

Policyweekly

Can Nigeria Protect its Most Vulnerable?



Policy Recommendations

- 1** The Nigerian government needs to allocate adequate resources from the national budget towards expanding access to quality education.
- 2** There is a need to strengthen law enforcement capabilities by investing in training programs, equipping security personnel with the necessary resources and technology, and implementing robust crime prevention and detection strategies.
- 3** There is a need to address the root causes of insurgency and banditry for long-term stability.
- 4** Fostering good diplomatic relations and promoting dialogue with neighbouring countries can help build trust and facilitate coordinated responses to shared security challenges.
- 5** There is a need to address the drivers of insecurity through a comprehensive approach that involves engaging with local communities, religious leaders, and civil society organisations.
- 6** It is important to launch targeted social awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives to fight against gender stereotypes.
- 7** There is a need to prioritise collaboration and coordination with state and local governments, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to ensure that their interventions are aligned with national priorities and complement existing efforts.
- 8** It is crucial that INGOs and CSOs continue to advocate for policy changes and investments that promote children's rights and well-being.

Introduction

Nigeria's children are grappling with an unfathomable crisis. Grave violations of their rights are on the rise. In addition to attacks on educational institutions, the escalating violence, coupled with the displacement of families fleeing insecurity, has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in violent-prone areas. Internally displaced children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and recruitment by armed groups, further compounding their already dire circumstances. The lack of access to basic services, including education and healthcare, further jeopardises their well-being and future prospects. Beyond physical violence, cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation persist, subjecting countless Nigerian girls to irreversible harm and psychological trauma. Similarly, sexual abuse and exploitation remain widespread, with many cases unreported and perpetrators escaping accountability, leaving victims traumatised and devoid of justice. These acts not only violate the fundamental rights of children but also undermine their prospects for a safe, healthy, and prosperous future.

In light of these challenges, this edition of the Nextier Policy Weekly examines existing policies and initiatives to safeguard children's rights in Nigeria. By identifying gaps and shortcomings in the current framework, evidence-based recommendations can be formulated to strengthen child protection mechanisms and ensure a safer,

more conducive environment for Nigerian children to thrive.

Vulnerability of Nigerian children to predatory forces

Millions of Nigerian children are locked out of their fundamental [right to education](#). This is not a missed opportunity but a blatant injustice. Education is not a privilege; it's the cornerstone of individual development, societal progress, and economic prosperity. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills to navigate life's challenges and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Education is a weapon against poverty. It fosters economic growth by creating a skilled workforce and dismantling social barriers, promoting a more equitable society. Not only does denying education limit a person's potential, but it also threatens Nigeria's future. Therefore, ensuring equal access to quality education for all Nigerians is not a necessity; it is a human right demanding unwavering protection and promotion.

The surge in student kidnappings has exacerbated concerns about the state of education in the country. Over the past decade, these abductions have become too common. Often large-scale and brazen, they instil widespread fear among parents and communities, further hindering access to education. Case in mind is the [276 Chibok schoolgirls'](#) abduction in 2014 and the recent kidnapping of [287 pupils and their teachers](#) from LEA School Kuriga in Chikun LG of Kaduna State in Kaduna. While 137 of the 287 victims have been rescued, the whereabouts of 150 remain unknown.

Children kidnappings in Nigeria have undergone a troubling transformation in recent years. While the 2014 mass abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram highlighted the weaponisation of education for extremist ideology, the current landscape presents a more complex and geographically diverse threat. The Northwest region, encompassing states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna, has witnessed a surge in child abductions. Unlike the ideological motivations of Boko Haram, these kidnappings are mainly driven by financial gain. Criminal gangs and bandits exploit weak law enforcement, porous borders, and socio-economic vulnerabilities to target children for ransom payments.

Based on data from the Nextier Violent Conflict Database, there have been 53 recorded incidents of violence, resulting in 36 casualties and 893 kidnapped victims in the past four years (June 2020 – March 2024). This translates to an average of 1.2 violent incidents targeting children per month, with an average of 19.4 children being kidnapped per month. Notably, attacks on schools are prominent in the Northwest region, accounting for 17 reported incidents and 802 kidnap victims.

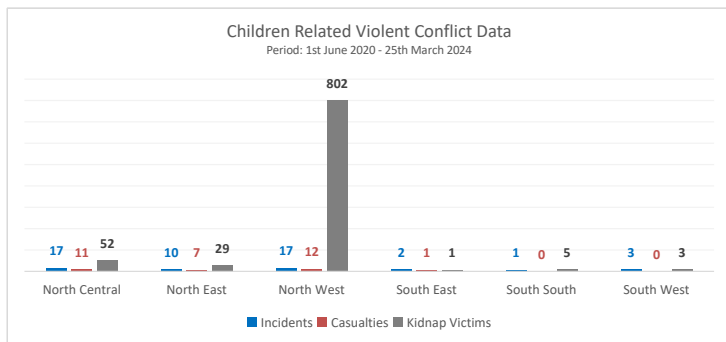


Figure 1: Children-Related Violent Conflict Data

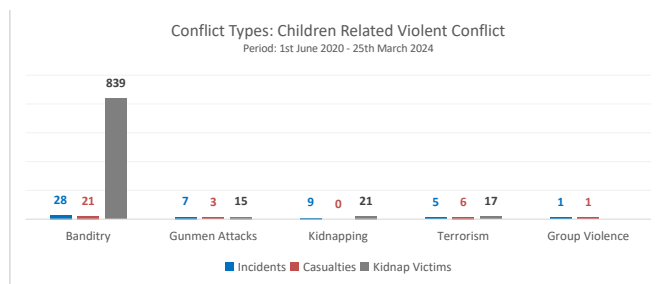


Figure 2: Conflict Types:Children-Related Violent Conflict

The consequences of these abductions transcend beyond mere security concerns. Educational enrolment and participation have reduced in the wake of these abductions. According to UNICEF, Nigeria is home to one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, estimated at [10.5 million](#). The fear of abduction among parents and communities translates into not sending children to school, exacerbating existing disparities in educational outcomes. As of 2021, [over one million children were afraid to return to school](#) and in 2020, 11,500 schools were closed due to attacks.

These challenges are compounded by significant deficiencies in educational quality. Seventy per cent of children in Nigeria cannot read with comprehension or solve basic math problems, according to [Key data on early childhood education in Nigeria](#). Only 49 per cent and 55 per cent of children achieve basic proficiency in literacy and numeracy, respectively. Compounding the issue, approximately 27 per cent of teaching staff in Nigeria are unqualified, further undermining the quality of education provided.

This educational deficit perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion, trapping future generations in a web of vulnerability. Due to conflict and violence, Nigeria is estimated to lose, further hampering economic prospects. Monetary poverty is still widespread in the country, with [half of the population living below the national poverty line being children](#) (50%). The child Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

indicates that poverty rates are higher in the North-East and Northwest areas, where 90% of children are poor, and lower in the South-East and South-West regions, with poverty rates of 74% and 65.1%, respectively.

Girls, often the worst affected by school kidnap crises, already face unique challenges. [Barriers](#) such as child marriage, sexual violence, a patriarchal system, and acute poverty hinder female children from accessing proper education. Violent extremist groups frequently target schoolgirls to disrupt their education and force conversions and marriage. A decade after the Chibok attack, ninety-eight girls are still in captivity. These factors, combined with the destabilisation of educational institutions, leave young girls with bleak prospects. For instance, [literacy rates for young women in the Northwest and Northeast regions are significantly lower than for young men](#) - 38% and 42% compared to 57% and 53%, respectively. This disparity is further exacerbated by poverty. Only 14% of young women from the poorest families have basic literacy skills.

Existing Policies and Initiatives to safeguard children's rights

Nigeria's government has made commendable efforts in formulating policies and implementing initiatives to safeguard children's rights and well-being. A critical review of existing policies and initiatives reveals both strengths and significant gaps in the country's approach to child protection.

- Child Rights Act (CRA) Implementation:** The Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003 represents a landmark legislation aimed at domesticating the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and ensuring the protection and welfare of Nigerian children. While the CRA provides a comprehensive legal framework for addressing various aspects of child rights, including education, healthcare, protection from abuse, and participation in decision-making, its implementation across all states of the federation remains uneven. Many states have yet to fully domesticate and enforce the provisions of the CRA, leaving children in these regions vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect.
- National Policy on Education:** Nigeria's National Policy on Education underscores the government's commitment to providing free and compulsory basic education for all children, with a focus on expanding access, improving quality, and promoting equity. Despite these aspirations, challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and insecurity have hindered the effective implementation of this policy, particularly in conflict-affected areas where attacks on schools and abductions have disrupted learning and forced children out of classrooms.
- National Health Policies and Programs:** Nigeria has developed various health policies and programs aimed at improving maternal and child health outcomes, including the National Strategic Health Development Plan (NSHDP) and the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS). While these initiatives have contributed to progress in reducing child mortality rates and increasing access to essential healthcare services, challenges such as weak health systems, inadequate funding, and inequitable distribution of resources persist, limiting the reach and impact of health interventions, especially in remote and underserved areas.
- Child Protection Mechanisms:** The Nigerian government has established various child protection mechanisms, including the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), to address issues such as trafficking, abuse, and exploitation of children. While these agencies play crucial roles in responding to incidents and providing support to victims, gaps in coordination, resource allocation, and capacity-building undermine their effectiveness, leading to gaps in service delivery and protection coverage.
- Education in Emergencies Response:** In response to the ongoing humanitarian crises in conflict-affected regions, the government, in collaboration with international partners and non-governmental organisations, has implemented education in emergency programs aimed at ensuring continued access to learning opportunities for displaced and vulnerable children. While these initiatives have provided temporary relief and educational support to affected populations, persistent insecurity, funding constraints, and logistical challenges hamper efforts to reach all children in need, leaving many out of school and at risk of exploitation.
- In terms of increasing access to education,** The Universal Education Act of 2004 represents a significant stride towards enhancing educational access by mandating free and compulsory basic education for all children aged 6-15. Complementary initiatives such as the Homegrown School Feeding Programme incentivise enrolment and attendance by providing students with meals, while Conditional Cash Transfer programs extend financial assistance to families contingent upon their children's school attendance. Additionally, Alternative Education Programs address the needs of students who might not fit into the traditional school system, offering flexible learning opportunities. Furthermore, the Safe School Initiative emerged in response to escalating attacks on schools, with its objective centred on enhancing

school security infrastructure, providing training, and fostering community engagement. While these initiatives are laudable and have helped to improve the situation, challenges remain. Inadequate budgetary allocation, insecurity and addressing the root causes of poverty that contribute to out-of-school children are ongoing issues.

Recommendations

1. Expanding access to quality education requires a concerted effort from the government, particularly in allocating adequate resources from the national budget. A substantial portion of the budget must be earmarked for education, with a focus on prioritising underserved regions where students frequently lack essential facilities and resources. Investments in education should encompass various facets, including infrastructure development, teacher training programs, curriculum enhancement, and provision of learning materials.
2. Expanding efforts to address security challenges, particularly insurgency and banditry, requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond mere military interventions. Strengthening law enforcement capabilities is paramount, encompassing not only bolstering the capacity of security forces but also enhancing coordination and intelligence-sharing mechanisms to effectively respond to threats. This involves investing in training programs, equipping security personnel with the necessary resources and technology, and implementing robust crime prevention and detection strategies.
3. Moreover, addressing the root causes of insurgency and banditry is essential for long-term stability. This entails addressing socio-economic grievances, addressing marginalisation, and promoting inclusive development initiatives in affected communities. By addressing underlying issues such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare, governments can undermine the appeal of extremist ideologies and reduce recruitment into armed groups.
4. Collaboration with neighbouring countries is also crucial in combating cross-border criminal activity. Given the fluid nature of borders and the transnational nature of criminal networks, regional cooperation is indispensable for effectively addressing security threats. This involves sharing intelligence, coordinating joint operations, and implementing measures to prevent the movement of illicit goods and individuals across borders. Fostering good diplomatic relations and promoting dialogue with neighbouring countries can help build trust and facilitate coordinated responses to shared security challenges.
5. Furthermore, addressing the drivers of insecurity requires a comprehensive approach that involves engaging with local communities, religious leaders, and civil society organisations. Empowering communities to resist extremist ideologies, promoting interfaith dialogue, and addressing grievances through peaceful means can help build resilience against radicalisation and violence.
6. One effective way to fight against gender stereotypes is to launch targeted social awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives. By raising awareness and encouraging dialogue, we can help break down barriers and promote gender equality. Additionally, investment in education programs that address the specific needs of girls is crucial. These programs should be designed to provide girls with access to quality education, support networks, and resources that can help them overcome social and economic obstacles. By empowering girls through education, we can help them build brighter futures for themselves and their communities.
7. While international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) like UNICEF are indeed playing a crucial role in addressing various challenges facing children in Nigeria, there is a need to prioritise collaboration and coordination with state and local governments, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to ensure that their interventions are aligned with national priorities and complement existing efforts. By working together, stakeholders can maximise resources, share expertise, and avoid duplication of efforts.
8. It is also crucial that INGOs and CSOs continue to advocate for policy changes and investments that promote children's rights and well-being. This includes advocating for increased funding for education, healthcare, and child protection programmes, as well as policies that address the root causes of child rights violations and promote social inclusion.

Conclusion

The protection and well-being of Nigerian children are fundamental prerequisites for building a just, equitable, and prosperous society. This requires not only the enactment and enforcement of child-friendly policies and legislation but also investment in education, healthcare, social services, and infrastructure to create an enabling environment where children can thrive and fulfil their potential. Addressing the root causes of vulnerability and inequality, including poverty, discrimination, and insecurity, is essential for building a society where every child is valued, respected, and empowered to realise their dreams. This necessitates a holistic approach that addresses child well-being's social, economic, and cultural determinants and promotes inclusive development that leaves no child behind.

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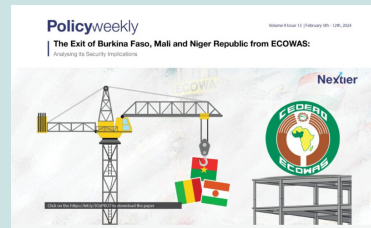
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