

REQUEST RESPONSE

Rapid review of the linkages between security and Islamic education systems in North-East and North-West Nigeria

REQUEST SUBMISSION

FCDO Nigeria has requested a rapid review of the insecurity–conflict–education nexus in NE and NW Nigeria, considering issues of radicalisation, terrorism, illegal migration, violence and the activity of armed groups; and education access, continuity, quality and relevance through different streams available to adolescents and youth. The request encompasses six key questions:

1. To what extent has limited and differential access to education—as well as issues with education quality—contributed to or sustained conflict in Northern Nigeria?
2. Are there specific groups of OOSC or types of formal/non-formal education provision that are contributing to radicalisation, instability, or improved stability in Northern Nigeria?
3. To what extent have peace/stability themes been integrated into education programmes and provision for different groups (host/stable populations, IDPs, reintegrated fighters/families)?
4. What is the likely impact of US and wider ODA cuts on education provision, considering how willing/able federal/state government and community/religious leaders are to sustain or adapt education opportunities for marginalised groups in the short-medium term?
5. What lessons do neighbouring countries—particularly in the Sahel—offer about the links between education and instability, particularly in terms of the role of Almajiri-type education?
6. If/how/where does insecurity/conflict impact education?

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

North-East/North-West Nigeria is affected by a range of interconnected crises: poverty, insecurity, displacement, gender inequality, institutional fragility, and environmental stress, all of which shape the education context. The interaction between education types, learner profiles, and security outcomes is highly specific to the local context, and is shaped by historical legacies, institutional arrangements, economic constraints, and social dynamics.

There is broad agreement that education has the potential to foster peacebuilding and stability in Northern Nigeria and that a coordinated approach integrating education with livelihoods, governance reform, and social protection is needed. However, perspectives vary on priorities and pathways to achieve this. Some specialists believe that stronger state-led oversight and regulation, especially over religious schools, is required. Others argue for community-driven reform, leveraging Islamic values and institutions.

There is little, if any, evidence to sustain the view that Islamic/Qur’anic education is by nature more prone than other types of education, formal or nonformal, religious or secular, to create mindsets in youth that are favourable or prone to radicalisation; and even less that Islamic/Qur’anic education is instrumentalised by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) to create a pool or stream of suitable candidates for recruitment into their ranks. While there are isolated examples of this happening, there is universal consensus that these are exceptions to the rule. Thus, any links between Islamic/Qur’anic education and radicalisation are widely deemed to be circumstantial rather than religious or ideological.

Nevertheless, there is very broad consensus that Almajiri learners are more exposed than other groups to recruitment by NSAGs, due to their underlying vulnerability; in particular, their distance from their families, poor coverage of their basic needs by economically stretched mallams, and the widespread practice of street begging. This is compounded by the nature of the education they receive, in particular the absence of Arabic language instruction, meaning that their actual understanding of the Qur’an, even once learned by heart, leaves scope for negative influence with respect to the nature of the messages, values, and behaviours it promotes (NCAOOSCE KII). Another factor contributing to their vulnerability is the limited recognition of the value of their educational outcomes by the labour market, which places high value on moral and social behavioural attitudes but low value on skills and basic competencies, thereby limiting their employment prospects.

These vulnerabilities, economic, situational, and educational, make Almajiri children prime targets for extremist groups, who exploit their characteristics to manipulate and coerce them into entering their ranks, when they do not simply use direct force, abductions, or the threat of violence against their families. They easily locate such children and youth in areas where Almajiri schools are predominant and the learners spend much of their days on the streets; leverage their poverty, offering an alternative life of affluence, albeit through banditry; and abuse their lack of nuance in the understanding of the Qur’an, claiming that it calls for violence to preserve certain cultural, religious, and traditional customs and freedoms.

They further exploit what experts call the “grievance” complex, which is rooted in opposition to colonial-era attitudes towards religious and traditional (ancestral) practices; the comparatively inequitable level of public resources historically allocated to basic social services, including education, in the Northern and predominantly Muslim geo-strategic regions; and the perception or claim that current governance systems and Western (“Boko”) education are geared against the beliefs, needs, and aspirations of Muslim communities in these areas.

Improving security and stability through education will require both improved access to schools and system-level reform through multifaceted approaches: addressing access and quality across all education streams (secular, religious, formal, and informal), protecting children who remain out-of-school regardless, further integrating formal and non-formal programmes, strengthening positive

religious education, mainstreaming mental health and psychosocial support, investing in teachers, embedding peacebuilding into education policy and practice, and engaging communities in co-creating inclusive and resilient learning environments.

Key findings

1. How do education access, quality, and relevance affect conflict in Northern Nigeria?

There is strong agreement that gaps and inequities in access to education and poor teaching quality fuel discontent and unrest in Northern Nigeria. Structural issues like weak education governance, the high share of learners enrolled in nonformal education, and widespread poverty overlap to form a crisis that makes young people especially vulnerable to radicalisation.

Reforms such as integrating Qur’anic and formal schooling—particularly through **Almajiri Model Schools**—have aimed to address these challenges. Despite some progress in literacy and infrastructure, these efforts suffer from weak enforcement, lack of funding, and local mistrust in the model schools. Successful education reforms tend to emphasise community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable support.

Nonformal Tsangaya/Almajiri schools are prominent but often operate without oversight or child protection. While they provide religious grounding and some moral education, students often miss out on basic literacy and transferable skills. This lack of functional education limits future job prospects and feeds cycles of exclusion.

Innovative efforts, such as **accelerated learning programmes and community-linked schooling models**, show that with the right approach, even out-of-school children (OOSC) can be re-integrated. In Kano, for example, the KaLMA programme dramatically improved literacy and numeracy through tailored instruction. Other small-scale initiatives, like eTrash2Cash, illustrate how values education and microenterprise can promote youth dignity and reduce recruitment into violence.

Crucially, education must go beyond mere access. If it fails to meet quality expectations or address deeper inequity-based grievances, it can reinforce frustration. Youth in conflict zones often describe education as a “broken promise,” exacerbating feelings of abandonment.

2. How do education types and learner profiles influence stability or instability?

Different education systems—formal, Qur’anic, and hybrid—interact in complex ways with stability. Poor curriculum quality, fragmented oversight, and social exclusion drive vulnerability across systems. In particular, Almajiri schools and Qur’anic centres, while deeply rooted in tradition, often lack integration with national education goals, making it harder to build inclusive, skills-based education.

Some analysts propose that **mosques could be leveraged as institutions for Almajiri reform**—serving not only as spiritual spaces but also centres for literacy and accountability. This would require better training, financing via Islamic charitable practices such as *zakat* and *waqf*, and regulations to prevent abuse or exclusion.

Gender inequality is another critical factor. Girls face barriers across both secular and religious schooling: forced marriage, stigma, and gender-based violence all reduce their chances of staying in education. Moreover, most deradicalisation efforts focus on boys, even though girls also experience violence, abduction, coercion, and recruitment by armed groups.

Successful examples do exist, however. The Lafiya Sarari initiative in Borno State, led by Neem Foundation, developed a conflict-sensitive curriculum for girls affected by Boko Haram. With a blend of core values, life skills, and mental health support, it enabled over 100 girls to re-engage with education in safe spaces, demonstrating the power of locally adapted and inclusive programming.

The **National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Education (NCAOOSCE)**, created in 2023, aims to provide integrated services, especially for children with Qur’anic backgrounds. It plans to

establish model schools in every northern state, offering accelerated learning for those who have memorised the Qur'an. However coordination with agencies like the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and the Nomadic Education Agency remains a challenge, and long-term funding remains uncertain.

3. Are peace and stability themes embedded in education programmes?

Education in NE and NW Nigeria is increasingly recognised not only as a learning tool but as a peacebuilding instrument. While there is agreement on the goal, opinions differ on how best to achieve it. Some argue for tighter state oversight of religious schools, others for locally owned, values-based reform rooted in Islamic teachings.

Cross-sectoral integration is poor. Education rarely intersects effectively with humanitarian aid, livelihoods programming, or governance reform, and efforts to combine education and prevention of violent extremism programming have fallen short of producing sustainable results at scale. As a result, many initiatives are fragmented, short-term, and externally driven.

4. What is the impact of ODA cuts on education provision?

Cuts to international aid (Official Development Assistance, or ODA) are posing serious threats to education in NE and NW Nigeria. The most vulnerable groups—girls, displaced children, and youth in non-formal systems—stand to lose the most.

Donor funding has traditionally supported more than just classrooms. It underpins teacher training, curriculum development, education data systems, and civil society engagement. Without it, there is a real risk of backsliding in terms of educational access, quality, and equity.

Local NGOs, which have played key roles in reaching marginalised learners and holding governments accountable, now face funding crises. This undermines their ability to fill gaps or innovate in service delivery.

Peacebuilding is also affected by ODA cuts. Education is often the first visible sign of state presence in conflict areas. Where it collapses, distrust, grievance, and extremist recruitment often rise. Community-driven models can help bridge some gaps but cannot substitute for systemic investment.

5. What lessons can Nigeria learn from the Sahel?

The Sahel offers both warnings and inspiration. While its challenges mirror those in NE/NW Nigeria—conflict, displacement, and weak infrastructure—it also demonstrates how education can support stability when grounded in local realities.

Key insights include the value of **hybrid education models** (blending secular and religious content), **mobile learning** for displaced populations, and **joint planning** across education, protection, and social welfare sectors. In countries like Niger and Chad, religious leaders have been engaged not just as gatekeepers but as peacebuilders, helping bridge state–society divides.

Youth empowerment is another standout approach. Peace clubs, student parliaments, and youth entrepreneurship initiatives all help position young people as contributors to stability, not just passive recipients of aid.

Inclusion is vital. Sahelian programmes that succeed tend to focus explicitly on marginalised groups—girls, disabled children, or those in remote areas—often linking education with cash transfers, health services, and protection.

Financing remains a challenge, but new models are emerging: public–private partnerships, diaspora contributions, and zakat-based community support. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems are also underused but essential for improving and scaling what works.

While Nigeria’s context is different, these lessons are relevant if applied thoughtfully, with strong local partnerships and political backing.

6. How does insecurity affect education provision?

Insecurity is one of the most damaging forces undermining education in Northern Nigeria. Armed conflict causes schools to close, disrupts learning, and erodes trust in both government and education providers.

The damage is not just physical—it is economic and psychological. School closures translate into lost lifetime earnings, reduced productivity, and greater inequality. Girls are especially affected, as early marriage and pregnancy often cut short their education permanently.

Promising responses include mobile classrooms, radio lessons, and community learning hubs, which have kept learning alive in crisis zones. But such models face scale, funding, and coordination challenges. Community actors often fill the gaps. Religious leaders and youth networks have mobilised local resources to keep schools running, proving that grassroots agency matters. Yet these efforts need external support to be sustainable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage **system-level reform in the support provided to nonformal Qur'anic education**, in particular to clarify and harmonise institutional mandates to avoid overlap and gaps.
- Invest in state leadership and policy frameworks, by **embedding education and prevention of violent extremism goals in state plans**.
- Develop a **comprehensive teacher policy for both secular and religious schools** which aims to ensure that all learners are offered quality learning in foundational skills according to their needs.
- **Recognise as “in-school” the learners enrolled in nonformal education in compliance with basic norms and standards**, which should be set at the national level and applied uniformly across and within states.
- **Promote the inclusion of peace education and social cohesion into learning**, determining the most cost and time-effective approach.
- **Adopt holistic programmatic strategies to address the needs of Almajiri children**, that include not only education provision, but also system governance, child protection and well-being, health and nutrition, and poverty.
- **Promote the inclusion of foundational literacy and numeracy classes for primary aged children and access to skills training for secondary aged youth**, across all types and streams of education, religious or secular.
- **Consider the inclusion of religious studies in the national curriculum as taught by formal schools**, to make formal education an acceptable alternative to families for whom some religious learning is a must.
- Based on the above reforms, **ensure that learning acquired by children and youth through Qur'anic education can be capitalised by leavers at key bridging points in their educational careers** to enable transitions to other streams.
- To further facilitate this, **invest in the development, promotion, and adaptation of Nigeria's successful accelerated education programme**.
- Deepen local engagement, by **co-designing programmes with communities**, supporting religious and traditional leaders as peacebuilders and amplifying youth voices in programme design and evaluation.
- **Apply gender-responsive and inclusive approaches**, in particular by addressing the specific needs of girls, disabled learners, and displaced youth, using targeted interventions and inclusive curricula.
- Build **robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems**, periodically collecting, processing and feeding-back disaggregated data to strengthen adaptive learning based on evidence.

INTRODUCTION

This desk review examines the complex relationships between different forms of Islamic education—particularly the Almajiri system—and dynamics of peace, conflict, radicalisation, and resilience in Northern Nigeria. Drawing on over 60 reports, academic articles, evaluations, and policy documents, as well as 10 key informant interviews, it addresses six core research questions (See the Bibliography, Annex 1: Methodology, and Annex 2: Key informant interviews). The review covers the North-East (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Taraba) and North-West (Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Jigawa, Kebbi, Kaduna, Zamfara) regions, focusing on the experiences of adolescents and youth aged 10–26, and the formal, non-formal, religious, and hybrid education cycles relevant to them.

The NE and NW of Nigeria are regions of acute humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding challenges. With over 10 million out-of-school children, 2 million displaced persons, widespread poverty, low literacy, and persistent attacks on schools, the education sector operates in a context of fragility and crisis. Any interventions aimed at deradicalisation, resilience, or development must be deeply informed by this context—recognising the overlapping drivers of exclusion, conflict, and marginalisation.

Demographic profile

NE and NW Nigeria are home to over 93 million people, or approximately 42 per cent of the country's estimated 223 million population (World Bank, 2024). The regions are predominantly Muslim, with diverse ethnic compositions: Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Shuwa Arab, and various minority groups. Youth dominate the population structure: over 60% are under the age of 25, reflecting a significant “youth bulge” (Akinyetun, 2023). Fertility rates remain among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with NE states averaging 6.5 births per woman (FMOHSW ET AL., 2024). Urbanisation is uneven: while Kano and Kaduna host major urban centres, much of Borno, Yobe, Zamfara, and Kebbi remain rural and underserved.

Poverty rates are acute. NBS (2023) estimates that over 70% of NE households and 65% of NW households live below the poverty line, compared to 40% nationally. Literacy rates are alarmingly low, particularly among women: only 27% of women in NE and 35% in NW are literate, compared to 67% in the South (Nwoke et al., 2024). Child marriage remains pervasive, affecting over 45% of girls under 18 in NE/NW, with profound consequences for education and health outcomes (Okonkwo, 2022).

Coverage of different types of education

Formal education in NE/NW is delivered through public primary, junior, and senior secondary schools; federal colleges; private, parent fee-paying schools, mostly in urban areas; and teacher training institutions. Non-formal education includes Qur'anic, Tsangaya, and Islamiyya schools, often outside the regulatory purview. Integration initiatives, including Almajiri model schools, attempt to bridge religious and secular education but face mixed results (Okadigwe et al., 2019; Dukawa et al., 2022).

Despite improvements, access remains uneven. Only 56% of NE children and 63% of NW children of primary school age are enrolled (UNICEF, 2022). Secondary enrolment drops dramatically: just 35% in NE and 38% in NW compared to 66% in the South (Nwoke et al., 2024). Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) access is minimal, with fewer than 10% of youth enrolled in vocational streams (Bekuma, 2021). Quality challenges abound: overcrowded classrooms, undertrained teachers, gender and disability exclusion, and outdated curricula (Alkali, 2019; Ogunode et al., 2022).

Out-of-school children (OOSC) numbers are staggering. Nigeria has the highest number of OOSC globally, estimated at 18.5 million (UNICEF, 2023). Of these, over 10 million are in NE/NW. Multiple sources (Ogunode et al., 2022; Nwoke et al., 2024; Osimen et al., 2022) characterise OOSC populations as predominantly poor, rural, and displaced. Profiles vary: many boys attend unrecognised Almajiri schools, frequently living away from their nuclear or extended family and engaged in either street begging to pay for their keep, or petty trading, agriculture, or informal transport; girls face heightened risk of early

marriage, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation; displaced children navigate disrupted schooling; and youth aged 15–24 fall into NEET (not in education, employment, or training) status (Okonkwo, 2022; Katami et al., 2023). Critically, the government considers children and youth enrolled in religious education that does not teach basic literacy and numeracy to be out of school. Nationally, poverty is considered to be the major cause of access disparities: 88% of the richest quintile and 39% of the poorest attend primary school, while the respective rates for lower secondary are 81% and 15% (MICS, 2021).

Recent surveys (NBS, 2023; UNICEF, 2023) provide further disaggregated insights into population and education indicators. In Borno, for instance, 68% of school-age boys and 72% of girls are out of school, compared to 61% of boys and 58% of girls in Yobe, and 49% of boys and 52% of girls in Adamawa. In NW Nigeria, Zamfara records some of the highest rates nationally, with 78% of school-age children out of school (Nwoke et al., 2024). Among adolescents aged 15–19, female secondary school completion rates fall below 10% in many rural local government areas (LGAs), compared to 25–30% in urban areas (Okonkwo, 2022). For youth aged 20–24, male literacy in NE/NW hovers around 50%, while female literacy is under 30% (FMOHSW ET AL., 2024).

Teacher supply is limited, with Alkali (2019) reporting the pupil-to-qualified teacher ratio exceeds 100:1 in some rural LGAs of Borno and Zamfara, far above the national average of 37:1. Less than 40% of teachers in NE public schools hold a formal teaching qualification, with even lower rates in non-formal schools (Adeniyi-Egbeola, 2018). Only 12% of secondary schools in the NE have female teachers, impacting girls' enrolment and retention (Okonkwo, 2022). Physical access is another barrier: in remote areas, 65% of children live more than 5 kilometres from the nearest functioning school (UNICEF, 2022).

Dynamics and scale of displacement

Displacement is a defining feature of NE/NW Nigeria. As of December 2023, 2.1 million people were internally displaced in NE, primarily in Borno (1.7 million), Adamawa (218,000), and Yobe (155,000) (UNSG, 2024). NW displacement, though less tracked, is worsening due to banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence, with Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina among the hardest hit (IOM, 2024).

Displacement patterns are shifting. While Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) violence drove early waves, banditry and farmer–herder conflicts now displace tens of thousands in the NW. In 2023, the IOM recorded over 500,000 displaced persons in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina combined (IOM, 2024), a near doubling from 2020 figures. Climate pressures compound displacement: Lake Chad's shrinkage has displaced 2.5 million people regionally, with spill over impacts in Borno and Yobe (Dieng, 2025). Intercommunal tensions, land disputes, and cattle raiding fuel recurrent violence in Kaduna and Plateau, further disrupting education (Tsolakis et al., 2025).

Key drivers include the Boko Haram insurgency (since 2009), ISWAP attacks, farmer–herder conflicts, climate shocks, and intercommunal clashes. Camp closures in Borno (2021–2024) forced over 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) into “returns” or secondary displacement, often into insecure, under-served areas (UNSG, 2024). Children and youth account for over 60% of the displaced, facing school disruptions, early marriage, recruitment risk, and psychosocial distress (Katami et al., 2023).

The **effects for displaced learners** are dire. The 2023 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) shows that only 28% of displaced children are enrolled in any form of education, with vast gaps in learning materials, teacher capacity, and psychosocial support. Girls account for less than 40% of IDP learners, reflecting gendered barriers of safety, care responsibilities, and social norms (Katami et al., 2023). Youth in return communities often face a double burden: lack of access to resumed schooling and pressure to contribute economically to household recovery.

Several disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, and reconciliation (DDRR)/deradicalisation **programmes have offered structured education to demobilised fighters** and associated individuals, having reached an estimated 1,500 youth overall. These include informal, small-scale reintegration efforts for low-level defectors, including women and children (Ugwueze, 2021), and community-based

defection-oriented programming linked to Lake Chad Basin Commission regional efforts (BICC, 2025). The greatest in scale however is Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), having reached an estimated 900 ex-combatants since 2016 with IOM support (Hassan, 2022). All of them offer basic literacy and numeracy, entry-level vocational training, and life-skills training. The OSC camp is in the process of setting up a Multimedia Learning Hub which should add another layer of learning for ex-fighters (Mbonu KII).

Almajiri and Tsangaya schools continue to absorb large numbers of boys, who as minors living away from their families, are particularly vulnerable to abuse and coercion. A majority of such schools lack regulatory oversight or integration into the formal system (Akubor, 2016; Dukawa et al., 2022). Estimates suggest that over 3.5 million Almajiri children are enrolled in Northern Nigeria, primarily in NW states, where they often rely on street begging for survival (Gbigbidje et al., 2021). Among these, less than 15% transition into any form of formal or vocational education, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation (Okadigwe et al., 2019). Several efforts to integrate Islamic and secular curricula have been undertaken, but have faced resistance, underfunding, and policy inconsistency (Olaniran, 2018). For instance, the federal government’s Almajiri Education Programme led by President Goodluck Jonathan during his administration (2010–2015), also called the Almajiri Integrated Model School System, was a bold attempt to reform the traditional Islamic education system in Northern Nigeria but was met with resistance and challenges rooted in cultural and religious sensitivities, as well as political opposition (Mbonu KII).

Attacks on schools/education

Attacks on education have escalated in scale and brutality. Between 2020–2022, over 1,470 learners were abducted, with 200 still missing (UNICEF, 2022). Armed groups have destroyed or occupied over 1,400 schools in the NE and forced the closure of an additional 11,500 in the NW due to kidnapping threats (UNICEF, 2022b). Suicide bombings, arson, and shootings have killed or injured educators and students (Osimen et al., 2022). Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to target Western-style schools in the NE, while bandit groups pursue ransom kidnappings in the NW (Faluyi, 2017; Afoaku, 2017).

The impact extends beyond physical harm: children drop out, teachers flee, parents fear school attendance, and entire communities lose trust in education systems (Save the Children, 2021; Innocent et al., 2021). Girls are disproportionately affected, with heightened risks of sexual violence, forced marriage, and stigma (Okonkwo, 2022; UNSG, 2024).

Attacks on education extend beyond school grounds. Children are abducted en route, teachers are targeted at home, and communities are collectively punished. Save the Children (2021) reports that nearly 60% of children in NW conflict zones fear going to school; UNSG (2024) documents that among abducted children, over 70% are girls, reflecting the commodification of female bodies in ransom, marriage, or trafficking economies. Boys face forced recruitment: ISWAP has used child soldiers in Borno, while NW bandits deploy youth as couriers, lookouts, or fighters (Afoaku, 2017; Faluyi, 2017). Psychosocial impacts are severe, with heightened rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety among survivors (Katami et al., 2023).

National responses include the Safe Schools Declaration (2019) and the implementation of its Plan of Action until 2023 by the Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education (PLANE), school-based risk reduction, and integration of non-formal streams of education, but implementation is patchy. UNICEF (2022) highlights that only 20% of high-risk schools have emergency plans; few have safe latrines, fencing, or teacher training on gender and trauma responsiveness. TVET pathways remain underdeveloped: fewer than 5% of NE/NW youth aged 15–24 are enrolled in vocational programmes, despite high demand (Bekuma, 2021; Abdullahi, 2020). Economic pressures force many youth, particularly boys, into artisanal mining, transport, or informal trade—sectors prone to exploitation, violence, and cross-border trafficking.

DFID/FCDO responses to education and insecurity dynamics in Northern Nigeria

The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has positioned education and the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) as key components of its development agenda in Northern Nigeria, albeit with distinct levels of emphasis and investment. Education features prominently among FCDO's organisational priorities—particularly girls' education, foundational learning, and system strengthening (FCDO, 2021). Education goals appear aligned with conflict prevention, peacebuilding and security-oriented interventions like disarmament, disengagement, de-radicalisation, and reintegration (4DR) and the UK's global security agenda.

FCDO's major PVE and 4DR efforts in Northern Nigeria include the Conflict Security and Stability Fund (now known as the Integrated Security Fund), North East Nigeria Conflict Management and Stabilisation Programme (2016–21, GBP 9.5m) and the Lake Chad Basin Programme (2021–25) that includes the "Strengthening Rehabilitation and Community-based Reintegration Processes in Nigeria" project (2022–25, GBP 5.1m) which supports Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) support package (FCDO, n.d.; FCDO, 2024). The programme interventions primarily targeted Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states. 4DR activities ranged from community engagement and counter-narrative dissemination to livelihood training and youth reintegration. OSC, in particular, focused on vocational training; the psychological rehabilitation of ex-combatants; and sensitisation activities in communities of returnees to enable successful reintegration. However, several reviews note weak educational components, limited vocational materials, and "one-size-fits-all" training approaches that fail to match participant educational backgrounds or learning needs (FCDO, 2024).

In education, flagship programmes such as the Education Sector Support Project in Nigeria (ESSPIN, 2008–17, GBP 127m), the Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education (PLANE, 2019–28, £159m) and the Girls' Education Project–Phase 3 (GEP3, 2012–22, GBP 82.2m) have received higher funding and are longer-term in nature, reflecting broader development objectives (UK Aid, 2017; FCDO, 2024–b; FCDO, 2022). These focus on areas spanning foundational learning, teacher training, governance reform, and integration of Islamic and secular education. Other education programmes and components include the Teacher Development Programme (TDP), Developing Effective Private Education Nigeria (DEEPEN), Education Data Research and Evaluation in Nigeria (EDOREN), and the Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn.

Case Study: Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) in Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigeria has faced a protracted insurgency from Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), leaving thousands of youth associated with non-state armed groups. In response, the Government of Nigeria established Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) in 2016 as a multi-agency deradicalisation, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) programme targeting ex-combatants. Recognising the potential security risks of recidivism, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) provided both financial and technical support to strengthen OSC as part of its broader 4DR agenda.

FCDO's objective was to improve the effectiveness of OSC in delivering credible rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes. Specifically, it aimed to build the capacity of OSC to deliver vocational and psychosocial support, enhance community-based reintegration, and reduce the risk of recidivism. This aligned with UK security priorities and the use of ODA to address upstream drivers of instability.

Through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), FCDO funded the development of vocational training facilities, livelihood kits, staff capacity building, and mentoring frameworks. Technical support included the design of curricula and monitoring systems. However, monitoring and evaluation studies (FCDO, 2024–25) highlighted serious implementation gaps around the educational elements—particularly foundational literacy, numeracy, and tailored instruction—which were weak or absent. Clients reportedly found vocational sessions too theoretical and inaccessible, citing a “one-size-fits-all” approach and inadequate materials.

OSC achieved some success in psychological rehabilitation and community acceptance of returnees. Community members were overwhelmingly supportive of the reintegration of rehabilitated former associates, across all genders and locations. Many reflected on the benefits of increased peaceful coexistence at community and wider state levels, and the potential positive impact of encouraging further defections and making progress towards peace. Yet, the lack of strong educational programming compromised reintegration outcomes. There was limited follow-up of graduates, limited evidence of employment gains, and no measurable reduction in re-radicalisation risk. A stronger integration of basic education and context-specific vocational skills could have enhanced programme impact and sustainability.

Among notable results, GEP3 reached over 1.5 million girls and trained 64,000 educators across six states (UNICEF, 2022) and ESSPIN reached over 16,000 schools (UK Aid, 2017). By its close, GEP3 had demonstrated how to improve the function of secular and religious schools to meet girls' learning needs, as well as how to improve the resilience of schools to retain girls in education despite shocks and insecurity. Programmes often addressed socio-cultural resistance to girls' education and insecurity-driven absenteeism. While results showed improvements in enrolment and learning, persistent insecurity and poor infrastructure were noted barriers to greater results (FCDO & UNICEF, 2022).

Although several programmes have attempted to integrate PVE and education approaches, such as the Increasing Economic Opportunities for Marginalised Youth in Northern Nigeria programme (2014–20, GBP 29,0m; see WB/DIME, 2021) and the Tackling Radicalisation in Nigeria project (2016–17, £59k; see FCDO, n.d.-b), this is not done across all programming. For instance, the CSSF programme has no education or skills component. Further limitations are noted at the operational level. For instance, while the OSC support component shows theory-of-change level concern for vocational training, several site visit notes suggest that this component has not been adequately planned, resourced, implemented, or monitored, with facilities inadequate and stretched.

In conclusion, both PVE and education FCDO programmes confront challenges of reach, sustainability, and socio–political complexity. Notably, it appears that conceptual and operational linkages could be strengthened to achieve greater value for money and results. There is clear scope for cross–fertilisation, particularly by integrating peace education and tailored vocational training within both PVE and education initiatives, to better address the root causes of conflict and build more resilient communities.

1. RQ1. THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION ACCESS, QUALITY, AND RELEVANCE ON CONFLICT

This section explores to what extent limited and differential access to education, as well as issues with quality and relevance, have contributed to or sustained conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Extent and history of education gaps

Historically, **Northern Nigeria has faced chronic underinvestment in formal education** relative to the South. As Afoaku (2017), Akubor (2016), and Nwoke et al. (2024) note, this disparity dates back to colonial policies that privileged Islamic and Qur'anic education models in the North, with limited integration into formal Western education systems. Decades of neglect, compounded by governance failures (Faluyi, 2017; IPCR, 2021), have resulted in an entrenched lack of public education infrastructure, especially in rural areas. The Universal Basic Education Commission's (UBEC) efforts to expand primary access have struggled to keep pace with population growth and displacement (Ogunode et al., 2022; Innocent et al., 2021), and federal UBEC and UBE-IF (Universal Basic Education Implementation Fund) funding is still discriminatory, especially to the larger and poorer Northern states.

The evidence suggests **the education crisis is grave and persistent**. Over 11,000 schools were closed between 2020–2022 due to insecurity, especially in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (UNICEF, 2022b). According to UNICEF (2022), North West states such as Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna account for over 70% of mass school abductions, further deepening educational exclusion. These conditions leave over 10 million children and youth out of school in the North, with particularly severe consequences for adolescents.

While Northern communities also face deficits in healthcare, security, and livelihoods, the **absence of public education carries distinct symbolic and practical consequences**. IPCR (2021) highlights that education represents a “future promise”—its absence fuels hopelessness, especially among youth with no vocational or employment pathways. Compared to health services, where humanitarian actors have stepped in, or security, where state and vigilante groups are active, the formal education sector is often perceived as invisible or irrelevant in people's lives.

Discrimination and resentment in access to services

Several studies (Katami et al., 2023; Gbigbidje et al., 2021; Akinyetun, 2023) highlight that in NE/NW Nigeria, **young people increasingly perceive the educational exclusion they face as part of systemic marginalisation** by the Nigerian state. This is compounded by ethnic, religious, and political grievances, especially in areas like Borno where military counterinsurgency campaigns have produced civilian casualties. Importantly, resentment is not only directed at the federal government but also at local elites, religious leaders, and politicians seen as self-serving or ineffective.

The evidence is mixed on whether indigenous, ethnic, or religious identities drive access discrimination. There is **limited evidence of systematic exclusion** from education based solely on identity, with Katami et al. (2023) and Okonkwo (2022) pointing to localised tensions between IDPs and host communities, but no large-scale evidence of this.

However, resource allocation decisions, particularly under humanitarian programming, can unintentionally fuel perceptions of bias, especially when certain groups receive preferential aid. For example, services targeted at displaced populations, including education, can create **resentment among host communities**. Salihi (2021) and De Silva (n.d.) observe that accelerated learning programmes, psychosocial support, and school feeding schemes for IDPs are sometimes seen as better resourced or more consistent than services for local youth. This resentment can translate into social tensions and undermine peacebuilding efforts if not addressed through inclusive, community-wide approaches (International Alert, 2022).

Educational opportunities for conflict-affected youth

Targeted educational services for adolescents and youth impacted by conflict—including IDPs, returnees, and reintegrated fighters—have expanded since 2015, supported by actors such as UNICEF, Save the Children, and local NGOs (UNICEF, 2022; UNSG, 2024; Okadigwe et al., 2019). These services often include accelerated learning, catch-up classes, vocational training, and psychosocial support. However, Okonkwo (2022), Katami et al. (2023), and Akinyetun (2023) highlight that access remains uneven, especially for girls, older adolescents, and youth with disabilities. Moreover, few programmes systematically monitor long-term outcomes or reintegration success.

Quality and relevance of religious education

Non-formal schools can also adopt **practices that further entrench marginalisation**. Akubor (2016), Gbigbidje et al. (2021), and Qualé (2017) trace the historical evolution of Islamic education, particularly the Almajiri system, from a respected form of religious scholarship to one increasingly associated with poverty, street begging, and social exclusion. This shift can be attributed to several interlinked drivers, including colonial-era dynamics and the collapse of traditional patronage systems, urban demographic pressures, the emergence of security and extremism narratives, and modern poverty dynamics. The Almajiri system, which was once a community-supported Islamic learning tradition, has become, in many contexts, a feeder into child begging, exploitation, and, in some cases, recruitment by non-state armed groups (Afoaku, 2017; Faluyi, 2017).

With government schools often absent or inadequate, families in rural and urban areas alike turn to Islamiyya and Tsangaya schools to fulfil religious obligations and provide basic literacy (Adeniyi-Egbeola, 2018; Dukawa et al., 2022). Poverty, parental illiteracy, cultural expectations, and lack of alternative schooling options drive Islamic education enrolment, especially in NW states like Sokoto, Katsina, and Kano. For displaced families, Tsangaya schools often represent the only accessible education, even though they may lack adequate shelter, materials, or trained teachers (UNIMAID Consults, n.d.; IPCR, 2021).

However, these schools vary widely in quality, oversight, and links to the broader formal education system. Even when youth access formal or non-formal education, the **learning environment often fails to meet students' needs**. Studies such as Akubor (2016), Adeniyi-Egbeola (2018), and Okadigwe et al. (2019) document how integrated Almajiri and Qur'anic schools underperform on literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills. The curriculum remains dominated by rote learning, with limited vocational or entrepreneurial training (Bekuma, 2021; Olaniran, 2018). This mismatch between education and labour market realities leaves graduates underprepared and disillusioned. Youth often voice disappointment that education does not translate into improved livelihoods or social mobility.

On the other hand, **some experts believe that this mismatch is more perceived than real** and reflects a very Western view of what types of knowledge are worthy of recognition. Buba, for instance, contrasts “useful” knowledge (that is provided through Western-style education in view of employment or training) with “deep learning” (in Muslim epistemology, the overriding belief that education is an ethical preparation for the afterlife). Building upon this precept, anyone who is engaged in any kind of learning that does not provide what is considered to be “useful” knowledge is perceived as a security risk and stigmatised. Almajiri are the greatest cohort of OOSC, and therefore the primary target of such assumptions (Buba KII).

Conclusion

Across the evidence base, there is broad consensus that the lack of education access, poor quality, and low relevance have sustained grievances, undermined resilience, and created fertile ground for instability in Northern Nigeria. Structural state failure (Afoaku, 2017; Faluyi, 2017), historical distortions

within religious systems (Akubor, 2016; Gbigbidje et al., 2021), and socio-economic exclusion (Akinyetun, 2023) intersect to create a multidimensional crisis.

Where narratives diverge is on attribution of blame and solution pathways. Some analysts highlight the role of federal government neglect, while others emphasise the complicity of local religious leaders and the failures of past Almajiri reform efforts (Okadigwe et al., 2019; Olaniran, 2018). Still others point to the need for cross-sectoral, integrated interventions addressing livelihoods, governance, and social cohesion alongside education.

Beyond the formal education system, non-formal education models such as Tsangaya, Qur'anic, and traditional Islamiyya schools are prominent, especially in rural Northern Nigeria. Studies (Qualé, 2017; UNIMAID Consults, n.d.) note that while these institutions offer cultural and religious continuity, they often lack oversight, modern curriculum integration, and child protection safeguards (See Annex 4: A typology of Islamic/Qur'anic education in Nigeria). As a result, youth educated solely in these systems may lack basic literacy, numeracy, or transferable skills, limiting their access to further education or employment and reinforcing cycles of exclusion. On the other hand, it is widely felt that NFE Tsangaya/Almajiri boys do benefit from a strong moral ethical behaviour code, which assists in traditional jobs and avoiding criminality.

Efforts to reform Almajiri education, aiming to integrate Qur'anic education with formal schooling to address widespread illiteracy, child poverty, and social exclusion, were motivated by security concerns, rising out-of-school rates, and links between youth marginalisation and radicalisation. Government and donor-backed initiatives introduced curriculum reforms, teacher training, and infrastructure upgrades. While progress includes the establishment of Almajiri Model Schools, challenges remain—such as inconsistent policy enforcement, community resistance, and lack of sustainable funding. Key lessons learned emphasise local ownership, inclusive planning, and long-term government commitment.

Importantly, informal interviews and programme evaluations (Heyneman et al., 2022; DAI, 2024) show that accelerated learning programmes, when properly designed, can reintegrate OOSC into formal schooling or vocational training. In Kano, for instance, DAI's implementation on behalf of FCDO of the "Integration without Disruption" pilot worked with Islamic schools to align core literacy and numeracy standards, improving transition rates to secondary education. PLANE KaLMA (Kano Literacy and Maths Accelerator), funded by FCDO between 2019 and 2022, boosted the competences of over 37,000 Primary 4–6 pupils in Dawakin Tofa and Wudil LGAs, in Hausa literacy, English, and maths—especially at foundational levels—via the Teaching at the Right Level model with dual-language support. However, challenges remain, including community resistance, under-resourced teachers, and tensions over curriculum content, especially regarding religious or moral instruction.

Importantly, the relationship between education and security is not linear. Chukwuma (2023) emphasises that simply increasing access without addressing underlying grievances, inequality, or social fragmentation may have a limited stabilising effect. In fact, when education systems reproduce exclusion or fail to deliver on expectations, they may fuel frustration. Youth interviewed in conflict-affected local government areas (LGAs) report feeling "abandoned" by both religious and state actors, with education seen as a broken promise.

The psychological impact of educational exclusion also warrants attention. Innocent et al. (2021) and Osimen et al. (2022) highlight that school closures, attacks, and displacement create not only learning loss but also trauma, anxiety, and social disruption. Girls in particular face compounded risks. Addressing these impacts requires integrated approaches combining education, protection, psychosocial support, and community engagement (UNICEF, 2022; Salihu, 2021).

Finally, the broader governance context shapes education outcomes. Studies (Faluyi, 2017; Alkali, 2019) stress that corruption, weak policy implementation, and lack of accountability at both federal and state levels undermine even well-designed education reforms. Without addressing these systemic barriers,

investments in infrastructure, teacher training, or curriculum reform risk being diluted or diverted, limiting their reach and impact on youth resilience and peacebuilding.

The evidence suggests that education matters not just for its instrumental value but for its symbolic and political importance in the NE and NW. Addressing these education gaps—both access and quality—is central to reducing discontent, building resilience, and creating pathways away from violence and radicalisation.

2. RQ2. THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT EDUCATION TYPES OR LEARNER/OOS PROFILES TO INSTABILITY OR STABILITY

This section examines whether specific groups of out-of-school children (OOSC) or types of formal and non-formal education provision contribute to radicalisation and instability, or conversely, to improved stability in Northern Nigeria, with a particular focus on the Almajiri system.

Islamic education and security

Little evidence suggests that Islamic education directly contributes to radicalisation or insecurity. Afoaku (2017) and Faluyi (2017) argue that **while most Almajiri schools are not inherently violent, their vulnerability to manipulation by political or extremist actors creates a “risk environment.”** Akubor (2016) details how some mallams exploit children for forced labour or begging, while others have been co-opted by armed groups for recruitment. Saliyu (2021) and Chukwuma (2023) point to the failures of state Almajiri reform programmes, which often focus narrowly on physical infrastructure without addressing curriculum reform, teacher training, or social protection.

At the same time, Gbigbidje et al. (2021), Olaniran (2018), and Okadigwe et al. (2019) highlight examples where **integrating Islamic schools into the Universal Basic Education (UBE)** framework has improved quality, reduced migration, and enhanced social cohesion. The Borno Tsangaya reform, for example, includes age limits, parental involvement, and vocational training alongside Qur’anic studies (Omirin, 2024), showing promise as a soft-power deradicalisation approach. Such reforms are currently being proposed for national policy by Minister of State for Education, Prof. Suwaiba Ahmad.

Case Study: Tsangaya/Almajiri Reform, Borno State

Borno State has long hosted a large number of Almajiri (Tsangaya) children—estimates up to 200,000 across some 3,500 schools in 15 local government authorities—most lacking access to formal literacy, numeracy, or vocational learning, and vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment into armed groups (ARCP scoping mission, Feb 2023). This traditional system, largely unregulated and poorly supported, has been linked to the Boko Haram insurgency and insecurity in the state, leading stakeholders to call for urgent reform (BusinessDay, Nov 2024).

FCDO-supported initiatives—most notably through the Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education (PLANE) education-in-emergencies programme and coordination with the World Bank-funded Better Education Service Delivery to All (BESDA) under the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB)—were tasked to support Borno’s state-led Tsangaya reform: integrating basic education, vocational skills, and a unified curriculum under a new Arabic and Tsangaya Education Board, while addressing overlapping institutional mandates, ensuring coordination, and enhancing the protection for at risk Almajiri children (Vanguard, 2025).

FCDO partnered through BESDA–SUBEB to map and pilot integrated Tsangaya schools. The At-Risk Children Programme (ARCP) and BESDA provided salaries for mallams (Qur’anic teachers), literacy and numeracy teaching twice weekly, meal provision, uniforms, and learning materials in the first enrolment of ~62,540 pupils among 883 schools (of 3,500 mapped) in Phase I (Nigerian Presidency, 2023). FCDO and PLANE advised on curriculum reform—a unified syllabus combining Qur’anic and secular elements—and capacity building for the state’s Arabic & Tsangaya Board. State Governor Zulum injected NGN 734 million in in-kind support (books, grains) for nearly 5,000 Islamic schools in 2023 under BESDA collaboration, aiming to subsidise reach and encourage compliance (Vanguard, 2025). At Tsangaya reform summits, stakeholders established the High-Powered Committee, recommended model boarding centres in each senatorial zone, age and guardian policies, and a Joint Task Force for data/pupil registration and enforcement, with a March 2025 target (National Accord, 2024).

The intervention introduced structured literacy/numeracy sessions, learner materials, and formal oversight into Tsangaya schools reaching tens of thousands of children—a nascent but critical shift from informal Qur’anic instruction alone. These reforms mitigate the risk of radicalisation by providing cognitive skills, reducing street begging, and exposing children to broader worldviews beyond purely religious education. However, progress remains constrained by limited coverage (only ~18% of mapped schools enrolled), weak facilities, water/sanitation deficits, resistance from traditional mallams concerned about curriculum change, institutional fragmentation across SUBEB, Tsangaya Board and local associations, and inadequate space to deliver expanded activities (Nigerian Presidency, 2023).

Scaling up pilot Tsangaya centres (e.g., Baba Buji Model, Muhammadu Buhari Academy) as learning hubs, completing mapping and registration, strengthening arbitration of overlapping mandates, and ensuring coordination via the Arabic & Tsangaya Board will be crucial. Ensuring consistent recurrent funding, and both state and FCDO technical assistance, may bolster literacy, vocational, and radicalisation prevention outcomes. Embedding education within Tsangaya reform holds promise to reduce youth vulnerability, promote resilience, and mitigate the drivers of conflict.

Role of teachers and facilitators

Beyond curriculum delivery, **teachers play a critical role through their language, attitudes, and values** (Mustafa, 2020). In the public system, public school teachers' ability to implement peace education, handle trauma, and promote inclusion is limited by low training levels and systemic under-support. In religious education, studies show that mallams or Islamic teachers who promote tolerance, nonviolence, and civic responsibility can act as community stabilisers, while those who preach exclusion or grievance narratives can deepen divides (Ogunode et al., 2022).

There is broad consensus that if intentional radicalisation of youth through Qur'anic schools in Nigeria does take place, it is exceptional (Riaz KII, Chowdhury KII, Shehu Kyari KII). Qur'anic teachers are categorised as typically elderly, apolitical, traditional, peace-loving people. In contrast, those who want to radicalise learners are politically minded and manipulative and can exploit Islamic facilitators due to their poverty and ignorance of current affairs (Ismail KII). The advent of *Isala* in Northern Nigeria (a less conservative form of Islam inspired by Wahhabism), combined with an equity-based promotion of human rights, has meant that Qur'anic schools have neither the traditional oversight of religious scholars nor government control. In this context, some can be influenced into extremist mindsets and interpretations of Islam, focusing on verses of the Qur'an that talk about battles and fighting (Shehu Kyari KII). However, even these occurrences are exceptions, not the rule.

Vulnerability of out-of-school children

There is strong consensus that OOSC are highly vulnerable to radicalisation, recruitment by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), early marriage, child labour, and trafficking (Agunyai & Ojatorotu, 2021; Akinyetun, 2023; Okonkwo, 2022). Boys, particularly Almajiri, are targeted for armed group recruitment or criminal activities, while girls face heightened risks of sexual exploitation and early marriage (UNSG, 2024; Katami et al., 2023). The fact that Almajiri boys are sent away from their families, often without resources, contributes to their vulnerability. Indeed, the NCAOOSCE chief executive has qualified "Almajiri as a form of family planning, but post-birth." COVID-19 further exacerbated these risks, with mass displacement of Almajiri boys across the country, and school closures pushing thousands more youth onto the streets (Agunyai & Ojatorotu, 2021; Okonkwo, 2022). This is also supported by the views of communities. ERICC and the Common Heritage Foundation (2024) for instance underline that "communities in Madagali LGA compel children to attend school or other learning institutions because they see education as a way to prevent children from becoming radicalised and recruited by Boko Haram."

Tensions between Western-Christian and Arab-Islamic education

ERICC (2024) and Tsolakakis et al. (2025) provide Sahelian insights, showing that tensions between secular and religious education systems can become flashpoints for grievance when one is perceived as dominating or excluding the other. In Nigeria, **parallel systems operate with little coordination, leading to duplication, inefficiency, and exclusion**. While some communities resist "Western" education as culturally alien, others see state neglect of Islamic schools as discriminatory. This is also mirrored by state officials. An ERICC Consortium working paper finds that:

In the three focus states of this study (Adamawa, Borno and Kaduna), officials express frustration that the federal government typically does not recognise the long-standing network of religious schools as a valid form of education. According to these respondents, the absence of federal-level recognition, where religious schools are not acknowledged as a form of basic education, restricts the application of federal funds and curriculum regulation in these schools. Key informants expressed further regret that examinations in non-formal schools, such as the Tsangaya schools, were not standardised to allow students

equivalence with formal school systems ... This points to vertical and horizontal incoherence resulting from differential treatment of religious schools in conflict-affected states by federal and state governments. (Sarwar et al., 2024, p.16)

Deradicalisation and rehabilitation programming

Salihi (2021), Omirin (2024), and Chukwuma (2023) assess deradicalisation and rehabilitation efforts such as Operation Safe Corridor, Yellow Ribbon, and Borno Tsangaya reforms, which combine formal education, vocational training, and psychosocial support. Such programmes show potential, as many beneficiaries have reintegrated into civilian life with improved employability thanks to a combination of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) and TVET reportedly enabling the uptake of small income-generating activities.

Critiques point to gaps in transparency, lack of monitoring, limited psychological support, limited economic reintegration, limited gender sensitivity, inadequate community consultation, and poor linkages to local peacebuilding structures. Girls formerly involved with armed groups, especially those that have returned pregnant, face particular stigma and neglect, underlining the need for gender-sensitive approaches and dedicated services (UNSG, 2024; Okonkwo, 2022).

National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Education

Financial and governance dimensions also matter. The National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Education (NCAOOSCE) was formally established by an Act of Parliament on Children's Day, 27 May 2023, as a major federal response to the plight of Almajiri and out-of-school children. Its creation reflects government recognition of their vulnerability to recruitment by non-state armed groups. The Commission's mandate includes delivering multi-modal education, combating illiteracy, and equipping marginalised youth with skills to prevent exploitation and facilitate integration into society. A model school was set up in February 2025 in Kaduna and is showing signs of success. The Commission plans to create one in each of the Northern States, targeting those who have already memorised the Qur'an and providing them with a 6-month accelerated course, followed by the National Board of Arabic and Islamic studies examination (NCAOOSCE KII). However, different institutions, including the Mass Education Agency, UBEC, and the Nomadic Education Agency, all continue to cover Almajiri education. To streamline institutional arrangements and harmonise the level and type of support provided to Qur'anic schools, it has been suggested that all other national level institutions should now fold into NCAOOSCE, where Almajiri and OOSC are concerned. The commission's operations will be strengthened by opening offices in each of the 36 states (NCAOOSCE KII).

Broader structural and governance factors

Several authors (Afoaku, 2017; Faluyi, 2017) stress that the impact of education on security cannot be understood in isolation from broader governance failures, poverty, and marginalisation. Without tackling the underlying drivers of exclusion, education reforms risk being superficial or even counterproductive.

Conclusion

Poor coverage, content, quality, and relevance of education are key drivers of youth vulnerability in Northern Nigeria. The emphasis, however, differs across studies: some highlight religious manipulation (Akubor, 2016; Afoaku, 2017), others the failures of integration (Olaniran, 2018; Okadigwe et al., 2019), and others the cross-cutting importance of governance, poverty, and inequality (International Alert, 2022). Sahelian evidence (Dieng, 2025; Tsolakis et al., 2025) adds comparative insight, underlining that similar patterns emerge across the region.

Beyond the broad trends, several studies provide detailed insights into how Almajiri and other Qur’anic education systems interact with local political economies. Dukawa et al. (2022) explore how mosques could be mobilised as institutions for Almajiri reform by strengthening Islamic governance structures, community accountability, and resource mobilisation through *zakat* and *waqf* (charitable donations in Islam). However, they also highlight the dangers of romanticising religious institutions without addressing underlying inequalities or abuses.

Qualé (2017) points to overlapping institutional responsibilities among federal, state, and religious authorities, leading to fragmented interventions and blurred accountability. This institutional fragmentation limits the potential for holistic integration or reform.

Gender dimensions also emerge across the evidence base. Okonkwo (2022), UNSG (2024), and Katami et al. (2023) document how girls face specific risks, including exclusion from both secular and religious education, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and stigmatisation. Deradicalisation programmes rarely address girls’ needs adequately, often focusing on male ex-combatants, despite evidence that girls associated with armed groups face severe reintegration challenges (UNSG, 2024; Salihu, 2021). Gender-responsive education, protection, and livelihood programmes are critical to filling this gap.

The Lafiya Sarari initiative developed by Neem Foundation for orphaned and displaced children in selected Boko Haram-affected communities in Borno State appears to offer potential in this area. They created a fit-for-purpose and conflict-sensitive curriculum, weaving core values like peace, justice, and tolerance into the Nigerian curriculum, not as standalone subjects but transversally, to strengthen perceptions of social cohesion (KII Alhassan). Over 100 girls affected by Boko Haram have benefited from this in safe, accessible, and confidential learning spaces in a pilot phase since 2017, through an accelerated education approach, including critical thinking and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) as well as life-skills (Khana Group, n.d.). It is noted that community integration was a critical success factor, and indeed that the approach has generated positive change in communities about girls’ education and the type of content that is acceptable (Riaz KII). NEEM also tested an adopt-a-school approach, which provided local government authorities with some exposure, in the perspective of them engaging with the initiative to take it to scale (KII Alhassan; Neem Foundation, 2024).

3. RQ3. THE INCLUSION OF PEACE AND STABILITY THEMES AND APPROACHES IN EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

This section analyses to what extent peacebuilding, stability, and social cohesion themes have been integrated into education programmes and provision for adolescents and youth in NE and NW Nigeria, including host populations, IDPs, and reintegrated fighters or their families.

Peace and tolerance promotion in Islamic education

A central debate across sources is whether Islamic education systems, particularly Almajiri, Islamiyya, and Tsangaya schools, promote peace or fuel radicalisation. Akubor (2016), Afoaku (2017), and Faluyi (2017) warn that the manipulation of religious education spaces by political or extremist actors has, in some instances, spread grievance-based narratives or enabled child recruitment. However, studies such as Mustafa (2020), Dukawa et al. (2022), and Omirin (2024) emphasise that Islamic curricula can be harnessed for peacebuilding by promoting intellectual security, tolerance, and nonviolence. The Borno Tsangaya reform, for example, integrates age-appropriate religious instruction with life skills, civic education, and vocational training, underscoring Islamic values of peace and social responsibility.

De Silva (n.d.) stresses the importance of embedding peace education and social cohesion into all streams—not only “Western” schools but also Islamic institutions and vocational centres. Peacebuilding is not neutral: if delivered in ways that alienate religious actors or disregard local cultural contexts, it

risks backfiring. Conversely, when teachers and community leaders are engaged as co-creators of curricula, peace education can enhance social trust and intercommunal relationships.

National curriculum and pedagogical approaches

At the formal system level, UNICEF’s Conflict Sensitivity and Peacebuilding Programming Guide (2016) highlights the importance of efforts to mainstream peacebuilding, social cohesion, and tolerance into the national curriculum, including through civic education, moral instruction, and social studies. However, implementation remains uneven. Many teachers lack the training, resources, or confidence to deliver participatory, inclusive pedagogies or to handle sensitive issues such as religious pluralism, gender equality, or intercommunal tensions (Ogunode et al., 2022). Efforts to build “soft skills” such as conflict resolution, critical thinking, and empathy are often undercut by overcrowded classrooms, exam pressures, and rote learning traditions.

The inclusion of peacebuilding and social cohesion in the curriculum is to be carefully managed and offered to every type of education institution, not just Qur’anic schools. This would help avoid any perception of stigmatisation of certain groups of learners as associated with insecurity. Such substantive changes therefore raise issues of political will, funding, inclination, and time, and should be introduced in a staggered way (Chowdhury KII).

Psychosocial support and social cohesion

In conflict-affected areas, education has become an entry point for psychosocial support, trauma healing, and social cohesion activities (UNICEF, 2022). Safe school initiatives (Ogunode et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2022b) combine physical protection measures with training for teachers, school-based management committees, and communities on risk reduction, gender-sensitive safety, and early warning. Yet, challenges persist: in many cases, safe school components are narrowly focused on hardening infrastructure, with insufficient investment in softer dimensions of inclusion, well-being, and trust-building.

Conclusion

Integrating peace and stability themes into education in NE and NW Nigeria requires going beyond curriculum change to address teacher capacity, community engagement, service delivery, and systemic resilience. Lessons from national and regional experience point to the need for holistic, inclusive, and locally adapted approaches, underpinned by sustained political and financial commitment.

Beyond the formal sector, non-formal and community-based programmes are critical arenas for peacebuilding. Dukawa et al. (2022) argue that mosques and Islamic learning centres have an untapped potential to serve as platforms for reconciliation, moral instruction, and intergenerational dialogue. However, without investment in teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and oversight, these spaces risk reproducing exclusionary narratives. Mustafa (2020) emphasises the importance of intellectual security, arguing that Islamic curricula can promote critical thinking, resilience against extremist messaging, and respect for difference—if designed and delivered with intention.

Youth engagement and agency are other vital dimensions. Chukwuma (2023) calls for “catch them young” approaches, integrating virtue ethics, civic education, and leadership development from early childhood onwards, in order to focus on values formation alongside literacy and vocational skills. Abdullahi (2020) describes innovative youth-led initiatives, such as eTrash2Cash in Bauchi and Kano, which blend environmental action, income generation, and social entrepreneurship to build resilience and social capital among Almajiri youth. These programmes, though small in scale, highlight the potential of economic empowerment as part of broader stability strategies to create alternative pathways to dignity, income, and social inclusion, reducing vulnerability to recruitment. These models

demonstrate that peacebuilding is not only about what is taught but about the opportunities, networks, and recognition young people experience.

Psychosocial dimensions also require attention. Studies (UNICEF, 2022; UNSG, 2024) show that young people affected by conflict face deep psychological scars—grief, fear, displacement, and identity loss. School-based psychosocial support, peer networks, and referral mechanisms are crucial but often underfunded and fragmented. Girls face particular challenges, with Okonkwo (2022) and Katami et al. (2023) documenting how stigma, sexual violence, and exclusion compound their marginalisation. Deradicalisation and reintegration programmes rarely prioritise girls' needs, focusing largely on male ex-combatants, despite evidence that girls and young women play multiple roles in armed groups, as combatants, supporters, wives, or victims.

Integration between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding approaches remains limited. Alkali (2019) and ETF (2025) warn that donor-driven programmes risk becoming siloed, short-term, and projectised, with insufficient attention to local ownership or sustainability. UNESCO (2025) calls for a more strategic use of shrinking ODA resources, focusing on system strengthening, local capacity, and multi-year commitments.

Finally, community perceptions and local legitimacy are central. As discussed, peace education and deradicalisation efforts will only succeed if they resonate with local norms, values, and aspirations. Top-down models risk rejection or backlash if seen as externally imposed or culturally insensitive. Engaging traditional leaders, religious authorities, parents, youth organisations, and civil society groups is essential to building trust, shaping locally relevant content, and fostering horizontal and vertical social cohesion.

In conclusion, building peace and stability through education in NE and NW Nigeria demands a holistic approach: transforming what is taught, how it is taught, who is included, and how schools connect to broader social, economic, and governance systems. It requires long-term, integrated investments that link education with livelihoods, protection, psychosocial well-being, governance reform, and social cohesion—always with local voices at the centre.

4. RQ4. THE LIKELY IMPACT OF RECENT ODA CUTS ON EDUCATION PROVISION

This section examines the likely impact of recent official development assistance (ODA) cuts on education provision in aid-reliant areas of NE and NW Nigeria, aiming to assess the nature of ODA support and coverage, the scale of cuts, practitioner concerns, and possible mitigation strategies.

Nature of ODA support to education

Over the past two decades, ODA has played a critical role in supporting education in NE and NW Nigeria, particularly in conflict-affected states like Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. Alkali (2019), ETF (2025), and UNESCO (2025) document how bilateral/multilateral donors and NGOs—including USAID, DFID/FCDO, UNICEF, Save the Children, and the World Bank—have invested in a wide range of areas: school rehabilitation, teacher training, curriculum development, accelerated learning programmes for out-of-school children (OOSC), psychosocial support, education-in-emergency (EiE) responses, safe school initiatives, and vocational training. These interventions have often filled critical gaps left by weak state capacity and underfunded local governments.

Nigeria received about USD 370 million on average per year of aid for education over 2021–24¹. These figures are among the highest for any African country. The distribution is 92% classified as non-

¹ About USD 18 million reported in FTS, over USD 300 million reported in IATI, and about USD 18 million from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE)

humanitarian. Of the humanitarian, 90% is classified as UN-coordinated appeals (UNESCO and ECW, 2025).

Level of service coverage achieved

According to ETF (2025) and UNICEF (2022), ODA-funded programmes have reached millions of children and youth over the past decade. For example, the Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) supported by UNICEF and partners was implemented in over 11 states, training thousands of teachers and school-based management committees. Accelerated learning and non-formal education initiatives, including integration of Tsangaya and Almajiri schools, were piloted in Kano, Sokoto, and Bauchi, reaching vulnerable youth (DAI, 2024; Okadigwe et al., 2019). Vocational programmes, such as those documented by Bekuma (2021) and Abdullahi (2020), created alternative pathways for youth empowerment. However, coverage remains uneven, with many marginalised groups, especially girls, older youth, and those in remote rural areas, still under-served (Okonkwo, 2022; Katami et al., 2023).

Scale of the cuts

The scale of ODA cuts is substantial. ETF (2025) and UNESCO (2025) warn of sharp declines in external funding to education following global financial pressures, shifting donor priorities, and domestic political changes in key donor countries. Overall, aid to education is likely to have fallen by a quarter of 2023 levels by 2027, marking the steepest decline since the 1990s (UNESCO GEM, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). USAID, once a major funder of basic and non-formal education programmes in Nigeria, has reduced its portfolio, while the FCDO has scaled back both education and humanitarian budgets. UNESCO (2025) notes that these **cuts are disproportionately affecting low-income, fragile states**—with Nigeria among the top five most impacted. The reduction affects not only programme financing but also technical assistance, research, and policy dialogue capacities.

Over the 2019–23 period, the UK was the donor whose aid decreased by the greatest extent, from about USD 1 billion to under USD 400 million, with a 20% drop in aid for education, representing about USD 73 million. The United Kingdom was the first to reduce its ODA share, from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income in 2021, and in February 2025 announced plans to lower it further to 0.3% by 2027 (UNESCO, 2025).

Similar trends are observed with the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, and Switzerland. While these cuts are smaller than those announced by other donors, they target education, including support to UNESCO and the GPE. The most extensive cuts however are those made by the United States, previously the largest bilateral donor to education. The country suspended 83% of its aid in January 2025 with a stop-work order affecting USAID-administered programmes in Nigeria, such as the Learn to Read programme (2022–27; USD 48 million – ETF, 2025) and the Opportunity to Learn programme (1,000 2nd shift schools closed overnight – Riaz KI). Taken together, the combined effect of these reductions could amount to a 14% drop in global aid to education, relative to the most recent levels (ETF, 2025).

Naturally, education is not the only sector to be impacted, and demobilisation/re-integration programmes are also preparing for the impact of cuts. Such is the case for instance of the DRR IOM Programme supporting Operation Safe Corridor, which is mainly funded by FCDO's Integrated Security Fund (ISF). Following ISF review, the programme will not be continued beyond March 2026. This is expected to significantly impact the programme as funding is deemed to have immensely improved the condition of the camp and the ex-fighters. Conversations around the exit strategy and sustainability are underway (Mbonu KI).

Practitioner concerns

Studies such as ETF (2025) highlight deep practitioner concerns about the effects of ODA cuts. These include fears of: (i) programmatic collapse of integrated Almajiri and Tsangaya school reforms; (ii) loss of accelerated learning and vocational training initiatives; (iii) interruption of safe school measures, including gender-sensitive protection and psychosocial support; (iv) reversal of gains in girls' education

and inclusion; and (v) erosion of local civil society capacity, as NGOs dependent on donor funding downsize or close. Practitioners also worry about increased community resentment if externally supported services for IDPs are withdrawn without transition planning, risking social tensions and undermining trust.

As underlined by ETF (2025), “USAID’s dismantling jeopardises decades of progress in global education, with the most severe impacts felt in fragile and conflict-affected regions. Without urgent intervention, the loss of USAID’s funding and leadership risks exacerbating inequalities, destabilising vulnerable regions, and leaving millions of children and youth without access to quality education.” There is tangible concern that learners who are abruptly abandoned from terminated programmes are more prone to radicalisation and recruitment (Ismail KII).

Validating this concern, the evidence base points to clear risks if ODA cuts are not mitigated. Studies (Afoaku, 2017; Faluyi, 2017; Agunyai & Ojatorotu, 2021) warn that educational exclusion, particularly among youth, is a key driver of instability, vulnerability to recruitment by non-state armed groups, and intercommunal tensions. Programmes that combine education, livelihoods, and psychosocial support are essential components of resilience. Their collapse risks deepening grievances, fuelling radicalisation, and undoing years of investment in social cohesion (Salihu, 2021; UNSG, 2024).

The UK aid 0.7% to 0.5% rollback already had a significant impact on programme scale and sustainability in Nigeria, in particular on learning programmes (Teaching at the right level, among others). There is concern that humanitarian education will be significantly affected by further cuts (EiE, IDP camps, ISF), with a down-scaling of activities, reach, and impact (Mbonu KII).

Mitigation strategies

Despite these challenges, several mitigation strategies are emerging. UNESCO (2025) highlights the importance of: (i) transitioning ownership to state and local governments, including through budgetary commitments and domestic resource mobilisation; (ii) leveraging community structures, including religious and traditional institutions, to sustain non-formal education provision; and (iii) integrating peacebuilding and education objectives into broader development planning. Prior recommendations already included developing hybrid financing models, including public-private partnerships, diaspora contributions, and zakat funds (Dukawa et al., 2022).

To make shrinking aid levels more effective, more aid needs to be channelled through national budgets (UNESCO, 2025). In turn, governments should seek sustainable ways to strengthen local education systems, co-opting civil society and the private sector, but also by holding LGAs accountable for budgets and results (Alhassan KII). However, it is important to also consider the risk factors of channelling funds through government systems; for example, in many sub-Saharan states, where financial allocations may be partly shaped by patronage dynamics, this could risk reinforcing unequal patterns of distribution.

Willingness and capacity of government and communities

Alkali (2019) and ETF (2025) warn that international donor withdrawal, such as the scaling back of USAID support, risks undermining promising initiatives if domestic financing is not mobilised. Without sustainable financing models, especially in aid-reliant NE states, gains in educational coverage and peacebuilding can rapidly unravel. UNESCO (2025) calls for “tough decisions” to prioritise funding, including difficult trade-offs between emergency responses and long-term system strengthening.

However, while federal and state governments have expressed rhetorical commitments to sustaining education provision, their capacity to do so remains constrained (ETF, 2025; Alkali, 2019). State governments, particularly in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, face fiscal pressures from security spending, displacement management, and social services, limiting room for education investment. Local

communities, including religious actors, play a vital role, especially in sustaining Tsangaya and Islamiyya schools, but lack resources to absorb large-scale service demands.

For instance, when 1,000 schools supported by the USAID Opportunity to Learn programme closed overnight, only 20% could be supported by the Borno State Education Commission, and considering that 80% of state formal schools are closed due to the insurgency, there has been no alternative for most pupils but to just go home (Riaz KII). Promising models of community engagement exist, such as school-based management committees and local zakat funds, but it is important to note that these are no substitute for sustained public investment.

Conclusion

There is broad consensus that global bilateral, multilateral, and ODA cuts pose a major challenge to humanitarian responses at large, including education provision and peacebuilding in NE and NW Nigeria. In response, some experts (UNESCO, 2025; ETF, 2025) call for tough prioritisation and system-level reforms, arguing that limited resources should be focused on scalable, government-owned models. Others (Alkali, 2019; Dukawa et al., 2022), however, stress the importance of community-driven, contextually embedded approaches, leveraging local assets.

The likely impact of recent ODA cuts on education provision in NE and NW Nigeria is severe, with far-reaching implications for adolescent and youth well-being, social cohesion, and conflict resilience. Mitigating these impacts requires coordinated, multi-level action, sustained domestic investment, and a reimagining of how education, peacebuilding, and development objectives intersect in fragile contexts.

Beyond the immediate programmatic impacts, several sources (UNESCO, 2025; ETF, 2025) caution about the **ripple effects of ODA cuts on the broader education ecosystem**. Donor funding has historically supported not only direct service delivery but also teacher training colleges, education management information systems (EMIS), research institutions, and monitoring and evaluation capacity. Without sustained support, there is a risk that gains in data quality, evidence-based policymaking, and sector coordination will erode, leaving national actors less equipped to plan, adapt, and respond to crises.

Moreover, local NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs), many of which are highly dependent on donor funds, face existential threats. Alkali (2019) highlights how CSOs have historically played indispensable roles in reaching marginalised groups, providing culturally sensitive services, and holding governments accountable. Their downsizing or closure risks creating service gaps, reducing community trust, and weakening citizen voice in education governance.

ODA cuts may lead to **especially pronounced impacts on gender and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in schools**. Okonkwo (2022), UNSG (2024), and Katami et al. (2023) emphasise that girls' education initiatives—often donor-funded—are among the most vulnerable. From school feeding and menstrual hygiene management to scholarships, safe transport, and gender-sensitive teacher deployment, these programmes address the specific barriers girls face in accessing and completing education. Their reduction or removal could reverse fragile gains, with long-term consequences for gender equality, fertility, health, and economic outcomes. Likewise, the ongoing provision of WASH in schools is threatened, as development partners have played a key role in promoting global standards in this particular area (Mbonu KII).

Another critical dimension is the **intersection of education with peacebuilding and security**. De Silva (n.d.) argues that education is not just a social service but a peace dividend: a tangible sign of state presence, social contract, and future opportunity. Where education collapses, grievances multiply, intergroup tensions harden, and the allure of violent actors grows. Programmes that integrate education, livelihoods, psychosocial support, and community reconciliation are especially valuable in fragile contexts—yet are often the first to be cut when funding declines.

Some promising **examples of local adaptations** exist. Dukawa et al. (2022) describe how mosque committees in Kano and Sokoto have mobilised zakat and waqf resources to sustain Tsangaya schools, while Abdullahi (2020) highlights community-led youth entrepreneurship models that combine training, mentorship, and market access. However, as ETF (2025) cautions, these local efforts, while inspiring, cannot substitute for systemic financing. Without predictable, long-term investments, gains will remain patchy, small-scale, and fragile.

The Sahelian experience provides important comparative lessons. ERICC (2024), Tsolakis et al. (2025), and Dieng (2025) show how regional education systems under crisis have combined mobile learning, community-based schooling, religious–secular integration, and cross-border collaboration to sustain access and relevance. Applying these lessons in NE/NW Nigeria requires contextualisation, adaptation, and political will. Such approaches fall well within the scope and mandate of the NCAOOSCE and could be supported by development partners (Mikailu Ibrahim, personal communication, July 2025).

Finally, **policy coherence** is a recurring theme. Alkali (2019) and UNESCO (2025) argue that Nigeria needs a clear, integrated national strategy linking education, peacebuilding, and development goals—with roles, responsibilities, and resourcing mapped across federal, state, and local levels. This includes clear frameworks for engaging religious actors, aligning non-formal education streams, and mainstreaming inclusion, gender equality, and accountability. Without such coherence, even well-funded programmes risk fragmentation, duplication, or unintended harm.

In conclusion, the impact of ODA cuts on education in NE and NW Nigeria extends beyond budgets to touch on social cohesion, governance, gender justice, and long-term peacebuilding. Addressing these challenges will require not only technical fixes or stopgap funding, but a collective reimagining of how education systems serve as platforms for resilience, inclusion, and social transformation.

5. RQ5. LESSONS LEARNED IN TERMS OF THE EDUCATION-STABILITY NEXUS IN NEIGHBOURING SAHELIAN COUNTRIES

This section explores the lessons that can be drawn from neighbouring Sahelian countries regarding the links between education, instability, and radicalisation, with particular attention to Almajiri-type education.

Core beliefs about the education–conflict–security nexus

Across the Sahel—including Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania—there is broad recognition that education is a double-edged sword in fragile settings. ERICC (2024) and Tsolakis et al. (2025) highlight that while lack of education and poor-quality and exclusionary systems fuel grievances and vulnerability to recruitment by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), education that is poorly designed or delivered can also exacerbate tensions. For example, curricula perceived as culturally alien, inequitable, or secular-biased have sparked resentment, especially in communities with strong Islamic identities. Conversely, education systems that recognise pluralism, promote inclusion, and link to livelihoods can enhance resilience and social cohesion.

Qur’anic education in the Sahel

A central question is the role of Qur’anic education—including Almajiri-type systems—in the radicalisation process. ERICC (2024), Dieng (2025), and Save the Children (2021) caution against simplistic narratives. While extremist groups in the Sahel (e.g., Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) have exploited Qur’anic learning networks to recruit or spread propaganda, most Qur’anic schools are not inherently violent. The risk emerges when poverty, state neglect, and lack of oversight converge, leaving youth vulnerable to manipulation. Niger’s experience,

for instance, shows that integrating Qur’anic and secular curricula, improving teacher training, and engaging religious leaders as peacebuilders can mitigate these risks (Dieng, 2025). Conversely, also in Niger, the decision to abolish the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and removal of related equity and inclusion subjects from the curriculum, has provided fertile ground for religious groups to claim credibility for their anti-Western views (Chowdhury KII).

The agenda of **Qur’anic education in the Sahel is a politically driven narrative**. Qur’anic schools fill a void left open by governments that cannot provide formal education for all, train and employ enough teachers, etc. Paradoxically, “decolonisation” efforts and those aiming to create a national identity that is distinct from that promoted by old development partners create favourable ground for religious groups to gain traction on the back of anti-Western sentiment. This discourse in turn gains legitimacy at the community level by the absence of a certification board for Qur’anic education, and the resulting lack of recognition. So legitimacy is all enmeshed and actually works for both sides of the conflict. Government legitimacy is perceived to be stronger where they support Islamic schools (Chowdhury KII).

Key differences between UNICEF-supported Qur’anic education integration efforts in Niger and Nigeria’s Almajiri reform approaches

1. Delivery model and integration philosophy

- In **Niger**, UNICEF-supported Qur’anic schools are retained as primary education providers, with seamless integration of literacy, numeracy, and life skills into existing religious instruction. This is done using low-cost, bilingual, modular curricula aligned with national standards and taught by trained Qur’anic teachers (often through accelerated learning).
- In **Nigeria**, reforms have involved creating parallel formal structures (e.g. Almajiri Model Schools) or absorbing children into mainstream schools, rather than adapting existing Qur’anic systems. This has led to disruption or rejection by traditional mallams and communities who view it as external imposition.

2. Community ownership and mallam engagement

- In **Niger**, initiatives emphasise deep collaboration with Qur’anic teachers (marabouts), including their direct involvement in curriculum design, training, and monitoring. This builds local legitimacy and minimises resistance.
- In **Nigeria**, reforms have often bypassed mallams or treated them as obstacles rather than partners. This has undermined trust and contributed to low uptake and sustainability, especially in Northern states where traditional Islamic education retains strong social authority.

3. Pace, scale, and flexibility of implementation

- In **Niger**, programmes are typically small-scale, adaptive, and gradual, with flexibility to align learning times with Qur’anic sessions and local calendars. They prioritise basic functional skills (literacy, hygiene, numeracy) over rigid academic targets.
- In **Nigeria**, many initiatives are top-down and formalised, such as the Almajiri Education Programme (2010–2015), with heavy infrastructure investment and limited adaptability. The focus is often on institutional reform, rather than learner-centred, flexible models that accommodate itinerant or informal learners.

Programme impacts

Several regional programmes offer important lessons. In Niger, UNICEF-supported initiatives have piloted the integration of basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills into Qur'anic schools, reaching thousands of children otherwise excluded from formal schooling. External evaluations (Dieng, 2025) highlight positive impacts on learning outcomes, social inclusion, and resilience, but also challenges: underfunded systems, political resistance, and community mistrust.

In Chad, mobile schooling and community-based education have supported access in remote or conflict-affected areas, though sustainability remains a concern (Tsolakis et al., 2025). Mali and Burkina Faso's experiments with accelerated learning and reintegration of OOSC show promise, but face bottlenecks in scaling, financing, and linkage to formal pathways (ERICC, 2024).

Drivers of success and failure

ERICC (2024) and Tsolakis et al. (2025) identify several **cross-cutting drivers of success**: (i) meaningful community engagement, including parents, youth, religious leaders, and local authorities; (ii) alignment with local aspirations, values, and livelihoods; (iii) flexible, context-sensitive delivery models, including mobile, hybrid, or bilingual approaches; (iv) investment in teacher capacity and motivation; and (v) integration with wider peacebuilding, governance, and social protection efforts. Conversely, programmes that are top-down, rigid, or disconnected from local realities tend to fail or backfire, eroding trust and legitimacy.

Moreover, cross-border lessons from the Sahel (Dieng, 2025; Tsolakis et al., 2025; ERICC, 2024) show that **resilience in education systems under chronic crisis requires multi-layered strategies**, including community-based education, mobile learning units, integration of Qur'anic and non-formal systems with secular education, and local ownership. These studies underscore the importance of embedding peacebuilding into education systems as part of a broader resilience strategy, not as an isolated intervention. Attention to both horizontal (intergroup) and vertical (state-community) cohesion is identified as another critical success factor.

Intersectional dimensions to consider

Regional evidence underscores the importance of **addressing gendered barriers and vulnerabilities**. Save the Children (2021) and Dieng (2025) document how girls in conflict-affected Sahelian contexts face heightened risks of exclusion, early marriage, sexual violence, and exploitation. Programmes that combine education with protection, psychosocial support, and economic empowerment show more promising outcomes. Yet, gender remains a blind spot in many education-in-emergencies (EiE) and deradicalisation initiatives, with limited attention to girls' and young women's specific needs, roles, and aspirations.

Save the Children (2021), in its child-led research, highlights **children's own voices and priorities, including safety, belonging, and the ability to influence decisions that affect their lives**. Save the Children (2021) underscores how conflict, displacement, and attacks on schools shape not only educational outcomes but psychosocial well-being and perceptions of fairness, belonging, and hope. These insights are directly applicable to the NE and NW Nigerian context, where young people are not only victims or beneficiaries but critical agents of change.

A key lesson is that education alone is insufficient to prevent radicalisation or promote stability. ERICC (2024), and De Silva (n.d.) stress that **integrated approaches linking education with livelihoods, governance reform, social protection, and reconciliation** are essential. For example, combining basic education with vocational training, apprenticeships, and youth entrepreneurship has helped expand opportunities and reduce grievances in parts of Niger and Chad. Similarly, school-based peacebuilding and intergroup dialogue initiatives, when well-facilitated, can help repair fractured social fabrics.

Regional experiences highlight the **importance of political leadership and policy coherence**. Dieng (2025) and UNESCO (2025) note that integrating Qur’anic and secular education requires not only technical solutions but also political consensus, regulatory frameworks, and sustained financing. Piecemeal or donor-driven efforts, without government buy-in or institutionalisation, struggle to scale or endure. Mali’s experience shows the pitfalls of fragmented, projectised approaches, while Niger’s relative progress underscores the dividends of national leadership and intersectoral coordination.

Conclusion

While the Sahel offers both cautionary and inspiring lessons for Nigeria, debate remains around transferability: some experts caution against importing models wholesale, emphasising Nigeria’s unique religious, political, and demographic landscape. Others argue that regional experiences offer valuable templates—if adapted with care and local ownership.

Learning from Sahelian neighbours offers Nigeria a rich set of insights on how to navigate the education–stability nexus. The evidence points to the importance of integrated, inclusive, context-sensitive approaches that bridge formal and non-formal education, engage religious actors, address gender and youth agency, and link education to broader peacebuilding, livelihoods, and governance goals. Applying these lessons requires investment, political will, and above all, listening to the voices of communities and young people themselves.

Beyond broad regional lessons, the Sahel experience also offers practical insights on managing humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus programming. Tsolakis et al. (2025) and UNESCO (2025) highlight how education sector actors in Niger, Chad, and Mali have increasingly sought to align emergency education delivery with longer-term development and peacebuilding objectives. This includes joint planning between education, child protection, and social welfare sectors; pooling donor resources; and embedding resilience indicators into national education plans. Nigeria, facing similar HDP challenges in NE and NW, might benefit from adopting integrated frameworks that prevent fragmentation and improve coherence across actors.

A further critical dimension is the role of religious and traditional leaders as peacebuilders. Dieng (2025) and ERICC (2024) document successful initiatives in Niger and Chad where imams, marabouts, and traditional chiefs have been engaged not only as gatekeepers but as active partners in promoting social cohesion through education. By integrating religious values of tolerance, solidarity, and nonviolence into both Qur’anic and secular school settings, these programmes have helped bridge divides and reinforce social trust. For Nigeria, where mistrust between state and religious institutions has hampered reform, these examples offer valuable pathways for relationship-building and co-creation of solutions.

Youth participation also emerges as a central theme. Save the Children (2021) underscores that children and youth are not merely beneficiaries but agents of peacebuilding in their own right. Across Sahelian contexts, child-led peace clubs, youth parliaments, and student networks have helped amplify young people’s voices, foster peer-to-peer dialogue, and generate local solutions to tensions and violence. Nigeria’s education sector can draw on these models to empower its large youth population, particularly adolescents aged 10–26, as leaders and collaborators in building more inclusive, peaceful societies.

Inclusion of marginalised groups, especially girls, children with disabilities, and displaced populations, is another area of learning. Dieng (2025) reports that Sahelian programmes achieving the greatest reach and impact are those that explicitly target the most vulnerable—for example, by combining education interventions with cash transfers, child protection services, and social safety nets. Gender-responsive design, including addressing norms around early marriage, gender-based violence, and gendered labour burdens, has been shown to improve both education and protection outcomes. Nigeria’s ongoing challenges with early marriage, sexual violence in and around schools, and exclusion of girls from secondary and vocational streams make these lessons especially salient.

Financial sustainability is a persistent challenge across the Sahel, as it is in Nigeria. Tsolakakis et al. (2025) note that while donor funding has catalysed innovation, national governments must increase domestic resource mobilisation, budget allocations, and policy commitments to sustain gains. Public–private partnerships, zakat contributions, and diaspora remittances are among the financing mechanisms explored in Sahelian settings, offering ideas for Nigerian policymakers seeking to reduce dependency on volatile ODA flows.

Finally, the importance of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) cannot be overstated. ERICC (2024) and UNESCO (2025) stress that too few regional programmes have invested in rigorous, participatory MEL systems, limiting their ability to track outcomes, adapt to changing contexts, and demonstrate impact. Embedding robust MEL frameworks, with disaggregated data on age, gender, displacement status, and disability, is critical for evidence–informed policymaking and accountability.

In summary, the Sahel offers Nigeria not a blueprint but a rich repertoire of experiences, innovations, and cautionary lessons that may guide efforts to strengthen and improve existing practices. Key takeaways include the need for integrated, cross–sectoral approaches; meaningful engagement of religious and traditional leaders; youth participation and agency; explicit inclusion of marginalised groups; diversified and sustainable financing; and robust monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems. Applying these insights in Nigeria will require adaptation to local contexts, political commitment, and above all, partnerships with the communities and young people most affected by conflict and exclusion.

6. RQ6. IMPACT OF INSECURITY AND CONFLICT ON EDUCATION PROVISION

This section analyses how insecurity and conflict affect education provision in NE and NW Nigeria, examining both supply– and demand–side impacts, attacks on education, and the consequences.

Supply–side challenges

Insecurity creates major barriers to education delivery. Innocent et al. (2021), UNICEF (2022), and UNSG (2024) document how insurgent violence, banditry, kidnapping, and communal clashes have destroyed infrastructure, displaced populations, killed or abducted teachers, and disrupted supply chains. The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI), as reported by UNICEF (2022) and Ogunode et al. (2022), responded to some of these challenges by strengthening physical infrastructure, introducing security protocols, and training school–based management committees. Yet, insecurity continues to prevent the opening or reopening of schools in affected areas, particularly in Borno, Yobe, Zamfara, and Katsina states.

Teachers are often on the frontline of this crisis. Okadigwe et al. (2019) and Alkali (2019) report that many **schools cannot retain qualified staff due to fear of violence, lack of support, or displacement.** The stress, trauma, and exhaustion faced by teachers in conflict settings impact not only retention but also teaching quality. Low morale, high absenteeism, and weak supervision further erode learning outcomes.

In addition to this, the **Lake Chad Basin conflict** also fuels instability in NE/NW Nigeria, through porous borders, arms flows, and militant movements—especially from the Cameroon axis. Cross–border displacement contributes to rising numbers of out–of–school children (OOSC), including unaccompanied minors and Qur’anic learners. These strain local education systems, complicate reintegration, and create recruitment risks. However, coordinated regional DDR efforts offer potential for stabilising youth through cross–border learning and protection mechanisms. While the Lake Chad governors’ forum pleaded for a common approach to the problem of resourcing Almajiri schools, the Nigerian government is reticent to provide support to Almajiri schools, out of fear this will attract new learners from neighbouring countries. (NCAOOSCE KII).

Demand-side challenges

On the demand side, **families increasingly withdraw children from school due to safety concerns.** Attacks on schools are among the most visible symbols of the education–insecurity nexus. UNSG (2024), Osimen et al. (2022), and UNICEF (2022b) report on mass abductions, targeted killings, arson, and occupation of school facilities by armed groups and military forces. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) identifies Nigeria as one of the world’s hotspots for attacks on education. Notably, NW Nigeria has seen a shift from Boko Haram attacks in the NE to mass kidnappings for ransom by armed bandits in Zamfara, Kaduna, and Niger states, compounding the crisis.

Save the Children (2021) and UNICEF (2022) estimate that over 1 million children are afraid to return to school, and girls are disproportionately affected due to **gendered safety risks.** Okonkwo (2022) highlights how sexual violence, harassment, and abduction during commutes or at school lead to parental reluctance to send daughters, particularly adolescents. Boys, meanwhile, are often pulled into informal work or recruited into non-state armed groups (NSAGs), especially when household livelihoods collapse (Afoaku, 2017; Agunyai & Ojabor, 2021).

Impact on education quality

The impact of conflict on education quality is profound. Beyond infrastructure destruction, insecurity disrupts curriculum delivery, reduces instructional time, and limits the availability of teaching and learning materials (Alkali, 2019; Ogunode et al., 2022). Teachers struggle to meet the diverse needs of conflict-affected learners, including traumatised children, displaced students, and overage returnees (DAI, 2024; Heyneman et al., 2022). Accelerated learning programmes, while promising, face challenges of scale, sustainability, and integration with formal systems (Okadigwe et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2022).

Social and psychological consequences

Insecurity also generates profound psychosocial impacts. Katami et al. (2023), Okonkwo (2022), and UNSG (2024) document how children affected by violence exhibit anxiety, depression, behavioural changes, and learning difficulties. Teachers and school administrators often lack the training, resources, or institutional support to provide psychosocial first aid, referrals, or ongoing care. Girls face compounded trauma due to conflict-related sexual violence, stigma, and exclusion, with few tailored services to support their recovery and reintegration (Salihu, 2021; Chukwuma, 2023).

Conclusion

There is broad consensus that insecurity severely disrupts education on both supply and demand sides, exacerbating poverty, grievance, and vulnerability to violence. Where narratives diverge is on solution pathways. Some analysts (Faluyi, 2017; Afoaku, 2017) call for stronger state security presence to stabilise education provision, while others (Dukawa et al., 2022) emphasise community-based protection, resilience, and peacebuilding. UNESCO (2025) stresses the need for integrated humanitarian–development–peacebuilding (HDP) approaches that bridge immediate service delivery with long-term system strengthening.

The impact of insecurity and conflict on education in NE and NW Nigeria is multidimensional, affecting not only access and quality but also safety, well-being, and social trust. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated, sustained efforts across sectors, levels of government, communities, and international partners, with a focus on resilience, inclusion, and local ownership.

A critical but underexamined dimension is the economic toll of conflict on education systems. ETF (2025) and UNESCO (2025) estimate that school closures, attacks, and displacement translate into billions of naira in lost lifetime earnings, reduced human capital, and weakened economic productivity. For girls, the cost is particularly steep: early marriage, pregnancy, and dropouts often permanently end educational trajectories, compounding cycles of poverty and inequality (Okonkwo, 2022; Katami et al.,

2023). Families who pull boys out of school due to insecurity may rationalise it as short-term survival, but the long-term impacts on skills, employment, and civic engagement are profound.

The HDP nexus is central to understanding adaptive strategies. ERICC (2024) and Tsolakis et al. (2025) highlight how Sahelian countries facing similar security crises have pioneered approaches such as mobile classrooms, hybrid religious–secular curricula, and joint education–protection programmes to keep children learning during crises. Nigeria has piloted similar models in the NE, including radio instruction, cash transfers to support school attendance, and community learning hubs (UNICEF, 2022; DAI, 2024), but scaling, coordination, and integration into government systems remain major challenges.

Community agency plays a powerful role in shaping educational resilience. Dukawa et al. (2022) and Abdullahi (2020) document how local religious and community leaders in Kano and Sokoto have mobilized zakat resources, volunteers, and informal networks to maintain learning for displaced or at-risk youth. Similarly, Bekuma (2021) highlights youth-led entrepreneurship schemes like eTrash2Cash, which combine environmental clean-up with skills training and income generation, reducing both educational and economic vulnerability.

Psychosocial resilience is increasingly recognised as essential. Katami et al. (2023), Okonkwo (2022), and UNSG (2024) emphasise that beyond material reconstruction, rebuilding trust, hope, and belonging is central to post-conflict recovery. Initiatives integrating mental health, trauma counselling, peer support, and creative expression into school programmes are emerging but underfunded. Without addressing these “soft” dimensions, even well-built schools and trained teachers may struggle to retain or re-engage affected children.

Gender-responsive approaches are crucial yet often overlooked. Save the Children (2021) and De Silva (n.d.) show that girls face unique barriers in conflict zones: not only heightened risk of violence and exploitation but also discriminatory norms, unpaid care burdens, and lack of female teachers or safe spaces. Programmes that successfully engage girls often combine education with protection, health, livelihoods, and family engagement, underscoring the need for cross-sectoral collaboration.

Accountability and governance are persistent gaps. Faluyi (2017) and Afoaku (2017) argue that weak state presence, corruption, and militarisation undermine both security and education outcomes. Militarised approaches to school protection can backfire, eroding trust and exposing children to new risks. Instead, community-centred safety models, including school-based early warning systems and local peace committees, are recommended as more sustainable solutions.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SUCCESS OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

This section highlights the key factors influencing the success of policies and programmes in NE and NW Nigeria and offers practical recommendations to improve the integration of education and prevention of violent extremism (PVE) programmes. Policies and programmes in NE and NW Nigeria will only achieve meaningful impact when they are contextually grounded, inclusive, multi-sectoral, and anchored in genuine local partnerships. Education and PVE integration is not a standalone technical task but a transformative agenda touching the political, social, and economic fabric of conflict-affected communities.

Political commitment and policy coherence

The presence (or absence) of political will at federal and state levels is a central determinant of success. Sources such as Alkali (2019), ETF (2025), and UNESCO (2025) highlight that education reforms, particularly those aiming to integrate non-formal Islamic education, require alignment across ministries (Education, Religious Affairs, Youth, Security) and sustained budgetary support. Without this, initiatives like the Almajiri integration programme (Okadigwe et al., 2019; Dukawa et al., 2022) struggle to move beyond the pilot phase. Frequent turnover of leadership, lack of clear mandates, and overreliance on donor financing undermine long-term gains (UNESCO, 2025; UNICEF, 2022).

Sociocultural considerations

For Islamic/Qur'anic education reform programmes to succeed will also hinge on several delicate and intricately intertwined sociocultural factors. At the base of these appears to be the need for an intentional and vocal recognition of what Almajiri education is to its mallams, learners, and communities. They perceive the system as being one of training into a particular form of Muslim subjectivity, learning not only the Qur'an but how to be a Muslim, based primarily on the quality of relationships. This recognition should leave no scope for misinterpretation that Almajiri is being conflated with Boko Haram or other NSAGs. Boko Haram is a Salafi hizala construct and Almajiri are not; there are fundamental ideological, sectarian, and doctrinal differences.

The recognition of the intrinsic value of the system should not obscure the reality that aspects of it are now broken, and need to be fixed, although any such discourse should take care to be more objective about the problem, its causes, and potential solutions, and avoid projecting any semblance of belief that Almajiri education is associated with radical Islam. These include the street begging conundrum, because the practice is considered by many to be a necessary lesson in Muslim submission and humility, beyond any economic imperative (Kere Abdurrahman KII). Also appropriate consideration should be given to "Makaranta allo": sitting on the floor is an act of piety and humility; it is part of a process of absolution; it is a sacred place. Bending over is part of respect and veneration. Therefore, infrastructure and furniture are not solutions, if they take that away. They are considered by Almajiri as stooping below their values (Buba KII).

Community engagement and religious actor involvement

Programmes succeed when they engage local stakeholders—including religious leaders, traditional authorities, parents, youth groups, and school management committees—from the outset (Akubor, 2016; Dukawa et al., 2022). De Silva (n.d.) underscores that peacebuilding and PVE efforts are most effective when they align with local norms, address community grievances, and empower respected figures (e.g., mallams, imams) as champions of tolerance. Top-down programmes risk rejection if seen as externally imposed or culturally alien.

Gender and inclusion sensitivity

Evidence from Okonkwo (2022), Katami et al. (2023), and Save the Children (2021) stresses that gender-blind approaches limit reach and effectiveness. Girls face unique barriers: early marriage, sexual violence, lack of safe transport, and shortage of female teachers. Likewise, programmes often overlook children with disabilities or displaced learners (UNICEF, 2022). Inclusive design, including gender-segregated facilities, menstrual hygiene support, scholarships, and tailored outreach, enhances retention and trust.

Teacher capacity and well-being

Teachers are frontline actors for both education and PVE goals, but chronic underinvestment weakens their role. Alkali (2019), Heyneman et al. (2022), and Salihu (2021) document that teachers often lack training in peace education, trauma response, and inclusive pedagogy. Without adequate pay, professional development, or safety assurances, morale and performance suffer, limiting programme impact.

Multi-sectoral integration

Programmes are most effective when education, livelihoods, social protection, and governance components are linked. Bekuma (2021), Abdullahi (2020), and Chukwuma (2023) highlight how combining vocational training, youth entrepreneurship, and civic education strengthens resilience and reduces recruitment risks. International examples (ERICC, 2024; Tsolakis et al., 2025) reinforce that education alone cannot prevent violent extremism—it must be part of a coordinated system addressing economic, social, and political grievances.

Monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive learning

Most programmes reviewed lack robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) frameworks. ERICC (2024) and UNESCO (2025) caution that without disaggregated data (gender, age, displacement, and disability), adaptive management, and transparent reporting, it is difficult to identify what works or to scale effective models.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the education context of NE/NW Nigeria is shaped by intersecting crises: poverty, insecurity, displacement, gender inequality, institutional fragility, and environmental stress. The interaction between education types, learner profiles, and security outcomes in Northern Nigeria is highly context-specific, shaped by historical legacies, institutional arrangements, economic constraints, and social dynamics.

While there is broad consensus that education can and should contribute to peacebuilding and stability in Northern Nigeria, narratives diverge on priorities and pathways. Some analysts (Afoaku, 2017; Faluyi, 2017) argue for stronger state-led oversight and regulation, particularly over religious schools. Others (Dukawa et al., 2022; Omirin, 2024) emphasise community-driven reform, leveraging Islamic values and institutions. Many (International Alert, 2022; De Silva, n.d.; UNICEF, 2016) stress the need for cross-sectoral integration, combining education with livelihoods, governance reform, and social protection.

Improving stability through education requires not only access expansion but also systemic transformation in a multifaceted approach: addressing access and quality across all streams (secular, religious, formal, and informal), protecting OOSC, integrating formal and non-formal streams, strengthening positive religious education, mainstreaming protection and psychosocial support,

investing in teachers, embedding peacebuilding into education policy and practice, and engaging communities in co-creating inclusive, resilient learning environments.

Islamic education in Northern Nigeria is not a monolith; it encompasses a diverse array of actors, institutions, and traditions that shape young people’s moral, intellectual, and social development. While unregulated Almajiri systems have been linked to heightened vulnerability due to poverty, street exposure, and lack of oversight, well-structured Islamic educational models—such as Islamiyya schools and integrated IQE/IQTE programmes—offer valuable platforms for inclusion, resilience, and peacebuilding.

The relationship between education and radicalisation is mediated not by religious content alone but by the interplay of socio-economic conditions, governance, security dynamics, and the quality of teaching and community engagement. Addressing the drivers of exclusion, strengthening educational integration, supporting teachers and communities, and embedding peacebuilding into educational practice are key steps toward leveraging the transformative potential of Islamic education in Nigeria’s North-East and North-West.

This review underscores the need for adaptive, evidence-based, and collaborative approaches that recognise both the risks and the opportunities presented by Islamic educational systems in the context of Nigeria’s broader development and security landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage **system-level reform in the support provided to nonformal Qur’anic education**, in particular to clarify and harmonise institutional mandates to avoid overlap and gaps. The creation of national and state-level commissions for Tsangaya and nonformal education is a positive first step in this regard.
- Invest in state leadership and policy frameworks, by **embedding education and prevention of violent extremism goals in state plans**, clarifying roles, securing more domestic financing, and strengthening inter-ministerial collaboration.
- Develop a **comprehensive teacher policy, for both secular and religious schools**, which aims to ensure that all learners are offered quality learning in foundational skills according to their needs. This would entail strategies that focus on recruitment, remuneration, posting (including to Qur’anic schools for dedicated classes), teacher education and training (including in peace education and trauma-informed methods), and teacher wellbeing.
- **Recognise as “in-school” the learners enrolled in nonformal education in compliance with basic norms and standards**, which should be set at the national level and applied uniformly across and within states.
- **Promote the inclusion of peace education and social cohesion into learning**, determining the most cost and time-effective approach (curricular reform, teacher training, targeted pedagogical interventions, behavioural practice, etc.). To ensure acceptance, avoid any offence, and maximise results, this must cover all types and streams of education, religious and secular, formal and nonformal, even if the approach may not be uniform and require tailoring and contextualising to each.
- **Adopt holistic programmatic strategies to address the needs of Almajiri children**, that include not only education provision, but also system governance, child protection and well-being, health and nutrition, and actions that aim to address the economic issues faced by Tsangaya schools, mallams, and learners (conditional cash transfers), not least to drastically reduce the need for street begging.
- **Promote the inclusion of foundational literacy and numeracy classes for primary aged children and access to skills training for secondary aged youth, across all types and streams of education,**

religious or secular, formal and nonformal. For religious schools, this must not create a squeeze on existing Qur'anic or Islamic learning and should very specifically include Arabic classes.

- **Consider the inclusion of religious studies in the national curriculum as taught by formal schools**, to both destigmatise preconceptions about population groups with particular religious affiliations and make formal education an acceptable alternative to families for whom the absence of any religious learning is not an option. The content should be tailored to regional population characteristics.
- Based on the above reforms, **ensure that learning acquired by children and youth through Qur'anic education can be capitalised by leavers at key bridging points in their educational careers** (standardised national assessments, recognition of prior learning, certification in national qualification frameworks) to ensure that early-years Qur'anic education does not imply a lifelong educational orientation, and transitions to formal education or technical and vocational training are offered.
- To further facilitate this, **invest in the development, promotion, and adaptation of Nigeria's successful accelerated education programme**, so that learners can minimise the time investment required to change stream and receive age-specific and context-sensitive pedagogical support.
- Deepen local engagement, by **co-designing programmes with communities**, supporting religious and traditional leaders as peacebuilders and amplifying youth voices in programme design and evaluation.
- **Apply gender-responsive and inclusive approaches**, in particular by addressing the specific needs of girls, disabled learners, and displaced youth, using targeted interventions and inclusive curricula.
- Build **robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems**. Disaggregated data should be periodically collected and processed, and feedback loops should be created to strengthen adaptive learning based on evidence findings to inform scale-up and sustainability.

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ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

The approach to this assignment was based on individual research carried out by the author/consultant, through an extensive desk review, and identifying key informants for follow-up interviews. The scope and focus were agreed with ERICC and FCDO on the basis of a detailed methodological note and two preparatory virtual meetings.

Search strategies included online research and the spider/snowball identification of sources and networking. This process tends to be capillary: a good report provides further references and names of authors to reach out to; a good contact sources further documents for review; etc.

The underlying logic to the research strategy is that the desk review should provide the vast majority of the foundational material for the report, during the first phase. Key informant interviews will complement this in a second stage, seeking to lift uncertainty on certain issues and fill glaring gaps between the research questions set and the answers as provided by the desk research.

The findings from the above were synthesised into a first draft report that was shared with the client for feedback. The feedback was incorporated into this final version.

Systematic desk/literature review

A thorough desk/literature review was conducted, based on a select number of search queries submitted through Google, ResearchGate, SOAS Library, Core, Google Scholar, Jstor, Library of Congress, Google Books, the digital commons network, Inter-agency Network for Educational Emergencies (INEE), UNESCO, Save the Children, the World Bank, Human Rights Watch, UNICEF, and the African Education Research Database. A few resources relating specifically to FCDO operations were shared by the client. Several other articles of interest were obtained by direct outreach to their authors or submitted by interviewed experts. All of the above were complemented by the author/consultant's own professional archives.

This process enabled the identification of over 120 subject-relevant publications, that included academic journal publications (captured from multiple disciplines including education, economics, social sciences, religious studies), methodological notes, policy reports, case studies, press articles, empirical studies, published and unpublished reports from international organizations and NGOs, government agency plans and strategies, conference presentations, evaluations of education and prevention of violent extremism programmes, and case studies from NE/NW regions and neighbouring Sahelian countries.

Given the fast-evolving nature of the situation in Northern Nigeria, to ensure optimal relevance and actuality of the resources considered, as well as to ring-fence the research effort to align with the rapid nature of the assignment, 2015 was retained as the earliest year of publication.

The source material was initially scanned (abstracts and/or executive summaries read; further content reviewed diagonally using further keyword searches to assess the strength and relevance of the content) to determine the most credible and robust resources to build the analysis upon. Over 60 publications were retained for further analysis and review. The desk/literature review was submitted to ERICC for information and review before finalisation and did not solicit any feedback.

(See the Bibliography)

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

KIIs were conducted with a purposive sample of key stakeholders, selected based on their roles, relevance, and depth of knowledge. It was estimated that approximately 10 KIIs would be conducted, entailing a selective, somewhat strategic selection process. The purpose of the KIIs was primarily to obtain clarity on certain issues as raised by the desk research, and/or obtain input to breach gaps in

the research results yielded by the desk review. Key informants were identified through outreach to colleagues in UNICEF WCARO, UNICEF Abuja country office, the national education in emergencies working group; introductions and/or specific requests made by FCDO regional colleagues; the identification of key subject experts as resulting from the desk/literature review; and the domino networking effect of following-up on the recommendations of further key informants by existing contacts.

In total, 35 potential individuals and/or organisations were identified as fulfilling the required characteristics. A shortlist was submitted to ERICC colleagues for approval. Outreach was initiated with 27 potential targets. Fourteen (14) KIIs were conducted, while one selected key informant declined to participate, in writing, due to perceived bias in the research questions. These included:

- 1 colleague from the UNICEF office in Maiduguri
- The coordinator of the Northern Nigeria EiE working group
- 1 FCDO colleague based in the British Embassy in Dakar
- 2 FCDO colleagues based in Nigeria
- The chief executive of the National Commission for Almajiri and OOSC (NCAOOSCE)
- The Borno state Arabic and Sangaya Education Board (BOSASEB) – interview denied
- 2 highly specialised scholars/researchers of Nigerian origin
- 2 community leaders, one male, one female
- 2 voluntary teachers working in temporary learning spaces for IDPs, managed by Street-Child
- 2 youth impacted by the insurgency, one male, one female

KIIs followed fairly standard procedure: advance scheduling with an indication of the broad theme of interest and motivation to hear each individual ; prior submission to the individual of the topical areas to cover (usually the research questions) for their preparation; flexible Q&A discussion loosely following those areas during the interview; mention of next steps (such as follow-up introductions or resources to be shared); thanks; write-up of key takeaways. The interviews were not recorded or transcribed.

(See Annex 2: Key Informant Interviews).

Further conceptual considerations

As the subject matter of the assignment is complex and sensitive, every effort was made to apply several lenses throughout:

- Conflict sensitivity: understand context; consider impacts, differentiating between root causes, triggers and consequences; be intentional about limiting negative consequences.
- Risk-informed analysis/programming: consider interactions (between instability and education), positive and negative, and in both directions ; focus on the risk factors that are within our control (reducing vulnerability, building capacity and resilience) ; think about long-term foundations for social cohesion as well as immediate programmatic wins.
- Conceptual Framework for ERICC: child-centred; focus on learning drivers and outcomes for social impact; foundation of education access, quality and continuity; concern for inclusivity, effectiveness, accountability, equity and holistic outcomes.
- Systematic questioning of assumptions: for such an assignment, it is necessary to be aware of one's personal bias or beliefs in such a way as to limit their distortion of our analytical lens, ensure the greatest degree of intellectual neutrality possible, including in drafting.
- Anchorage with FCDO programming and development priorities: An early understanding of FCDO structures, policies, programmes and ways of working in NE and NW Nigeria was sought, and key relevant parameters retained to scope the material to consider for the desk review.

Considerations of scope

The following parameters were agreed with the client:

- Geographic coverage: the review was to consider any/all of the states included in the NW as well as NE geopolitical regions, i.e.: Sokoto, Katsina, Jigawa, Kano, Zamfara, Kaduna & Kebbi States in the North West; and Yobe, Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa and Taraba States in the North-East.
- Age-group / education sub-sector coverage: the review was to focus on adolescents and youth in the 10 to 26 year age group, and the situations, contexts, issues, opportunities and challenges they face, as well as the education cycles that are relevant to them (secondary, TVET, higher).

ANNEX 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The following key informants were interviewed:

Date/Time of KII	Name	Organisation	Location	Role	Referred by
01/07/2025, 16h30	Muhammad Riaz	EiEWG	NE Nigeria	UNICEF focal point/coordinator, BAY States	Personal contact
10/07/2025, 11h30	Naved Chowdhury	FCDO	Dakar, Sénégal	Regional education lead for the Sahel	Ian Attfield
11/07/2025, 10h00	Chinedu Mbonu	FCDO	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	Senior Programme Manager, Governance, Conflict Management, Stabilization and Peace Building for the Lake Chad Basin	Mikailu Ibrahim, Ian Attfield
11/07/2025, 13h00	Dr. Ismail Yusuf	UNICEF	Maiduguri, Borno	Education Specialist	Mamadou Salif Traore
11/07/2025, 15h00	Dr Muhammad Sani Idris	National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children (NCAOSCE)	Abuja	Chief Executive	Kano report
21/07/2025, 10h00	Dr Hadiza Kere-Abdul Rahman	University of Lincoln	Lincoln, UK	Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education	Kano report
21/07/2025, 11h30	Malami Buba	DELVE/PLANE	Sokoto, NW Nigeria	National team leader	Milaiku Ibrahim
21/07/2025, 13h00	Anonymous	N/A	Maiduguri, Borno	Woman Leader	John Usiju, Street Child Programme Officer, through Chinedu Mbonu, FCDO
21/07/2025, 13h00	Anonymous	Street-Child TLS	Maiduguri, Borno	Male volunteer teacher	
21/07/2025, 13h00	Anonymous	Street-Child TLS	Maiduguri, Borno	Female volunteer teacher	
21/07/2025, 13h00	Anonymous	N/A	Maiduguri, Borno	Boy child, ex-BH, 13 yrs	
21/07/2025, 13h00	Anonymous	N/A	Maiduguri, Borno	Girl child, ex-BH, 12 yrs	
22/07/2025, 11h30	Abba Bukar Shehu Kyari	N/A	Old Bama, Borno	District Head	Muhammad Riaz, EiEWG
22/07/2025, 14h00	Mustapha Alhassan	ODI Humanitarian Policy Group	Abuja, Nigeria	Researcher/academic	Dr. Abdul Wando, SOAS
Denied	Sheikh Aliyu Abdul Fathi	Borno state Arabic and Sangaya Education Board (BOSASEB)	Maiduguri, Borno	chairman	Muhammad Riaz, EiEWG

(See also Annex 1: Methodology, for considerations regarding the selection process).

ANNEX 3: HUMAN INTEREST STORIES

The following human-interest stories were drafted on the basis of informal conversations, thanks to the intermediation efforts of John Usiju, Street Child Nutrition and Livelihoods Senior Officer with Street Child in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. Prior due consent was obtained, in writing. Several conversations were held in Hausa/English, with John's facilitation and translation. Personal details have been amended to preserve the anonymity of respondents, but the stories as related are fair to the truth.

Fatima Mohammed, Female community leader

Fatima was born and bred in Konduga LGA. She has 8 children, aged 2 to 15 years. She attended school until secondary, following both formal and Tsangaya in parallel.

They frequently heard people talking about Boko Haram, until one day they came and abducted her sister and forcefully married her to an insurgent. They sent a message that nobody could attend the wedding. The community thought that the family had voluntarily given their daughter away, and that the family was complicit. So the community started to target them, and they decided to leave. Then the whole family was abducted. Two were able to escape. Four are still being held in the bush. The daughter was then remarried to another lower-ranking insurgent, and Fatima's brother was converted to become an insurgent. She has no contact with these family members since her escape.

Fatima moved to Maiduguri, 45km away. Four of her children, two girls and two boys, attend a Street Child temporary learning centre (TLC); the others are still too young to be enrolled. She says that she is OK now, thanks to being somewhat anonymous. Nobody knows where she is. Her face remains neutral when she shares that this was a terrible experience, that she never wants to hear about again.

Ibrahim Tuharouna, Volunteer Teacher, Street Child TLC

Ibrahim is originally from Bama radda. He attended primary and secondary formal school in Maiduguri in parallel to Tsangaya education, gaining the Nigeria Certificate of Education, before going to higher education at Ramat Polytechnic. He has been a teacher by profession for 8 years.

He was displaced 12 years ago as a result of the insurgency and now teaches a class of Primary 3 and 4 pupils displaced by conflict, about 35 girls and 28 boys aged 7 and 8. Teaching is difficult, due to their terrible past experiences. He uses role playing and drama for understanding. Some children share their experiences with him. Some cannot be referred to psychosocial support. He offers advice on how to find money and food. Some may have had fights with their elders about food and transport money. So they will be distracted in school. So he includes messages of peace and understanding in his lessons.

Maryam Oumar, ex-Boko Haram abductee, 13 years

Maryam was living in Goza with her family, going to the farm as usual.

One day they heard gunshots. They were scared to leave the house. Boko Haram insurgents came into the town. The whole family was abducted to a very dark place, where they could not see anything clearly. They were suffering, with no food and no water. They were flogged, flogged, flogged, but luckily they didn't die. After about a week, a neighbour who knew the terrain showed them an escape route. A second group of Boko Haram captured them again, but with no guns this time, just cutlass (machete). So there was a second team surveying the location. Her father was slaughtered under her eyes, from behind the neck. The mother and the children were then allowed to go. They arrived at Tungushe village, by trekking over 2 weeks, where the mother was able to meet another woman who supported her with employment. Eventually, with her scant savings, they were able to get to the back of Bakati, near Maiduguri, and joined the Street Child programme following a vulnerability assessment.

After two years studying in a TLS, Maryam was mainstreamed back into formal education. She now enjoys school, she is learning every day, school is fun, and she meets lots of people. She is currently

sitting exams and expects to get a very good grade in Maths. She is also going to Islamiyya school. She wants to become a medical doctor.

ANNEX 4: A TYPOLOGY OF ISLAMIC/QUR’ANIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

The following table is courtesy of Emily Roy (Qualé, 2017).

	Non-formal Qur’anic Education			Formal Islamic Education		
	Family or neighborhood Qur’anic School	Traditional Qur’anic School	Nomad school	Modernized Qur’anic Schools	Islamic Madrasa	Arabic or English-Arabic madrasa (private)
Types	+	+ <i>Makaranta allo et tsangaya et almajiri</i> (boarding school)	+ <i>Almajiri</i> schools	+ Integrated	+ <i>Islamiya</i> (équivalent)	+ Integrated <i>Islamiya</i> schools
Main Education Objective	Qur’an memorization	Qur’an memorization	Qur’an memorization and Islamic sciences	Qur’anic memorization and secular sciences	Islamic sciences	Islamic and secular sciences
Teaching languages	Arabic/National languages	Arabic/National languages	Arabic/National languages	Arabic/English/National languages	Arabic/National languages	Arabic/English/National languages
Pedagogical method	Traditional	Traditional	Traditional	Traditional and Professor-centered lectures	Professor-centered lectures	Professor-centered lectures
End of studies certification (diplomas)	<i>Hafidh, Ijaza, Shahada</i> (Sometimes refer to as <i>ibtidaiyya</i> or <i>idadiyya</i> and <i>thanawiyya</i>)	<i>Hafidh, Ijaza, Shahada</i> (Sometimes refer to as <i>ibtidaiyya</i> or <i>idadiyya</i> and <i>thanawiyya</i>)	<i>Hafidh, Ijaza, Shahada</i> (Sometimes refer to as <i>ibtidaiyya</i> or <i>idadiyya</i> and <i>thanawiyya</i>)	State diploma or diploma recognized by the State	Diploma (recognized or not by the State)	State diploma or diploma recognized by the State
Status	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private
Government Oversight	None	None or some under State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) or State Agency for Mass Education (SAME) or Arabic and Islamic Schools Management Board or equivalent	None or some under SAME or Arabic and Islamic Schools Management Board	Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) or National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) through State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) or State Agency for Mass Education (SAME) respectively	Arabic and Islamic Schools Management Board or equivalent	Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) or National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) through State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) or State Agency for Mass Education (SAME) respectively
Schedules	Part-time school	Part-time or full-time day school	Full-time Boarding school	Full-time day school	Full-time day school	Full-time day school
Legal recognition	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes