

**POLICY BRIEF:**

**Policy brief: Strengthening the delivery of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in conflict-affected areas of Adamawa State, Nigeria**

**The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.**

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge – at local, national, regional and global levels – through co-construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, ODI, Osman Consulting, OTHERWISE Research and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC’s inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox’s Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

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*“Truly, school may be good, but if it is for us, we should be part of the whole thing except the teachers they employ. The government should consult us about where the school should be built, what we want our children to learn, when we want the learning to take place and so on. But they build the school, they get the teachers, they say we shall teach this and that, and they say this is the time the school will open, this is the time it will close, but bring your child and buy uniform, pencil bag and so on. I don’t understand it, maybe others do.”*

— Men’s FGD, Sabon Layi

## Background

Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria remains far from realisation in conflict-affected areas such as Adamawa State. In 2024, a participatory action research (PAR) project was implemented in three school communities in Gombi Local Government Authority (LGA), an area impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency and ongoing displacement, in addition to periodic conflicts between pastoralists and farmers. The PAR initiative, conducted by the Common Heritage Foundation (CHF) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) under the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) programme, sought to co-design and pilot community-led solutions to barriers to access, quality, and continuity of basic education. Gombi LGA was selected because it has been heavily affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. Although the occupation of the LGA headquarters and prominent communities by the insurgents only lasted for a few weeks in 2014, frequent attacks, disruptions to the education system, and even displacements lasted for long periods (several months or even years), the aftermath of which is still felt. At the time of this research, however, people were returning and resettling, and some who had fled to the LGA from elsewhere had decided to stay and start new lives.

This LGA, which is largely rural and Muslim, was also selected because it was classified by the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) as having a high number of out-of-school children (OOSCs).<sup>1</sup> The three focus primary school communities also had high numbers of OOSCs. LGA education (LGEA) officials worked as co-researchers in facilitating the development of community-driven initiatives to be piloted that address systemic educational challenges in the delivery of UBE in these conflict-affected communities.

Core participants in the PAR that worked alongside the CHF research team included three LGEA officials, who operated as co-researchers, the primary school head teachers, the school-based management committee (SBMC) community representatives, and 32 marginalised and ‘ordinary’ community members (OCMs) identified through community mapping. The total number of core participants was 44 (21 female, 23 male).

## Key findings

### Persistent barriers to education

- **Economic hardship** is the leading cause of non-enrolment, irregular attendance, and dropout because children’s labour is needed, especially during harvest season and on market days.
- **School costs** (e.g. for uniforms and learning materials) add to the hardship and are compounded by Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) levies, which continue in some schools despite a state-wide official ban.
- **Girls and boys from single-parent or widowed households and self-supporting orphans** face heightened exclusion, exacerbated by gendered labour demands and school costs.
- **Teacher shortages, absenteeism, lack of professionalism**, and poor infrastructure undermine educational quality.

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<sup>1</sup> Although many children attend Qu’ranic schools, which are not counted in state school education numbers.

## Gaps in representation, understanding, and systems

- **SBMCs are dominated by elites**, often disconnected from the needs and priorities of OCMs.
- **Mismatch in understanding:** SBMCs mistakenly believe that children of OCMs are not in school because parents are not aware of the value of schooling, so they propose ‘awareness-raising’ campaigns. In reality, OCMs question the value of the schooling that is available, especially when they have more pressing needs.
- **Mismatch in priorities:** SBMCs are more concerned with the management of schools, so they emphasised fundraising, making material improvements, and addressing teacher shortages and professionalism. In contrast, OCMs are concerned with the challenges they face in accessing schooling and the changes they require from the education system, so they proposed more flexible, practical reforms such as adjusted timetables and vocational learning.

## There is demand for community participation and empowerment

- When supported, communities are both keen and able to problem-solve to help improve the delivery of UBE, underscoring the importance of involving them in future policy making, planning, and implementation.
- When community and government education actors are empowered to make decisions together in meetings, rather than by communicating via letters up the system, changes can be effected more quickly.

## Community-level actions already taken to improve UBE

Several actions proposed by SBMC members were taken by communities during the PAR period to improve access, continuity, and quality of basic education:

- SBMCs **mobilised funds** from affluent individuals or alumni associations **to improve school infrastructure**, including building extra classrooms.
- In one school, **split shifts** were proposed to **reduce classroom overcrowding**; primary teachers would use the rooms in the morning, and junior secondary school (JSS) teachers in the afternoon.
- Alumni and parents were approached for **donations to buy learning materials** and school registers.
- Two schools addressed a shortage of teaching staff by engaging **volunteer teachers** from the educated community youth.

## Community-driven recommendations for piloting in UBE III

The following recommendations for immediate piloting arose from community-developed interventions proposed by OCMs that were approved by the LGEA and state education authorities. These will be piloted and evaluated by ERICC’s UBE III study in 2025–2026 and will have wider relevance beyond Adamawa State.

### 1. Implement flexible annual and weekly school calendars to facilitate school access (and continuity) while enabling children to support household livelihoods.

- **Adjust the annual school calendar** so that school holidays coincide with the harvesting season (October to early December).
- **Adjust weekly timetables** so that schools are **closed on market day**, with the affected lessons held at other times.
- **Include an additional ‘4<sup>th</sup> term’** chance (ATC) in July–August (school holidays) for catch-up and accelerated learning classes for those who have missed over 20 days of schooling.

2. **Provide a flexible exit and re-entry policy (FLEX)** at set, convenient times during the school year for those unable to attend school continuously. Pupils will be assessed on re-entry, taking account of any **out-of-school learning**, both for **grade allocation** and **certification**.
  - Out-of-school learning could include learning a trade or new agricultural techniques for one day a week.
  - **Practical assessments**, which could include assessment of out-of-school learning, would be included in certification.
3. **Establish traditional community savings groups specifically for offsetting basic education costs.**
  - **Communities could establish traditional savings groups (*adashe*)** to pool funds for covering direct expenses for basic education, such as uniforms and learning materials. These savings groups will be critical for supporting orphans and children from the most vulnerable households.
4. **Strengthen teacher accountability and professionalism**
  - **Institute a robust teacher monitoring system** to ensure teachers' school and classroom attendance. LGEA school support officers (SSOs) will work with head teachers to track teachers' attendance, overseen by SBMC members. Sanctions will be applied for teachers' non-compliance.

## Factors that can enable or constrain the successful implementation of these initiatives

### Enabling factors

- **Committed education officials** at the state and LGA levels.
- **High level of community interest** in formal education, even among poor households and households with OOSCs.
- **Broad stakeholder engagement** in formulating these strategies.
- **Conflict-affected communities' capacity to work together** to think 'outside the box' and develop strategies for improving the delivery of UBE.
- **Communities' capacity to mobilise funds** when necessary (this should be voluntary and not include compulsory payments by those who can least afford to give, and also should not replace government funding).

### Constraining factors

- **Limited vertical systems coherence** (federal, state, and LGA levels) in education and limited horizontal coherence among departments (with overlapping responsibilities) and between government and international development partners and civil society organisations (World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021; Sarwar et al, 2024). Systems non-alignment can hamper the collaboration needed for planning and implementing desired curriculum change, such as introducing flexible learning and certification pathways.
- **A complex bureaucracy** for states to access Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) funding (World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021)
- **Inadequately resourced schools**, which are already struggling to deliver quality education to children who are currently enrolled, especially in rural areas (Kontagora et al., 2018; World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021; Sarwar et al, 2024). In the absence of additional resources, the envisaged increase in pupil numbers due to the interventions will put an even greater strain on resources and may compromise educational quality. This, in turn, would result in a likely increase in irregular pupil attendance and eventual dropout.

- **Unreliable school data** (World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021) **and pupil attendance records**, which are likely to prevent reliable monitoring of pupils' enrolment and regular attendance.
- **Perceived irrelevance of the current curriculum** by households with OOSCs, which threatens both school access and pupil retention unless changes to the curriculum are made.
- **Inappropriate teacher recruitment**, which may not rely on certification and professional competence, and **inequitable teacher deployment**, which is not based on school enrolments (Kontagora et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020; World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021).
- **Teachers' inadequate subject knowledge and knowledge of English** (Cameron et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020) and **unsatisfactory working conditions** (Cameron et al., 2018; Kontagora et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020).
- **Under-resourced** and therefore low-quality **teacher professional development** (Kontagora et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020).
- **Non-inclusive SBMC membership and limited or no involvement in governance functions** (World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021).
- The **charging of PTA levies** by some schools and **refusal of entry** to children not in uniform or without learning materials (in contravention of state policy).
- **Unconducive school learning environments** where pupils experience 'teasing', bullying, and violence, including excessive corporal punishment (World Bank and IIEP-UNESCO, 2021), which can threaten pupil learning and retention (UNICEF, 2022).

## Policy recommendations

- **Develop state regulations** of LGEA teacher recruitment and deployment to avoid nepotism and ensure that qualified and competent teachers are appointed where they are most needed. Involve head teachers and communities in the selection of teachers and ensure that teachers have some say in their deployment.
- **Endorse curriculum reforms** that include vocational pathways and practical assessment, in consultation with Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), state, and local education authorities.
- **Support flexible school calendars** through formal policy channels, including options for 4th terms and adjusted timetables.
- **Resource local pilot initiatives** through targeted grants and technical support – not only through traditional funding streams.
- **Institutionalise SBMC reforms** that ensure equitable representation, training, and gender balance.
- **Expand monitoring and evaluation** of community-systems initiatives, to ensure that schools are not charging PTA levies or refusing children who do not have school uniform or learning materials, using participatory research methods to track impact and feasibility.

## Conclusion

This research shows that communities and governments can work together to devise community-driven, systems-compatible innovations that can potentially address structural barriers to UBE in crisis-affected areas. However, scale and sustainability require political commitment, inclusive planning, and investment in both people and systems.

**It is time for the government and partners to act** – by investing in what communities are already doing and building flexible, inclusive education systems that leave no child behind.

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