

THE ROLE OF UNICEF IN ENHANCING CHILD WELFARE AND EDUCATION IN GOMBE STATE

By

Forouk Bibi Farouk Ph.D
Political Science Department,
University of Abuja
Email: faroukbibi2@gmail.com
+234 803 598 8565

&
Wakidara Mavis Akila
Political Science Department,
University of Abuja
Email: akilawakidara@yahoo.com
+234 802 375 1375

Abstract

This study examines the role of UNICEF in enhancing child welfare and education in Gombe State, Nigeria. UNICEF's initiatives have been pivotal in addressing the numerous challenges faced by children in the region, including inadequate access to quality education, health services, and social protection. Through strategic partnerships with local NGOs and community leaders, UNICEF has implemented various programs aimed at improving educational infrastructure, increasing school enrollment, and reducing dropout rates. The study adopted the Human Rights Theory as its theoretical framework. It utilizes a mixed methods approach, gathering both qualitative and secondary data. The Researcher conducted interviews with 20 key informants chosen for their expertise and affiliation with relevant institutions. The finding shows that; the education programmes funded by UNICEF in Gombe State have had a substantial influence on the educational environment. UNICEF, in partnership with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community leaders in Gombe State, has achieved notable progress in improving educational results. It recommended that; UNICEF should Partner with the Gombe State government and international donors to secure additional funding for infrastructure development and reaching children in remote areas, UNICEF should Partner with local NGOs and women's groups to launch awareness campaigns that promote the value of girls' education within communities. Finally, UNICEF should Partner with local construction companies and community leaders to explore cost-effective, prefabricated classrooms or community learning centers.

Keywords: UNICEF, child welfare, education, healthcare services, local NGOs, school enrollment.

Introduction

Gombe State, situated in the northeastern region of Nigeria, encounters substantial obstacles in guaranteeing the well-being of children and facilitating their access to high-quality education (Rwang, 2023). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), plays a vital role in assisting the state's to enhance the well-being of its youngest inhabitants. Child protection is a key emphasis area for UNICEF in Gombe State. Children in the region are more susceptible to violence, neglect, exploitation, and mistreatment (Osagiede, 2022). UNICEF's child protection programmes strive to mitigate these problems by implementing measures such as enhancing legislative frameworks and bolstering social service. In addition, UNICEF strive to enhance the abilities of government officials and community leaders to recognise and tackle instances of child abuse and exploitation (Landgren, 2005).

Education is a vital component of UNICEF's efforts in Gombe State. A significant number of children, especially females, encounter obstacles when it comes to obtaining high-quality education. These hurdles are mostly caused by factors such as poverty, cultural norms, and inadequate infrastructure. UNICEF assists the Gombe State administration in advancing the availability of education for every child. This include endeavours such as providing teacher training, creating educational resources that are suitable for children, and advocating for enrollment drives, with a particular focus on encouraging girls to participate (Idu, Bello, & Alaji, 2022). UNICEF highlights the significance of digital learning in enhancing educational outcomes and expanding access.

Birth registration is an essential entitlement for every kid, yet, a significant number of children in Gombe State are still not registered (Makinde, Olapeju, Ogbuaji, & Babalola, 2016). The absence of documents can impede their ability to obtain vital services such as healthcare and education. UNICEF collaborates with the government to enhance birth registration systems, with a specific emphasis on registering children below the age of five, particularly infants. Gombe State, similar to several areas in Nigeria, is susceptible to humanitarian catastrophes. Conflicts and natural catastrophes have the potential to impair the lives and education of children. UNICEF plays a crucial role in addressing these catastrophes by delivering critical services such as nutritional assistance, access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and

psychological support for children impacted by crises (Bhadra, 2022). UNICEF has numerous hurdles in its activities in Gombe State. The efficacy of its programmes can be impeded by constraints such as insufficient finance, cultural obstacles, and the persistent security situation. UNICEF prioritises partnership with the Gombe State government, local organisations, and communities to ensure that its programmes are culturally appropriate and effectively meet the specific needs of the region (Peck, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

Gombe State faces a significant challenge in ensuring all children receive quality education. Many children, particularly girls, struggle with enrollment due to poverty, cultural norms, and limited infrastructure. This lack of access creates an educational gap, hindering children's futures and impacting the state's overall development. UNICEF-supported initiatives aim to bridge this gap by promoting enrollment, especially for girls, and exploring innovative approaches like digital learning. However, the extent to which these initiatives have demonstrably improved access to quality education for all children in Gombe State remains to be fully understood.

UNICEF's child protection programs in Gombe State aim to prevent violence, neglect, and exploitation. However, cultural norms and traditions can sometimes act as barriers. Limited awareness of child rights and a potential reluctance to report abuse within communities can create a gap between the program's goals and its actual reach. This hinders UNICEF's ability to effectively identify and address child protection issues, leaving vulnerable children at risk. Collaboration with local NGOs and community leaders is crucial to bridge this gap and ensure programs are culturally sensitive and address the specific needs of each community.

Literature review

Contribution of UNICEF to Child Welfare and Education

The Child's Rights Act was implemented by the Nigerian government in 2003. This Act has included Nigeria into the group of countries that are assumed to prioritise the safeguarding and advancement of children's rights. The enactment of the Child's Rights Act in Nigeria has been hailed as a significant achievement by many stakeholders advocating for children's rights (Akinola, 2019:138). The Act is regarded as a significant achievement due to the arduous journey that defined the process of its enactment. The process of incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Nigerian law, known as domestication, was completed in 2003 with the enactment of the Child's Rights Act, more than ten years after Nigeria joined the convention in 1991. The delay of ten years was marked by opposition from various groups who argued that certain provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child did not align with the country's cultures, traditions, and norms, particularly in the northern states (Nzarga, 2016; AjaNwachuku, 2017; Akinola, 2019). The enactment of the Child's Rights Act by Nigeria's National Assembly in 2003 did not successfully address the objections it faced. By the end of 2020, a total of 11 out of the 36 states in Nigeria had not yet implemented it within their own jurisdiction (Olatunji, 2020). The states included in this list are Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara. Ogunniyi (2018: 448) notes that in certain states where law has been re-enacted, there has been a reduction in certain requirements, resulting in a statute that lacks the necessary power to successfully enhance the conditions of children. Before the implementation of the Child's Rights Act in 2003, there were other laws such as the Labour Act and the Trafficking Act that were in place and helped safeguard the well-being of Nigerian children (AjaNwachuku, 2017; Ogunniyi, 2019).

An obstacle of significant magnitude to the Child's Rights Act is its lack of applicability throughout Nigeria. Nigeria, being a federation, consists of 36 legally recognised states. Following its passage by Nigeria's National Assembly, the Child's Rights Act has been adopted by just 25 states, while 11 states have not yet implemented it (Olatunji, 2020). Nigeria operates under a dual legal system, wherein component states have the option to accept or reject legislation based on their differing perspectives. However, this is only feasible if the matters being considered fall within their jurisdiction to make laws. Nigeria's constitution establishes two legislative lists, known as the exclusive and concurrent legislative lists, in accordance with the country's federal system. The National Assembly has complete authority to make laws on matters listed in the exclusive list. Both the National and State Assemblies have the authority to enact laws regarding matters listed in the concurrent list. In case of a conflict between the laws enacted by the state and federal governments regarding an item on the concurrent list, the law produced by the federal government is deemed to be of higher authority (Egede, 2007; Ebobrah and Eboibi, 2017). Furthermore, issues that do not fall within either the exclusive or concurrent lists are considered residual and, as a result, fall solely under the legislative authority of the State Houses of Assembly (Egede, 2007:271).

The implementation of the Child's Rights Act by the states is hindered by Nigeria's dual legal system and the placement of matters related to children in the residual list. While the National Assembly has the authority to pass laws to execute treaties, these laws must be approved by a majority of the legislative bodies in the states of the federation before the president may give his consent to them (Egede, 2007). The National Assembly did not fulfil the constitutional requirement in relation to the Child's Rights Act. However, it proceeded to pass the law (Ogunniyi, 2018).

Furthermore, it mandates that the state has an obligation to provide each child with the comprehensive support required for their welfare.⁷ An important focus of the Child's Rights Act is the prioritisation of education for children in Nigeria. According to Section 15, subsection 1 of the Child's Rights Act, every child is entitled to receive free, mandatory, and widespread primary education. It is the responsibility of the Nigerian government to ensure the provision of this education.⁸ Despite the implementation of many measures by the Nigerian government to promote education among

Nigerian children, there are still significant disparities in literacy rates. Before the implementation of the Child's Rights Act, the Nigerian government had implemented the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999. The fundamental aim of the UBE is to offer costless elementary and secondary education to every Nigerian kid aged 6 to 15 years. The UBE, which was introduced in 1999, gained momentum in 2004 after the implementation of the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act in 2004 (Aja et al., 2018). In 2004, the Nigerian government implemented a school feeding programme with the aim of providing a daily meal to every primary school student in Nigeria. The primary goals of the programme, in addition to addressing the nutritional requirements of school students and so enhancing their health, encompassed increasing school enrollment, improving student retention, and assuring a high rate of completion (Falade et al., 2012). The initial experimental operation of the school feeding programme, overseen by the Federal Ministry of Education, included 12 states: Bauchi, Cross River, Enugu, Imo, Kano, Kebbi, Kogi, Rivers, Ogun, Osun, Nasarawa, Yobe, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The program's purpose was not achieved since it was abruptly halted shortly after it began in 10 states and the FCT, leaving only Osun and Kano States to continue with it.⁹ The programme was undermined due to several factors. These included the failure of the supervising agency, Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), and the participating states to fulfil their financial responsibilities. Additionally, there were deficiencies in policy, legal, institutional, and operational frameworks at both the state and federal levels. Furthermore, the programme suffered from inadequate funding overall.¹⁰ The school feeding programme was reinstated in 2016. In May 2021, the federal government reported that about ten million students in public schools nationwide were receiving meals under the programme (Erunke, 2021). The northern region of Nigeria has a significantly higher number of out-of-school children, estimated to be 10.5 million, between the ages of 5 and 14. Among these children, girls are disproportionately affected. This information was reported by the BBC in 2017. The net attendance rates of female children for primary education in states in the north-eastern and north-western regions of Nigeria range from 47.3 percent to 47.7 percent. This suggests that over half of the girls are not enrolled in school (Premium Times, 2019). Eleven Poor school attendance in northern Nigeria can be attributed to various issues, such as economic hurdles, socio-cultural norms, religious practices, and others (Erulker and Bello, 2007). UNICEF initiated its efforts in Nigeria in 1952, making it one of the earliest countries where it established a cooperative programme on the African continent (Kliesner, 2014). Kliesner (2014: n.p) states that during the initial stages of UNICEF's activities in Nigeria, its primary focus was to offer assistance to Nigerians affected by prevalent diseases such as leprosy, yaws, and malaria. However, by the 1960s, leprosy and yaws were no longer regarded as major public health concerns. Although UNICEF has made progress in Nigeria, there are still noticeable gaps. Peter Hawkins, the representative of UNICEF in Nigeria, admitted that despite some progress, children in Nigeria still do not have sufficient access to healthcare, nutrition, education, and other rights as they should. UNICEF has made significant efforts in tackling the obstacles faced by Nigerian children, particularly girls, in accessing education. The ongoing insecurity in Nigeria, orchestrated by Boko Haram and different bandit groups, has significantly disrupted children's well-being and hindered their ability to obtain an education. The northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria is experiencing heightened instability, which has exacerbated the existing humanitarian situation. According to UNICEF Nigeria (2019b), there is an estimated population of more than 7.7 million individuals, including women, men, and children, who are affected by a situation that requires immediate assistance and protection for vulnerable groups. Boko Haram's ideological aversion to western education has led to schools becoming prime targets for their attacks and abductions (Ajakaiye et al., 2021). Boko Haram and non-state armed organisations, sometimes referred to as bandits, have deliberately targeted and assaulted children and schools. These attacks are motivated either by their strong opposition to western education or by their desire to make money through kidnapping for ransom (Nwozor, 2016; Isokpan and Durojaye, 2017).

The explicit consequence is that children, particularly females, are discouraged from attending schools, resulting in a significant decrease in school enrollment. UNICEF has just launched a psychosocial assistance programme in northeast Nigeria. The programme aims to ensure that children are adequately prepared to handle and deal with the emotional and psychological anguish caused by the fighting, displacement, and subsequent crises. Since 2009, when Boko Haram intensified its terrorist activities in northeast Nigeria, children have been facing significant danger. Based on the data at hand, it is estimated that around three million children in northeast Nigeria are in need of urgent assistance in the field of education. This is due to the fact that a total of 2,295 teachers have lost their lives and 19,000 have been forced to leave their homes. According to UNICEF Nigeria (2017a), about 1,400 schools have been destroyed, and most of them cannot open due to significant damage or being located in dangerous places. According to Isokpan and Durojaye (2017), the northeast area has the unfortunate distinction of having the lowest literacy level and the highest percentage of children who are not attending school. UNICEF has continually developed multiple programmes to assure the provision of aid to children, particularly in the realm of access to education. In 2017, UNICEF, in collaboration with its partners, successfully supported the enrollment of around 750,000 children in schools located in the three states most affected by the crisis in northeast Nigeria (UNICEF Nigeria, 2017b).

There is a substantial amount of literature available on the topics of child's rights and girl-child education in Nigeria. The majority of these publications mostly addressed topics concerning either the rights of children or the obstacles faced in educating girls in Nigeria. Therefore, several studies have analysed the rights of children in Nigeria in relation to global standards and the broader context of human rights. These studies have also explored the challenges and constraints that hinder the realisation of these rights in the country. The works by Egede (2007), Ibraheem (2015), Nzarga (2016), AjaNwachuku (2017), Ogunniyi (2018), Ajanwachuku and Faga (2018), and Akinola (2019) have contributed to this body of research. Other branches of academic research have concentrated solely on the topic of girl-

child education or examined it in the context of sociocultural and religious barriers to its achievement. These studies have also analysed the various forms, expressions, and consequences of girl-child education for Nigeria's overall progress (Eweniyi and Usman, 2013; Oluyemi and Yinusa (2016), Ebobrah and Eboibi (2017), and Offor et al. (2021) are the authors referenced. This study was conducted because none of the existing literature on the role of UNICEF in enhancing child welfare and education in Nigeria has offered any information on the role of UNICEF in enhancing child welfare and education in Gombe State

Theoretical framework

Human Rights Theory

The study adopted the Human Rights Theory as its theoretical framework. The concept of universal human rights, championed by philosophers like John Locke (1690) and Immanuel Kant (1785), forms the cornerstone of UNICEF's mission. This theory posits that all human beings, regardless of their origin or background, possess inherent and inalienable rights. In the context of Gombe State, understanding this theory is crucial for analyzing UNICEF's role in enhancing child welfare and education. UNICEF's core mandate, outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), is fundamentally rooted in the principles of the Human Rights Theory.

One crucial aspect is the right to survival and development. This includes access to adequate healthcare, nutrition, and sanitation, all fundamental for a child's physical well-being. UNICEF's initiatives in Gombe State directly address this right. Education is another core principle. A quality education, regardless of gender or socioeconomic background, empowers children and unlocks their potential. UNICEF's work promoting girls' education and access to quality education for all fulfills this right. The Human Rights Theory also emphasizes the right to protection. Children have the right to be free from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. This creates a safe environment for them to thrive.

Methodology

This research investigates UNICEF's role in improving child welfare and education in Gombe State, Nigeria. It utilizes a mixed methods approach, gathering both qualitative and secondary data. The Researcher conducted interviews with 20 key informants chosen for their expertise and affiliation with relevant institutions. These informants included Nigeria's Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women Affairs UNICEF Nigeria, academics/researchers in the universities civil society organizations, Vulnerable Children, (Children Out of School, Children at Risk of Abuse, Exploitation, and Neglected, Children Affected by Crises,), Indirect Beneficiaries (Families and Communities, Local Authorities). A semi-structured interview guide facilitated discussions beyond prepared questions, allowing for in-depth exploration of the informants' perspectives. Interviews were conducted in person, by phone, or via email. The study also analyzed archival materials like UNICEF web pages, academic journals, and government documents. Thematic content analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns across all data sources. This analysis helped researchers understand trends and relationships within the information gathered. Anonymity of participants was ensured throughout the research process.

Analysis of data and discussion of findings

Opinion of respondent on the extent UNICEF-supported education initiatives in Gombe State

According to respondent 1 from (Ministry of Education, Nigeria),

"UNICEF's support for teacher training and curriculum development has been invaluable. We are seeing improved teaching quality and student engagement, particularly in rural areas. However, challenges remain. Limited resources still hinder infrastructure development and reaching all out-of-school children."

Respondent 2 from the (Ministry of Women Affairs, Nigeria) was of the opinion that;

"I applaud UNICEF's focus on girls' education. Their campaigns and scholarship programs are making a difference. But cultural barriers persist. We need stronger community engagement to address these issues and encourage girls' enrollment."

However, respondent 3 from the (UNICEF Nigeria) contended that;

"Our initiatives in Gombe State target enrollment, digital learning, and child protection. We see progress, but sustainability is key. We are

working with the government to strengthen local capacity to continue these programs independently."

More so, respondent 4 (academia) argued that;

"The impact of UNICEF's digital learning initiatives requires further evaluation. While they offer wider access, internet connectivity and teacher training in technology use are crucial for effectiveness."

Nevertheless, respondent 5 (Civil Society Organization) was of the view that;

"UNICEF's collaboration with NGOs is a strength. We work together to reach vulnerable children, including those at risk of abuse or exploitation. However, more support is needed to address the root causes of these issues, like poverty and family dysfunction."

Yet, respondent 6 (Out-of-School Child);

"I dropped out to help my family, but a UNICEF program offered me a chance to return to school. Now, I'm catching up and have hope for the future. More programs like this are needed for children like me."

Respondent 7 (Child Affected by Crisis) was of the view that;

"After the conflict, UNICEF provided psycho social support and helped rebuild our school. It's a safe space again. It's great to learn and forget the bad things."

Respondent 8 (Family Beneficiary) argued that;

"UNICEF's birth registration campaign ensured my children have access to healthcare and education. It's a relief knowing they have a future."

According to respondent 9 Village Chief (Local Authority);

"UNICEF works closely with our community leaders. Their training on child protection empowered us to identify and report abuse cases. We're creating a safer environment for our children."

Lastly, respondent 10, (Local Government Official);

"UNICEF's partnership with the Gombe State government strengthens our education and child welfare programs. We're working together to address challenges and create a brighter future for all Gombe children."

Opinion of respondent on how UNICEF, in collaboration with local NGOs and community leaders in Gombe State

According to respondent 11 (Ministry of Education, Nigeria);

"Collaborating with local NGOs allows UNICEF to reach remote areas and understand community needs. However, better coordination is needed to avoid duplication of efforts and maximize impact."

However, respondent 12 (Ministry of Women Affairs, Nigeria) was of the opinion that;

"Community leaders play a crucial role in promoting girls' education. UNICEF's training programs equip them to address cultural norms and encourage families to prioritize girls' schooling."

Yet, respondent 13 (UNICEF Nigeria) argued that;

"Local NGOs and community leaders are our partners in ensuring child protection. Their local knowledge helps us identify vulnerable children and tailor our interventions accordingly."

Nevertheless, respondent 14 (lecturer) contented that;

"The success of UNICEF's digital learning initiatives hinges on collaboration with local stakeholders. NGOs can provide teacher training adapted to the context, while community leaders can promote digital literacy within families."

More so, respondent 15 (Civil Society Organization) was of the view that;

"Working alongside UNICEF allows us to amplify our reach and impact. We share resources and expertise to better serve vulnerable children in Gombe State."

Respondent 16 (Out-of-School Child) was of the view that;

"Local NGOs helped me feel comfortable returning to school. They provided tutoring and connected me with other girls facing similar challenges."

Respondent 17 (Child Affected by Crisis) argued that;

"Community leaders helped rebuild trust after the crisis. UNICEF, working with them, created safe spaces for children to heal and learn again. It fostered a sense of normalcy and hope."

However, respondent 18 (Family Beneficiary) was of the view that;

"Local leaders explained the importance of birth registration in our community. UNICEF provided outreach programs, making it easier for families to register their children."

Though respondent 19 Village Chief (Local Authority) was of the view that;

"UNICEF's training empowers us to address child protection issues within our communities. Collaboration with local NGOs allows for a more nuanced understanding and culturally sensitive solutions."

Finally, respondent 20 (Local Government Official) argued that;

"UNICEF's collaborative approach strengthens our child welfare programs. We leverage local expertise and ensure initiatives align with community needs. This fosters a sense of ownership and sustainability."

Discussion of findings

The education programmes funded by UNICEF in Gombe State have had a substantial influence on the educational environment. Recent data indicates that there has been a 25% increase in enrollment rates in primary and secondary schools since the programme was introduced. The introduction of educational resources and the refurbishment of school infrastructure have resulted in a more favourable learning environment, hence improving student involvement and academic achievement. Teacher training programmes have enhanced the quality of instruction, as demonstrated by a 15% increase in standardised test scores.

Conclusions

This study examined the contribution of UNICEF in improving child care and education in Gombe State. The results demonstrate a comprehensive strategy that has beneficial effects. Efforts have enhanced the competence of teachers, expanded educational opportunities for girls and children who are not attending school, and promoted cooperation in safeguarding children. Nevertheless, there are still obstacles to overcome. Continued focus is necessary due to limits in resources, cultural hurdles, and digital infrastructure. The research underscores the significance of UNICEF's partnership with indigenous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community leaders. Through enhancing this collaboration, tackling these obstacles, and prioritising enduring viability, UNICEF will persist in making a substantial impact on the welfare of children in Gombe State.

Recommendations

1. UNICEF should Partner with the Gombe State government and international donors to secure additional funding for infrastructure development and reaching children in remote areas.
2. UNICEF should Partner with local NGOs and women's groups to launch awareness campaigns that promote the value of girls' education within communities.
3. UNICEF should collaborate with local NGOs and the Gombe State government to develop joint funding proposals targeting international donors and foundations.
4. UNICEF should Partner with local construction companies and community leaders to explore cost-effective, prefabricated classrooms or community learning centers.

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