

CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN IDP CAMPS: BARRIERS AND INTERVENTIONS IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the educational access of internally displaced children in three selected IDP camps in Nassarawa, Benue and Niger States in the North Central region. The study has four main objectives, namely, examining the presence and the adequacy of educational facilities, existing enrolment and attendance levels, and the challenges of participation in education. It also examined the challenges of participation in education, and existing government and non-government educational interventions. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed. The study population was school-going children ages 6-18 years, their parents/caregivers and camp administration personnel in the three selected camps. A sample size of 150 was achieved using stratified random sampling. Nine administrators in the three camps were purposively chosen for the in-depth interviews. Key findings are educational facilities in the camps are insufficient or absent. Only 27 percent of the school-going population is enrolled in any level of education, and the lack of education facilities, unqualified teachers and poverty, together with psychological trauma, were some of the barriers to educating the children of the displaced. The vast majority of the survey respondents do not know of any government or NGO educational programs. This study calls for the adoption of a formal policy on education for displaced persons, the inclusion of budgets for education in safe areas, mandatory psychological support, and a focus on education as a primary rather than an ancillary service.

KEYWORDS: Human rights, Education in emergencies, educational barriers, Poverty and North Central Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian efforts deal with great concern when considering the affected populations that are displaced and dislocated from their habitats due to attacks by Non-State Armed Groups in Northern Central Nigeria (Nassarawa, Benue, Niger, Kogi, Kwara, Plateau). These groups use such actions to displace communities and force entire households to seek shelter in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Basic services including provision of education in these camps is of poor quality. Violent extremism in northern Nigeria drives kidnappings of school children, destruction of schools, and the internal displacement of thousands of people. Education as a social service and as a human right is defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990) and the Nigerian Child Rights Act (2003). The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) pledges that, by 2030, all children shall have full access to free quality education at all levels (United Nations, 2015). Unfortunately, Nigeria is home to one of the world's largest number of children who are out of school, estimated at 10.2 million by UNICEF (2022) and are predominantly from the north.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) encounter many unique struggles, and among the most vulnerable are children. A significant number of these children reside in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Due to the structured schooling being absent or inadequate in these camps, children are some of the most neglected groups. Ogunsakin (2024), states that about 60% of the IDPs in Nigeria are children. In the 2023 report by Emefiele, he notes that children living in IDP camps are neglected, are a victim of discrimination and social conflicts, and never attend school throughout the duration of their displacement. This study aims to identify and describe the barriers that constrain education of children in the North Central zone, and propose practical solutions to address the barriers and improve their education.

Statement of the problem

The internal displacement crisis in Nigeria's North Central region has created a lifetime risk of being cut off from school for a generation. Jones et al (2021) state that support for food, health and shelter for internally displaced persons (IDPs) by governmental and nongovernmental organizations is lagging far behind support for education. Although organizations provide some basic support for IDPs, the basic support for internally displaced persons in the camps is still at a very rudimentary level. According to Ezera and Oghenede (2021), the internally displaced children in Nigeria face numerous educational challenges as a

result of the lack of adequate facilities, teaching staff, teaching and learning materials and the psychological effects of distress from the violent displacement.

Data collected in December 2023, from eight North Central and North West states, estimated an IDP population of 895,694. A majority of this population is children (IOM, 2023). Budgetary appropriations and programs in education for IDP camps continue to be woefully inadequate. Abodunrin, Ashaolu and Olawoyin [2024] affirm that the absence of good quality education in IDP camps is the main concern of children and amplifies their existing vulnerabilities. This study fills a gap for Field – based evidence to enact policy and program changes for the education of IDP camps in the North Central zone. This study is also intended to complement the study of Jafar (2025), which revealed that Internally Displaced Persons of the North Central Zone have unaddressed basic socio-political requirements, and will transcend the study into the realm of children's education rights.

Objectives of the Study

This research study examines the challenges of internally displaced children in the North Central region of Nigeria, and especially the barriers that hinder their education. This research intends to:

1. Note the available educational facilities and learning resources in Nasarawa, Benue, and Niger States IDP camps.
2. Note school enrollment, attendance and retention data for children of schooling age in the studied IDP camps.
3. Analyze the barriers of an institutional, infrastructural, psychosocial and socio-economic nature to education for the IDPs.
4. Evaluate the existing governmental and nongovernmental educational projects in the studied camps.

Research Questions

This study answered the following research questions:

- 1) What are the educational services/programs designed for school aged children in IDP camps in Nigeria's North Central Zone?
- 2) What is the enrolment, attendance and retention of displaced school-aged children in the scrutinized IDP camps?
- 3) What are the most significant factors limiting internally displaced children in IDP camps from accessing formal education?

4) In what ways have governmental and non-governmental agencies fulfilled and what are the failings in meeting the formal education rights of internally displaced children?

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework: The Right to Education

Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the corresponding international and national laws, as well as the right to education, apply to all children and state an obligation to ensure equal opportunity to education for all. Right to education cannot be denied because of displacement and the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) affirm that internally displaced people have a right to education at all levels and without any unnecessary delay. Conceptually, these standards and principles are fairly clear and broad based, but they have not been successfully implemented in practice. Thirty-five years on from the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), millions of Nigerian displaced children continue to be denied the right to education. Ogunsakin (2024) situates this problem in the discourse of inclusive quality education. Addressing the right to inclusive quality education for displaced children needs creativity in the development of policies and randomness and flexibility in relation to the social and economic and psychosocial conditions found in IDP camps.

Internal Displacement and Education in Nigeria

New studies and articles are focused on internal displacement in Nigeria. Abodunrin et al. (2024) researched two IDP camps in Abuja and documented some of the same challenges faced by women and children in these camps. Abodunrin et al. noted the lack of adequate food, shelter, and education, insecurity and poverty. Ezera and Oghenede (2021) researched the education of displaced children in IDP camps in Nigeria. They hypothesized that due to the scarcity of teaching and learning supplies and the ongoing trauma of the children, education in IDP camps is limited. According to the UNICEF (2022) report, the North Central Region of Nigeria is the worst impacted due to the conflicts between herders and farmers and banditry. With an estimated 10.2 million out of school children, this region has the highest number of unschooled children.

Barriers to Educational Access in IDP Camps

Research examines the many challenges accompanied by displacement when the child cannot attend school. These challenges include lack of classrooms, unavailable teachers, and absence of learning supplies. Barriers of this nature are placed into the physical, economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions by Ogunsakin (2024). Economic are of the greatest concern due to

the severe levels of poverty that characterize the IDPs. Within a displaced situation, children often need to work to provide for the family, thus preventing the child from attending school. Adelakun (2021) places the discrimination of IDP children by host schools as the first barrier to the integration of these children into the formal education system in Nigeria. The North Central region experiences the highest impact of psychosocial trauma. These children have been documented to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress and are depressed and anxious. These symptoms have a negative impact on a child's ability to focus and retain new information (Nwoke et al, 2022). Elegbede et al. (2024) did a study based on the potential role of technology in filling voids in Nigeria's education landscape. In this region, technology, as a potential game-changer, is severely constrained by power outages, accompanied by a lack of digital devices and skills.

Governmental and Non-Governmental Responses

The Nigerian government reacts to the displaced children's educational needs by providing emergency relief, rather than by developing a long-term solution. Through the study of the management of IDPs in Benue State between 2015 and 2022, Eloho, Ogoh and Audu (2022) noted that the management of the camps has prioritized the physiological needs of the IDPs, while the educational needs of the IDPs have been completely disregarded. UNICEF Nigeria (2025) wrote about the creation of safe learning spaces and the introduction of psychosocial support programs at the Mega Camp of Benue State, done in partnership with the Justice and Peace Initiative and the Ministry of Women Affairs. Although these efforts have been made, the gap remains large and these initiatives are still limited. The Norwegian Refugee Council (2021) called for an education in emergencies plan which advocated for education to be incorporated into the management of IDP camps as a priority and a multi-year budget allocation for education be developed.

Gap in Literature

Though research on disrupted learning for internally displaced children in Nigeria's North East region is extensive, research on the North Central region is almost non-existent. Displacements caused by herder-farmer conflicts, banditry, and ethnic militias in Nasarawa, Benue, and Niger States create a unique socio-political context, and therefore present a gap in existing research. This study is the first to narrow the research gap and collect original field-data in order to develop policies to restore educational services for displaced children of this region.

METHODOLOGY

This study combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The goal was to add statistical description of educational exclusion of internally displaced persons (IDP) children and provide hierarchical understanding of the issue. A population of IDP children was collected from three IDP camps in the North Central region of Nigeria. This included children from Nassarawa State, Benue State, and Niger State. They included children, and their caregivers and the management representatives of the IDP camps. It was estimated that the population included approximately 1500 children, 570 caregivers, and 17 management staff.

Stratified random sampling was used to select participants for the quantitative survey. From each IDP camp, 50 caregivers were selected, resulting in a total sampling population of 150. Of these, 140 completed the questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 93.3%. Purposive sampling was used to invite nine camp officials, three from each of the states, to participate in qualitative interviews.

The main tool for collecting quantitative data was a self-administered survey with the following sections: demographic, educational infrastructure, enrollment and attendance, reasons for not attending school, and various interventions. A qualitative interview was the primary method of collecting qualitative data. Additionally, observation checklists guided the team in recording the state of educational facilities in the IDP camps.

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts and simple percentages and were presented in a tabular form with narrative interpretation. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews were analyzed through thematic content analysis. Secondary data from journals, government reports, UNICEF reports, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) displacement tracking matrices were analyzed using content analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS / RESULTS

Table 1.00: Availability and Adequacy of Educational Facilities in IDP Camps. (n=140)

Variables	Available N (%)	Inadequate N (%)	Absent N (%)	Total
1. Classroom/Learning space in the camp	38 (27.1)	42 (30.0)	60 (42.9)	140
2. Qualified/trained teachers for displaced children	18 (12.9)	30 (21.4)	92 (65.7)	140
3. Textbooks and instructional materials	28 (20.0)	46 (32.9)	66 (47.1)	140
4. Stationery (pencils, exercise books, etc.)	42 (30.0)	50 (35.7)	48 (34.3)	140
5. Safe and adequate sanitation facilities	25 (17.9)	38 (27.1)	77 (55.0)	140
6. Psychosocial support services for children	10 (7.1)	20 (14.3)	110 (78.6)	140

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 1.00 reflects conditions of educational infrastructure in IDP camps. The majority of the surveyed participants noted the absence or inadequacy of every educational component. In the absence of learning spaces, 42.9 percent of the participants noted the absence of learning spaces, and 30 percent noted inadequacy of learning spaces. Therefore, only 27.1 percent of the participants noted the presence of learning spaces that were adequate. The greatest inadequacy was the absence of qualified teachers, which was noted the by 65.7 percent of the respondents. The absence of psychosocial support was noted by by 78.6 percent of the respondents. These findings are consistent with the studies of Ezera and Oghenede (2021) and Ogunsakin (2024) and reflect the deficiencies of educational infrastructure that are documented at the national level.

Table 2.00: Level of Enrolment, Attendance, and Retention Among School-Age Displaced Children. (n=140)

Variables	YES N (%)	NO N (%)	Total
1. Are your school-age children currently enrolled in any school?	38 (27.1)	102 (72.9)	140
2. Have any of your children dropped out of school since displacement?	88 (62.9)	52 (37.1)	140
3. Do enrolled children attend school regularly (3+ days per week)?	12 (31.6)*	26 (68.4)*	38*
4. Have enrolled children completed a full school term since arriving?	14 (36.8)*	24 (63.2)*	38*

Source: Field Survey, 2026 *Percentage computed from enrolled children only (n=38)

Table 2.00 shows very little school displacement participation by children. Interviews collected records of only 27.1% of the parents. This means that 73% of the children do not have school provision. For the 38 households with school enrollment, we have reports of school attendance in only 31.6% of the cases. Only 36.8% of the households stated that their children attended the whole school term since displacement. Around 62.9% of the displaced households stated that their children dropped out of school. School displacement is a clear violation of the right to education articulated in UNCRC (1989) and the Child Rights Act (2003) of Nigeria.

Table 3.00: Barriers to Educational Participation Among Displaced Children. (n=140)

Variables	Major Barrier N (%)	Minor Barrier N (%)	Not Barrier^a N (%)	Total
1. Lack of educational facilities in the camp	118 (84.3)	16 (11.4)	6 (4.3)	140
2. Absence of qualified teachers	115 (82.1)	18 (12.9)	7 (5.0)	140
3. Psychosocial trauma and emotional distress	110 (78.6)	22 (15.7)	8 (5.7)	140
4. Poverty and economic dependence of families	102 (72.9)	28 (20.0)	10 (7.1)	140
5. Hunger affecting concentration and attendance	98 (70.0)	30 (21.4)	12 (8.6)	140
6. Child labour and domestic responsibilities	92 (65.7)	32 (22.9)	16 (11.4)	140
7. Discrimination by host community schools	85 (60.7)	38 (27.1)	17 (12.1)	140
8. Language and cultural barriers	55 (39.3)	48 (34.3)	37 (26.4)	140

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3.00 shows the multiple barriers and the challenges they possess. 84.3 percent of respondents indicated lack of schools, while 82.1 percent stated lack of teaching staff. 78.6 percent of survey respondents attributed the psychosocial trauma caused by forced displacement to the lack of children's ability to study. Other problems noted were poverty (72.9 percent), hunger (70.0 percent), child labor (65.7 percent), and discrimination by the host community against the displaced children (60.7 percent) that contribute to the current problems. Collective evidence shows that there is not one single solution to address the problems faced. Only multi-dimensional and comprehensive strategies can adequately respond to the educational needs of the displaced children.

Table 4.00: Awareness and Effectiveness of Educational Interventions. (n=140)

Variables	Very Effective N (%)	Somewhat Effective N (%)	Ineffective N (%)	Not Aware N (%)	Total
1. Government/NEMA educational programmes	5 (3.6)	14 (10.0)	40 (28.6)	81 (57.9)	140
2. UNICEF/international NGO safe learning spaces	10 (7.1)	25 (17.9)	32 (22.9)	73 (52.1)	140
3. State government educational provision	4 (2.9)	12 (8.6)	44 (31.4)	80 (57.1)	140
4. Faith-based organisation schooling programmes	8 (5.7)	20 (14.3)	28 (20.0)	84 (60.0)	140
5. Psychosocial support and trauma therapy	3 (2.1)	8 (5.7)	25 (17.9)	104 (74.3)	140

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.00 shows gaps in types of interventions employed and how they are perceived to address challenges within the three camps. Most respondents did not know of any intervention in all of the areas. The most concerning, was the fact that 74.3 percent of the respondents did not know of any psychosocial support or trauma therapy; 60.0 percent did not know of any faith-based schooling; and over half did not know of any governmental or NGO educational projects. Of the respondents who knew of a given intervention, few rated them as very effective. This finding supports Eloho et al. (2022), that the educational needs of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have been greatly ignored. In addition, this finding complements the neglected area of socio-political sensitization documented by Jafar (2025), which was the focus of the companion study.

In-Depth Interviews

Three camp officials from each state were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Their answers served to augment the quantitative data and categorize the cause of the patterns documented in Tables 1 to 4.

A coordination camp officer from Nassarawa State, Musa Sani, said, "It is overwhelming how many people come to our camp. Each day our main concern is food and medicine. How will we even think about creating or implementing schools? We do not have the means, physical structures, or staff. The classrooms that we have were even given to us by an NGO a year ago."

An official from the Benue State Mega Camp in Makurdi noted how the camp is bigger and more developed, but still, has constraints, "We have set up a learning space that UNICEF helped us with, but we only have two trained facilitators for over six hundred children and they are not even teachers. The children are traumatized because they have seen brutal things. Without proper psychosocial support, you cannot expect children to sit and learn in a space that is merely a tent."

An officer from Niger State, said, "Since 2021, I have not seen a government official concerned with what happens to the children to ensure their schooling. The only people who at least tried were a church group that organized a 2 week literacy program. It has been complete despair since then." "Nobody is thinking about the children's futures."

These qualitative answers confirm that insufficient educational provision is intentional, constructed by an idea that considers IDP camps as short-term emergencies for which

education is an add on, rather than a right. This is similar to Jafar (2025) concerning socio-political rights in the same camps. Thus, the neglect of non-physiological needs of IDPs in the North Central zone indicates a consistent intentional pattern of the institution, as opposed to an isolated incident.

Discussion of Findings

The field data were analyzed and four major findings have been revealed. These findings are a result of a combination of qualitative and quantitative data.

The first finding is that educational infrastructures at IDP camps in the North Central region are either non-existent or woefully insufficient. Data in Table 1.00 show that in 43% of cases, there are no classrooms provided; in 65.7% of cases, there are no teachers; and in 78.6%, there are no psychosocial support services. These gaps are not due to omissions; the negligence is built into the policy framework for the management of IDP camps, in which the provision of education is not prioritized. Qualitative interviews show that officials at the camps have neither the budget nor staff allocated and therefore are not obligated to provide educational services.

The second finding illustrates IDP children lacking attendance, enrollment, and retention in school with only 27.1% of these children enrolled in school and 62.9% of these households with school dropouts. The remaining 72.9% are likely to be fully excluded from school. This finding is consistent with the UNICEF (2022) report which states over 10.2 million children out of school in Nigeria, and confirms displaced children are a vulnerable group. Given the IDP populations in the North Central region have been at camp sites for over 3 years, the over 3 year camp residents suffer disrupted schooling.

The third finding states that multiple layers of barriers from the structural, economic, psychosocial, and social perspective build an impenetrable wall stopping IDP children from accessing education. Lack of infrastructure, paucity of teachers, trauma, poverty, hunger, work, social discrimination, and child labor create a system of cumulative exclusion that is greater than the sum of the parts. This implies a multi-stranded barrier means that in order to provide IDP children with education, multiple, multi-dimensional programs are needed.

The fourth finding is that those working among displaced families report that most of the educational interventions that exist are unknown to the displaced families, and are undervalued by those working with displaced families who do know about them. This means that the recommendation of the Norwegian Refugee Council (2021) is reinforced, that instead of the current practice of a myriad of short-term, fragmented, donor-dependent educational

projects, camp management should integrate multi-year, adequately resourced educational projects.

Summary of Findings

1. A lack of school structures, teachers, books and psychosocial support meant all the IDP camps examined had no educational infrastructure, not even basic levels, as defined by national or international standards.
2. 27.1% of displaced children were enrolled in some form of schooling, with 62.9% of the households saying at least one child had ceased formal schooling since they had to leave their homes. Of those schooled, most left before the end of the school year.
3. Displaced children do not attend school for many different reasons. In the displaced population, there are many lacks such as a school building, teacher, teaching material, poverty, hunger, and child labour. Discrimination against them in the host community schools compounds the situation.
4. The majority in all the IDP camps interviewed said there were no educational programs run by either the government or NGOs. Where these programs existed, camp residents said they were not sufficient. No camp had a psychosocial support program for children.
5. The records of the camp officials documented the absence of services and the reasons for not offering education, primarily indicating an approach to camp management that saw education as secondary to the camp residents' basic needs, without policies, budgets, or service mandates to offer education.

CONCLUSION

This research studied internally displaced children's right to education in Nassarawa, Benue, and Niger States IDP camps. Without a doubt, the enclosed reports affirmatively demonstrate the North Central region of Nigeria's internally displaced children are suffering systematic, protracted and virtually invisible educational exclusions that violate multiple provisions of both international and national laws and standards on human rights. The camp management policies are designed largely as feeding and shelter programs. There are no provisions for teaching or educational services, psychosocial support, and no mandate to provide educational support to displaced children.

This failure is not a matter of short-term humanitarian concern. This will have long lasting negative consequences on the host communities themselves and the nation as a whole. Children are effectively abandoned and denied access to schooling for several years at a

critical part of their brain and social development. The effect of this will be that they will have a lifetime of poverty, poor health, and inability to participate fully in the society. There will be threats of crime and social unrest. This is not a voluntary choice to be charitable, this is Nigeria's duty, a developmental imperative, and a national security issue.

Recommendations

- We ask the Federal Government of Nigeria to pass a National Policy on Education in Emergencies. To be clear, structuring educational services should be a permanent and unshakable element of the management of internally displaced people (IDP) camps starting from the first week of an IDP camp's establishment. A budget should be allocated to this effect in the National Emergency Management Framework.
- The education units, comprising qualified education officers and counselors, should be established in the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and state emergency management agencies for coordination and monitoring of educational services in all the IDP camps in the North Central zone.
- Within the framework of the policy on displaced persons, the Federal Ministry of Education should create a curriculum tailored to displaced children as quickly as possible to address the educational needs of these children, incorporating the Sullivan Fast Track program and implemented by qualified teachers from the IDP population to address the shortage of teachers and provide employment.
- The education programs should include psychosocial support and trauma therapy to the displaced children. These children have been traumatized by forced displacement and, without assistance to address the trauma, are unable to learn.
- We appeal to the development partners, especially UNICEF, UNHCR, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, to change their grant-aided emergency education to three-year (at least) sustained educational recovery programs for displaced children in the North Central zone.

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