Considering the mobilisation of such children for violence, mass enlightenment campaigns should be used to reorient parents and children in rural areas against child abuse in the name of religious practice. This effort will require a multi-stakeholder approach with

a significant role for moderate clerics who can offer a more progressive interpretation of the Koran.

3. Vocational and apprenticeship training should be revived. Even where education is made free, children who do not have a flair for modern education will still ignore it. To ensure that such children do not become social misfits and thus vulnerable to “violence entrepreneurs”, they should be empowered through the apprenticeship training and vocational skills to seek other legitimate source of income.
4. The government should ensure the rule of law. Through the use of intelligence gathering, the government should identify and prosecute individuals and groups that abuse the less privileged including out-of-school children. Effective implementation of these measures should drastically reduce the alarming level of out-of-school children in Nigeria. This should reduce the number of children available as foot soldiers for disgruntled politicians and insurgent groups.
5. There is need for an urgent holistic study of the fundamental causes of the spike in out-of-school children especially in Northern Nigeria. It will require a multi-sectoral approach driven by a multi-stakeholder group. The report should form the basis for a summit to address the problems of out-of-school-children in Nigeria. Political commitment will be required to ensure commitment to the recommended policy actions.

Nigeria cannot afford to play ostrich with this problem. The problem has reached a critical stage with 13.2 million children. It will continue to grow with population increases and sluggish economic growth. This should be a topical issue for both the public and private sectors in Nigeria.