

Millennium Development Goals: Nigeria struggles to meet target to educate over 10million Out of School Children

For Nigeria's poorest children, school is an impossible dream despite Millennium Development Goal to end illiteracy



Pupils sit at the entrance of a classroom at the Tattali orphan school in Nigeria's northern city of Kaduna. Photograph: Akintunde Akinleye

Poverty shuts school gates

Jummai Nkwo will not let her daughter Mary go to school. "I'd like her to go, but it's just too expensive and I need her. I'm a widow. We have to work to keep everyone in the family fed. So she goes every day with me to the bush to cut wood and then we take it to sell in Abuja."

Mary, who is 12 but looks about seven, is plucking at the kitten embroidered on her grubby T-shirt as she listens. Would she like to go to school? Yes, she says shyly. She's seen two of her elder sisters go and she thinks it would be nice to learn things such as English. "I want to be able to take care of myself and my children," she tells me. But this modest desire makes her mother laugh, and after a while so do all the other women standing around the cooking pot as the evening porridge bubbles.

"Mary's job is to get the water," smiles one, and Mary is too embarrassed to say any more. Jummai didn't go to school, she says, and clearly she can't see the point. In any case, she removed Mary's sisters from the primary school, here on the outskirts of [Nigeria's](#) capital, when older men offered to marry them. They were just 14. This is in spite of an existing Universal Basic Education law that proclaims education free and compulsory.

Mary's plight, and that of over 10 million other children across Nigeria who do not attend school, will continue to occupy a central place among the [United Nations eight Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#) – targets set by the G8 in rosier times 11 years ago for radical reductions in global [poverty](#) by 2015

But while officials say the number of children out of education in Nigeria has fallen, activists differ arguing that deepening poverty in the country has further depleted the number of children in school who now go on to join the growing rank of out of school children

Poverty in the midst of plenty

Nowhere in the Sub Saharan African is the struggle to achieve MDG2 more vivid than in Nigeria. On paper Nigeria is Africa's third richest because of its immense oil wealth – it is the sixth-largest producer in the world. Officially the country has 8.8 million children out of school, more than any other nation. But research by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education, indicates that the actual figure may be 19.2 million – nearly half of all Nigeria's primary-age children. (FME 2006, Crisis: The State of the Nigerian Educational System and the Agenda for Reform).

Where education is provided, there are stark indicators that the quality of it is inadequate. Three years ago, the education commissioner of Nigeria's Kwara state (currently the Minister of Youth Development) revealed that nearly 20,000 of the state's teachers had been made to sit tests in English and mathematics designed for nine- and 10-year-olds, but only seven of the teachers could reach the minimum attainment level. An editorial in Nigeria's *Guardian* newspaper commented that the Kwara scandal was "a symptom of a decadent system, where favouritism, corruption, compromise, incompetence and the like hold sway ...".

Wale Samuel, Policy Advisor to CSACEFA, says the key to the problem is "more financing and better use of it" – obvious things in a country that in recent history has rarely devoted adequate resources to education, much less than South Africa whose spending to education has grown by 14 % in the past 3 years. (Most rich nations spend about 12%).

Paradise Lost

Many Nigerians blame the neglect on the fact that government officials have little interest in a system that they do not use; most children of top government officials are educated privately or abroad. Recently, Nigeria's union of university lecturers threatened to release the names of all government officials who sent their children out of the country for their schooling. CSACEFA acknowledges this problem, and says in a statement that the country's elite must develop a "passion" for education: "We have to impress on policy-makers that the social fabric is knotted together by quality education – without it, you court disaster in Nigeria."

Although Nigeria is committed to free primary education for all, unofficial fees charged by underfunded schools keep children away, in a country where 1 dollar a day is a significant wage.

At the charity-run Tattali free school in Kaduna's back streets, children pay nothing. Its six mud-walled classrooms, none of them much bigger than a king-size bed, see an incredible 340 students a day, arriving in shifts. Among them are Zahra Mohammed and Sadiya Saidu, 14 and 15. Neither girl had ever been to school before this month; the village they came from had a teacher but no school building – "He teaches the children under the trees." In any case, the fees for registration, sanitation, books and uniforms were more than their families could afford, they said, and no child they knew had ever been to school.

Both of them fought their families to come to school in Kaduna. "My mother said she didn't want me to come. 'You don't need school, you need to help in the house'," said Zahra. A relative found the money for her to travel to the city, while Sadiya was helped by her mother. "I was supposed to get married soon, my father had decided it, and I didn't want to."

Education is one way of avoiding these sorts of abuses of women – Statistics show that, worldwide, girls with basic education marry later, have fewer and healthier children, and are less likely to catch HIV/Aids.

Dangerous Signal

Sadiya and Zahra underline one of the struggles the education system in Nigeria grapples with – these children have a passion for education and are hungry for school. And there are good teachers who want to work. Akin Zuheini, who was teaching maths at the Tattali School, told me it was impossible to get a job in the state system, "unless you are connected to someone in power". Rukkaiyat Adamu, co-ordinator of the charity behind the school, said: "There's such a desire for education here that we run this school without holidays, all day and all night." Among her pupils are several mothers, attending school for the first time with their own children.

CSACEFA's Policy Advisor Wale Samuel likes to quote the 19th century British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli: "Upon the education of the people of this country, the fate of this country depends." In Nigeria, mired in poverty and with a fast-increasing population, that fate troubles him deeply. "We sit on an explosive situation – a growing, angry, ill-educated young population without work".

Adapted from [Alex Renton](#) piece from [The UK Observer](#), Sunday 19 September 2010