CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA'S EDUCATION SECTOR AND THE ATTAINMENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4 BY 2030

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Keywords

Challenges, Education Sector, Attainment, United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal

Abstract

Research Problem: *Nigeria intends to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) target by 2030,yet it faces ongoing structural and human-related hurdles that jeopardise its journey toward inclusive and quality education. Despite having policies in place, the nation has not sufficiently addressed the systemic barriers that could stand in the way of achieving this target. This paperexaminedthe challengesfacing Nigeria's education sector andthe attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 target by 2030.*

Methods/theory: *The authors relied solely on secondary sources of data, and the data gathered were analysed using content analysis. The paper was guided by Talcott Parsons' social system theory developed in 1951.*

Results*: Findings revealed that Nigeria's achievement of SDG 4 is hindered by a combination of endemic problems, including insecurity, corruption, inadequate funding, inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified and willing teachers, poverty and curriculum obsolescence.*

Conclusion: *The study ultimately concludes that unless we confront these structural and human-related challenges with coordinated institutional reforms, Nigeria is unlikely to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *This paper adds to the existing body of research by offering a comprehensive systems-based analysis of the educational challenges facing Nigeria. By framing the issue through the lens of Social System Theory, it reveals that the barriers to achieving SDG 4 are not just isolated problems within specific sectors; rather, they are interconnected institutional failures that call for a more holistic approach to intervention.*

Recommendation*: The paper recommended, among others, that the government needs to develop a clear and coordinated plan to reform the education sector. This plan should focus on increasing funding for schools, provision of adequate security, upgrading school infrastructure, updating curriculum, employing qualified and willing teachers, as well as enhancing accountability systems.*

Introduction

Global statistics show that over 278 million children, who arebetween the ages of 6 and 18 years are out of school, despite the global commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030 (UNESCO, 2025). Several countries including Nigeria still face significant barriers that hinder the attainment of educational targets under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).It is clear that education forms the foundation of societal progress and national development. If individuals or government overlook its importance, it could have a detrimental impact on other institutions within the society. As famously noted by Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Osung, 2026).The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015, has 17 interconnected goals in its agenda to be achieved by 2030.Among these, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)specifically provides for quality education for all by 2030. Recent global reports show that notable strides had been made in expanding access to education, but significant disparities persist, particularly in developing countries including Nigeria (Sustainable Development Goals, 2025).

African countries including South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Morocco and others have adopted free and compulsory education programmes as policy responses to improve access and quality of education, yet 98 million children are out-of-school in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). According to Mboho and Nkob (2023), free and compulsory education is not new in the history of man and society; it has been there right from the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to the period that the Sustainable Development Goals were formed in 2015.The implementation of this programme involves substantial resources from the government and stakeholders. An efficient educational system depends on the available resources and commitment of the government and stakeholders alike. Resources in this context encompass everything that the school system requires (that is, human beings, money and infrastructure) to provide an adequate learning environment for the children (Denga, 1986, cited in Petters, 2023). Successive governments in Nigeria and elsewhere have adopted the free and compulsory education policy as a strategy to

achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). It is important to note that the degree of the provisions and utilisation of educational programmes enhances a child's performance in school and its outcome. As stated by Mboho and Nkop (2023), Willie et al. (2025), Ukommi and Agha (2015), education is the best legacy a responsible leader, government, parent or guardian can give to children. That is to say, the governments and stakeholders have to ensure every child, irrespective of gender, has access to basic education.

Nigeria, in 2015 recorded 20,788,190 pupils in public primary schools and 12.5 million in public secondary schools, while in 2022, there were 39.78 million children in both primary and junior secondary schools (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). Despite the high rates of school enrolment in public primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, most children are still out of school, and many of them are categorised as street children (Asangausung, Okorie&Ukommi, 2025; Essoh & Asangausung, 2025). This paradox suggests that access expansion alone does not guarantee the attainment of SDG 4 target.

Scholarly literature has extensively examined the challenges confronting educational development in Nigeria and other developing countries. Existing literature largely attribute difficulties in achieving equality in education by 2030 to structural and material issues including insecurity, policy instability, inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and demographic pressures (Ukommi& Agha, 2015; Willie et al., 2025; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). While this studies significantly contributed to understanding educational challenges, they predominantly focus on institutional limitations, often treating human actors merely as component of the system rather than a critical driver of policy success of failure.

Against this backdrop, this paper departs from the previous studies by employing a documentary research methods to examinethe challenges in Nigeria's education sector and the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 target by 2030, and proposing ways to address these challengesto enhance the attainment of SDG 4.

Statement of Problem

The majority of countries have agreed that by 2030, all people should have access to high-quality education. Significant progress has been made in reaching the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA] (2025).In a 2024 report by the United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF, 2024], there are roughly 18.3 million out-of-school children in Nigeria, of which 10.2 million are in primary school and 8.1 million are in secondary education. Nigeria's startling out-of-school childrenare at variance to the SDGs' goal of universal access to high-quality education by 2030.

According to research by Udefuna et al. (2024), Nigeria is ranked 191 out of 208 nations in terms of education standards. The literacy rate in Nigeria stands at 59.57 per cent, according to Veriv Africa (2024), and this is very low. Udefuna et al. (2024), observe that Nigeria has the highest percentage of children aged 6-7 who are not in school, with 66.4 per cent of them living in Sokoto State and 67.6 per cent in Kebbi State. The ongoing kidnapping and abduction of schoolchildren, ethno-religious conflicts, Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in northern

Nigeria, sit-at-home orders by separatist groups (IPOB) in the southeast, poverty, violence against children, and abuse are some of the issues that prevent school-age children from attending school. These issues, however, make it difficult for Nigeria to achieve the desired objectives of SDG 4.

In 1999, the Nigerian government introduced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme to provide free and compulsory education for all in the country (Centre for Public Impact, 2017). This position aligns with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which has to do with the achievement of quality education for all in 2030. Since Nigeria implemented a free and compulsory education programme, children are supposed to be attending school instead of skulking on the streets. Even though Nigerian sub-nationals have a free and compulsory education policy in place, many public schools lack qualified teachers, classrooms, and desks, and many children are forced to learn on the floor. As a result, parents choose private schools for their children, and a sizable portion of children remain at home without being enrolled in school because of their family's low income, cultural discrimination, and insecurity. Criminal elements pose a huge threat to the security situation in the majority of Nigerian schools.

Previous studies like Daniel (2016) submitted that free and compulsory education aims to promote equality of opportunity, reduce poverty, and enhance socio-economic development by ensuring that every child has basic access to education, but inadequate funding, lack of infrastructure, manpower, and cultural barriers are some of the challenges.Other researchers, such as Oketch (2024), Emordi and Olufemi (2023), and Oweibia et al. (2024), focused on the challenges and implementation level of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Nigeria and Africa.

Based on the foregoing, none of these investigations were conducted in 2026, mainly to investigate the challenges to Nigeria's education sector and the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 target by 2030. This research attempts to fill this gap in the literature. In the course of this study, the following questions guided the research: (i) What are the challenges affecting Nigeria's education sector towardsthe attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 target by 2030? (ii) How can these challenges be addressed to enhance progress towards the 2030 target?

Research Objectives

i. To examined the challenges in Nigeria's education sector towardsthe attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 target by 2030.

ii. To suggest how these challenges can be addressed to enhance progress toward the 2030 target.

Concept of Education

Education is a major concern in all civilised societies, according to Yagci et al. (2026). This prompted Nelson Mandela to say that, "education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world" (Osung, 2026). Scholars have defined education in various ways. For instance, Udom (2016) defined education as the process of cultural transmission and renewal. He furthered that education is the process by which adult members of a community carefully supervise the development of children and initiating them into the culture of the society. It is a procedure that aids in learning or the development of values, beliefs, habits, and

abilities. Education encompasses both the formal and informal learning experiences acquired throughout life as well as the instruction received in settings such as schools.Patil (2012) observed that education may be a vehicle for empowering people in the society. Asangausung, Okorie and Udom (2025) said that education pave the road for societal growth and bring about remarkable transformations in every facet of human existence.

The Free and Compulsory Education

Free and compulsory education means that both primary and secondary schools are without tuition and are enforced by law for all pupils within a particular age range. This, however, assures that all students, regardless of their socio-economic situation, are entitled to basic education. The free and obligatory education implies that the government bears the cost of education, providing education for children instead of their parents. The Right to Education Project (2014) put it that this policy indicates that it is necessary for all children within a particular school age to attend and be taught to acquire skills and information.

According to Amaele (2009), free and compulsory education includes the construction of numerous kinds of schools and expansion of school curricula to make each child develop according to his or her aptitude, age and interest. It further includes the establishment and provision of library facilities, technical and vocational equipment for skills learning, and recruitment and retention of skilled and adequate staff for the implementation of the programme. It also has to do with free tuition, free eating (like the school feeding programme), free literature, free accommodation, free transportation, uniforms and other personal necessities of the pupils. Free and compulsory education implies the eradication of every socio-economic and cultural hindrance to education. Since the success of a child's education will be hampered by the absence of any one of the aforementioned, it is acceptable to argue that education might be considered free when all of these are well implemented in schools.

In 1999, the government of Chief Olusegun Matthew Obasanjo introduced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) system in Nigeria (Abul et al., 2017). The purpose of UBE was to provide free, obligatory and universal basic education for every Nigerian kid of school age. Assessing this policy from its point of workability, it can be determined that there is a vast gap between the development of the policy and its execution, making the success of the plan uncertain. The principle of free education is clearly established in Section 18(3) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended (LFN, 1999). This section has it that "Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy, and to this end, shall then provide: (a) Free, compulsory and universal primary education for every child, (b) Free secondary education, and (c) Free adult literacy programmes".

However, the inauguration of the UBE programme in 1999; subsequent acceptance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (United Nations, 2015) were significant demonstrations of Nigeria's commitment to the international treaties on education. The Table 1 shows the global commitment to education through international treaties.

Table 1: International treaties on education and their targets

Treaty	Target
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)	Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental phases. Elementary education shall be compulsory.
European Convention on Human Rights Protocol 1 (1952)	No person shall be denied the right to education.
UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960)	The states parties to this agreement undertake to create, develop and adopt a national strategy which will tend to promote equality of opportunities and of treatment, and in particular, to make elementary education free and compulsory.
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)	Primary education shall be compulsory and availably free for everybody.
Protocol of San Salvador to the American Convention on Human Rights (1988)	The states parties to this convention recognise that in order to realise the full exercise of the right to education, basic education should be compulsory and available to all without expense.
Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)	States parties recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to attaining this right gradually and on the basis of equal opportunity, they must in particular make primary education compulsory and available free for all.
Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child (1990)	States party to the present charter shall adopt all reasonable measures with a view to realising the full realisation of (the right to education) and shall in particular provide free and obligatory basic education to every child.
European Social Charter (1996)	With a view to ensuring effective exercise of the right of children and young persons to grow up in an environment which encourages the full development of their personality and of their physical and mental capacities, the parties shall (1) undertake, either directly or in co-operation with public and private organisations, all appropriate and necessary measures designed (2) to provide to children and young persons a free primary and secondary education as well as encourage regular attendance at schools.
The Millennium Development Goals (2000)	The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education, notably MDG 2, sought to achieve universal primary education by 2015. This policy, according to Daniel (2011), was intended at ensuring that all the children, irrespective of their origin and gender, should complete their basic education studies.

	Goal 3 of the MDG centred on gender equality in education, and it aimed at reducing gender gaps at all levels of education. The MDGs recognised that education was vital for development, social advancement and human empowerment as well as for eliminating poverty. However, this policy leads to school enrolment, which, according to the United Nations (2016), climbed from 83% in 2000 to 91% in 2015. Despite the progress observed in school enrolment, challenges still remain, which include 57 million children still being out of school by 2015, disparities between urban and rural areas, the impact of poverty and hunger on school children, and inadequate funding and poor infrastructure, which also hinder the progress and the effective implementation of education policies.
Sustainable Development Goals (2015)	The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, agreed by all the United Nations members in 2015, created 17 sustainable development objectives, one of which is SDG 4; the achievement of equitable quality education for everyone by 2030. The goal highlights universal access to elementary and secondary education, affordable technical, vocational and further education and also considers the need for literacy, numeracy, and education for sustainable development, as well as skills for work and entrepreneurship. Just like the MDGs, there has been significant progress in enrolment, but challenges still remain in the area of the number of out-of-school children on the street as a result of hunger and poverty, poor funding and implementation of education policies and programmes, a poor number of teachers to students (pupils) enrolled, and poor infrastructure. These issues therefore continue in ensuring that excellent and equitable education is accomplished.

Source: Arranged by the Authors

Table 1 illustrates the international treaties on education and their targets since 1948 till date. Although, international treaties have progressively expanded the scope of the rights to education, from access to equity and quality, the persistence of out-of-school, infrastructural deficits, and funding issues indicate a widening gap between global commitment and local implementation.

Challenges in Nigeria's Education Sector and Sustainable Development Goal 4 Target

At the continental level, Oketch (2024) carried out a documentary study to examine the

level of implementation of SDG 4 in Africa. The study argues that the SDG 4 targets do not sufficiently capture the critical components required for the successful implementation of educational reforms in Africa. The author concludes that several African countries were yet to witness tangible outcomes primarily due to structural deficiencies embedded in the educational system. Oketch (2024) did not provide an in-depth, country-specific empirical analysis of human-related constraints that directly influence the implementation of SDG 4 in Nigeria, which is the thrust of the current research.

Focusing primarily on Nigeria, Oweibia et al. (2024) took a careful examination of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria since its inception in 2015. Relying on systematic literature and policy documents from the Economic and Growth Plan (ERGP) and the Ministry of Budget and National Planning, findings showed that Nigeria has integrated the Sustainable Development Goals into the national development plan, but systemic issues including insecurity, corruption and wide-gap inequality stalled the progress made so far. Oweibia et al. (2024) focused on assessing the entire Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but failed to take a critical look at the education sector in Nigeria, particularly the human-related constraints that may likely hinder the achievement of the SDG 4 target by 2030. The current study has bridged this gap in the body of knowledge.

Similarly, Emordi and Olufemi (2023) examined Nigeria's constraints on achieving the SDG 4 target using official documents from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals report (SDGs). The study identified poverty, child labour, gender inequality, and the COVID-19 pandemic as factors that significantly jeopardise the achievement of SDG targets. The authors did not provide adequate explanations about how the identified constraints and several others jointly affect the achievement of SDG 4 in Nigeria, which is the goal of the current research.

At the sub-national level, Asuquo and Ekanem (2024) carried out a study in Akwa Ibom State to examine how corruption in the education sector affects economic development. Using a mixed-methods approach (structured questionnaire and oral interviews), findings indicated that corruption has a substantial adverse impact on the education sector and the economic development of the state. The authors did not explicitly link corruption to the broader SDG 4 framework or examine other factors beyond corruption that may hinder the achievement of the SDG 4 target in 2030. The current study is expected to deal with human-related and systemic constraints that may likely hinder the attainment of SDG 4 target on quality education for all by 2030.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Talcott Parsons' Social System Theory, developed in 1951. At its core, this theory is based on structural functionalism, a sociological perspective that views society as a complex system where various elements are interconnected and work in harmony to maintain stability and cohesion. Parsons likened society to a living organism, where different parts collaborate to keep the whole functioning smoothly. His theory highlights the vital links between family, education, economy, government, and religion, which Parsons considered as the basic social institutions in society. Each of these components has specific

roles to play in ensuring the system remains stable. If one part experiences dysfunction, it inevitably affects the stability of the entire system (Mboho, 2025; Mboho & Asangausung, 2024).

Applying Talcott Parsons' Social System Theory to the challenges facing Nigeria's education sector towards the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 target by 2030 offers valuable insights into how both human factors and structural imbalances impede progress. SDG 4 aims to ensure that everyone has fair and equal access to education by 2030. Within the framework of Parsons' theory, education is a crucial subsystem that plays a key role in socialisation, distributing roles, transmitting values, and developing skills essential for economic productivity and national unity. When the education system fails to fulfill these responsibilities effectively, it leads to instability and underdevelopment in the broader social system.

In Nigeria, persistent issues such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, curriculum obsolescence, corruption, insecurity, and poverty represent dysfunctions within the educational subsystem and its related institutions. These challenges are not isolated problems; rather, they reflect a systemic imbalance that collectively hinders progress toward attaining the SDG 4 targets in Nigeria.

Materials and Methods

It was documentary research that only used secondary data sources. The data for the paper were sourced from various categories of secondary materials, including scholarly journals indexed on Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia, Semantic Scholar, news publications and policy briefs, government publications and official documents, and reports from international organisations. Data from these sources were systematically analysed to interpret and integrate information derived from existing documents concerning the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Nigeria. The principal analytical method employed was content analysis. Ethically, the study utilised exclusively publicly accessible secondary data, with no human participants involved. Thus, ethical standards were upheld by proper citation and recognition of all referenced materials.

Results

Findings revealed that the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) target in Nigeria is highly constrained by interconnected human-related and systemic challenges that collectively undermine access, quality, equity and learning outcomes. These interconnected human-related and systemic challenges include insecurity, corruption, inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, poverty, and curriculum obsolescence. This implies that the attainment of SDG 4 in Nigeria is not merely a policy challenge, but a systemic issue rooted in human-related constraints and institutional dysfucntions.It was found that insecurity has disrupted education in some states in Nigeria, leading to abduction of students, displacement of children who were supposed to be in schools, closure of schools, poor attendance, declined enrollment and high rates of school dropouts, thereby weakening educational access and continuity.Findings also showed that corruption has compromise teacher recruitment, school infrastructure development, payroll integrity, and data management within the education sector , which has resulted in reduced instructional quality, poor facilities and diminished public trust in the system.

Discussion of Findings

Insecurity

The achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Nigeria is seriously affected by insecurity around schools and communities. It was found in that insecurity has disrupted education in some states in Nigeria, leading to abduction of students, displacement of children who were supposed to be in schools, closure of schools, poor attendance, declined enrolment and high rates of school dropouts, thereby weakening educational access and continuity. This result aligns with Adetunji (2025), who observed that insecurity in Nigeria in different parts of Nigeria has affected school enrolment, students' attendance and the conduct of examinations. Insecurity in schools including kidnapping and abductionare documented by Abang et al. (2025). In fact, Asangausung et al. (2024)summarised that insecurity in some parts of Nigeria, including Zamfara, Katsina, Borno, Yobe, Benue, Plateau, Sokoto and others, led to widespread displacement of children of school age, making access to education difficult.The statistics of schools, teachers and schoolchildren affected by continuous abductions and security issues, particularly in the northern part of Nigeria is documented by Stiftung (2022), indicating that 11,536 schools were closed down, 1,436 schoolchildren and 17 teachers were abducted from various schools, and 16 children lost their lives. When the school environment is unsafe for pupils and students due to continuous criminal attacks, access to education becomes an issue of concern, and children may discontinue learning. This situation is at variance with the objectives of SDG 4 target by 2030. This takes us to corruption, another factor that affect the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 target in Nigeria.

Corruption

Corruption undermines access, quality and equity in the educational system. The recruitment of teachers in public schools has been compromised by politicians and man-knows-man, giving room for unqualified teachers, which has a negative effect on learning outcomes. Ghost teachers, which has to do with teachers who are fraudulently listed in the payroll of the government without being posted to schools to teach the pupils or students, leaving the classrooms with fewer teachers and a heavy workload for available ones. A number of schools in the country lack basic amenities, including desks, libraries, laboratories, and toilets, as a result of misappropriation of development funds. Corruption often manifests in the illegal collection of fees, inflated or falsified data on admission and school attendance and supporting roles for children involved in examination misconduct. This submission aligns with Adjarho (2024), Akinniyi et al. (2021), and Asuquo and Ekanem (2024), who agreed that corrupt activities in the education sector lower the standard of education in Nigeria. Therefore, a country with a high level of corruption may find it difficult to attainthe SDG 4 target.This takes us to inadequate funding as one of the challenges to attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 target in Nigeria.

Inadequate Funding

Table 2: Federal Government's Budget Allocation for Education from 2021-2025

Year	Total Annual Budget	Budget allocation for Education Sector
2021	₦13.58 trillion	₦742.5bn (5.68%)
2022	₦17.127 trillion	₦923.79bn (5.39%)
2023	₦21.8 trillion	₦1.79 trillion (8.2%)
2024	₦27.5 trillion	₦1.54trillion (6.39%)
2025	₦54.99 trillion	₦3.52 trillion (7.3%)

Source: Arranged based on data from the Budget Office of the Federation as at 31/12/2025

Table 2 shows how much the Federal Government of Nigeria spent on education sector from 2021 to 2025. The figures show that education sector in Nigeria is not a priority because of the limited amount of money budgeted for it. The educational sector's low budget makes it hard to provide schools with teaching materials and build new infrastructure. Table 2 further shows that Nigeria's budget for education is not in line with UNESCO's guideline that 15-25 per cent of a country's total budget should go to education. In 2025, Nigeria's education sector got 7.3 per cent of the total budget and this amount was not still encouraging. This means that Nigeria's education system is falling behind because it does not have enough resources. The results corroborate the assertions posited by Amadi and Nwogu (2023), who contended that inadequate funding in Nigeria leads to diminished enrolment rates, insufficient teacher preparation and professional development, inadequate infrastructure and learning resources, and a disconnection from labour market demands, all of which significantly hinder the country's social and economic progress.Inadequate funding of the education sector may likely result in poor infrastructure.

Poor Infrastructure

Inadequate budgetary allocations for the education sector has contributed to the dilapidated state of educational infrastructure in the country. Therefore, the free and compulsory education policy in Nigeria cannot yield positive results when the educational infrastructure is in a deplorable condition. It is important to mention that some of the public schools in Nigeria have no classrooms and desks for children, thereby making learning difficult. This result aligns with studies by Daniel (2011) and Daniel (2016), who submitted that most public schools in Nigeria have poor classrooms, library facilities and an absence of instructional materials for learning, thus hindering the anticipation of achieving the mandate of quality education in 2030. As noted by Daniel (2016) and Mboho and Nkop (2023), poor learning environments caused by dilapidated infrastructure in primary and secondary schools affect the achievement of quality education in Nigeria.

Shortage of Trained Teachers

Insufficient and poorly trained teachers have been cited as another important obstacle to effective quality education in Nigeria. The Universal Basic Education Commission (2022) said that the total number of public primary school teachers in Nigeria are 499,202, out of which 410,835 are qualified teachers and 88,367 are unqualified teachers. This submission corresponds with studies by Amadi and Nwogu (2023), which stated that Nigeria has a problem of shortages of trained instructors in schools,

and this has damaged the quality of education required in SDG 4 by 2030. Daniel (2011) and Daniel (2016) found that the United Nations Standard of 25 children to a teacher is far unrealistic in Nigeria. It is in Nigeria that hundreds of pupils or students are assigned to one instructor, making a reliable educational influence on students impossible and the attainment of SDGs unattainable. Teachers have a significant role in imparting knowledge and skills to students, and their training, retraining and development are key for the enhancement of quality education (Amadi&Nwogu, 2023). Where teachers are not sufficient, and those present lack the requisite skills and expertise to properly impart, it will result in poor learning outcomes (Udofot, 2003).

Poverty

The World Bank research, quoted in the News Central TV (2025), claims that 139 million Nigerians (62% of the population) still live in poverty. The high rates of poverty are ascribed to inflation (40%), unemployment (35%) and others. Similar numbers are published by the National Bureau of numbers (NBS), which reported a poverty growth from 47% in 2024 to 63% in 2025, suggesting that 133 million people in Nigeria have experienced poverty. These outcomes necessarily affect the number of out-of-school children from 2021 to May 2025. The situation of poverty in Nigeria substantially affects the accomplishment of decent education in Nigeria. Poverty restricts access to education due to costs like lack of food, uniforms, and transportation, while instability in the country contributes to the closure of schools, therefore leading to an increased number of out-of-school children in the country. The UNESCO studies reflect a chronic and worsening status of education in Nigeria. Nwoke et al. (2024) claimed that Nigeria has one of the largest numbers of out-of-school children in the world, and poverty is one of the factors (see Table 3 for statistics).

Table 3: Statistics of out-of-school children in Nigeria between 2021-2025

Year	Frequency	Remark
2021	10.5 million	Very low
2022	10.2 million	Very low
2023	20 million	Low
2024	18.4 million	Low
2025	18.3 million	Low

Source: UNESCO Report

Curriculum Obsolescence

Curriculum obsolescence is among the problems in the fulfilment of SDG 4 in Nigeria. This particular factor stems from the problem of content, which may not be relevant to the present needs of developing a skill-based education; poor teacher training programmes on effective curriculum implementation; over-theorising of the curriculum; and failure to relate to practical skills that will help the child acquire skills that will make him or her self-reliant. The Nigerian educational curriculum development is still unsuccessful, as it is focused towards literacy rather than skill acquisition, which coincides with the SDGs aim. This correlates with the studies of Willie et al. (2025) and Ukommi and Agha (2015), who stated that

inadequate attention to technical and vocational education and out-dated curriculum, which inhibits human capital development, contributes to poor industrial development in Nigeria.

In summary, the discussion of findings highlighted how insecurity becomes a major setback to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Nigeria, particularly by hindering access to education. Continous attacks on schools, kidnappings of students and teachers, and widespread displacement; especially in northern Nigeria have led to school closures, falling enrolment numbers, irregular attendance, and rising dropout rates. Numerous studies consistently show that insecurity has severely disrupted educational continuity, undermining the goal of providing inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030. Corruption also emerged as a significant barrier to SDG 4. The research indicates that corrupt practices in hiring teachers, the presence of ghost workers, mismanagement of funds, illegal fee collection, and manipulation of academic processes all compromise educational quality, equity, and access. These issues diminish accountability, erode institutional integrity, and lower educational standards, making it harder to reach quality education targets.

Inadequate funding was identified as a fundamental constraint. Budget allocations for education from 2021 to 2025 have fallen well short of international recommendations, indicating a lack of prioritisation for the sector. This insufficient funding has led to poor infrastructure, limited teaching resources, inadequate teacher development, and a growing disconnect between educational outcomes and the demands of the job market. The findings are consistent with previous studies that link underfunding to declining educational quality and lower enrolment rates. The state of infrastructure only adds to the challenges at hand. Many public schools are marked by poor classrooms, a shortage of desks, limited libraries, and a lack of teaching materials, all of which create tough learning conditions. These issues dilute the impact of free and compulsory education policies and hinder the pursuit of quality education.

Another major hurdle is the shortage of qualified and willing teachers. A significant number of educators lack proper qualifications, and the high pupil-to-teacher ratios make effective teaching a real struggle. Overcrowded classrooms and a lack of professional development opportunities stifle learning outcomes and fall short of global quality education standards. Poverty is also a key factor that limits access to education. With a large portion of Nigerians living in poverty, many families find it hard to cover basic educational expenses like uniforms, transportation, and learning materials. The rising levels of poverty have led to an increase in the number of children out of school, keeping Nigeria among the countries with the highest rates of out-of-school children worldwide.

Lastly, out-dated curricula are a significant barrier to achieving SDG 4. The curriculum tends to be too theoretical, lacking a focus on skills, and does not align well with today's socio-economic and technological realities. The limited focus on technical and vocational education hampers human capital development and diminishes the relevance of education to the country's development goals.

Conclusion

This study the challenges of Nigeria's educational sector in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030. The results showed that issues like insecurity, corruption, poverty, outdated curricula, lack of funding,

poor infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified and willing teachers are all major setbacks to progress of SDG 4. But it does not just stop at identifying these challenges; the findings also carry important conceptual and theoretical implications.

By combining systemic issues and human-related factors into a unified analytical framework, the study enhances our understanding of the educational hurdles faced in the country. The findings revealed that poverty, corruption, insecurity, and crumbling infrastructure are interconnected, each one feeding into the others, rather than being isolated problems. This suggests that striving for high-quality education should be viewed as a complex development challenge deeply rooted in broader socio-economic and political contexts, rather than merely a sector-specific policy issue. Consequently, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for a holistic, systems-based approach instead of fragmented efforts.

The findings also support and build upon Talcott Parsons' Social System Theory. Parsons argued that functional harmony is essential for the stability of the interdependent subsystems that make up society. This research shows that the effective functioning of the educational subsystem is hindered by dysfunctions in the political subsystem (like corruption and poor policy execution), the economic subsystem (characterized by inadequate funding and poverty), and the security framework (marked by violence and insecurity).

By interrogating the serious and intricate nature of insecurity as a destabilising force in Nigeria, this study takes a bold step in questioning some long-held theoretical beliefs. The ongoing violent disruptions to education reveal a deeper, systemic strain that complicates how quickly stability can be restored, which stands in stark contrast to earlier structural-functionalist views that focus on stability and gradual adjustments. By pointing out that ongoing instability can lead to prolonged disequilibrium in developing cultures, this research builds on Parsons' ideas.

The findings align with other studies that identify teacher shortages, lack of funding, and poor facilities as major hurdles to Nigeria's educational progress. Corruption and poverty also emerge as persistent barriers to effective policy implementation in similar research. However, this study sets itself apart by adopting a more integrated analytical approach, situating these issues within a broader theoretical and systemic context instead of examining them in isolation. Additionally, it gives equal importance to curriculum obsolescence and insecurity as structural factors that affect both access to and the quality of education, while previous studies have often zeroed in on economic limitations or governance failures.

In summary, the analysis concludes that to meet Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Nigeria by 2030, we need a systemic overhaul across interconnected institutions, rather than just increasing enrollment numbers or building more facilities. Conceptually, this study shifts the discussion from mere sectoral reform to a call for systemic change. Theoretically, it strengthens the relevance of Social System Theory in addressing development challenges in complex societies.

Recommendations

The following practical suggestions stem from the understanding that Nigeria's education sector faces significant challenges in attaining Sustainable Development Goal 4 due to issues like insecurity, corruption, insufficient funding,

poor infrastructure, a shortage of trained and willing teachers, poverty, and an outdated curriculum:

First, the government needs to develop a clear and coordinated plan to reform the education sector. This plan should focus on increasing funding for schools, provision of adequate security, upgrading school infrastructure, updating curriculum, employing qualified and willing teachers, as well as enhancing accountability systems. Essentially, this means allocating more resources to education in line with international standards, ensuring timely and proper monitoring of funds, renovating dilapidated school buildings, and employment of qualified teachers who are willing to serve. To combat corruption, we should strengthen anti-corruption measures in educational administration through independent monitoring bodies and digital financial management systems. By tackling funding gaps, infrastructure issues, and teacher shortages simultaneously, we can sustainably address the structural weaknesses highlighted in the study.

Secondly, there is a need to establish a comprehensive framework for school safety and social support to tackle the barriers to education posed by poverty and insecurity. This involves fostering collaboration between security agencies, local communities, and school authorities to ensure schools are safe from violence and disruption. Additionally, implementing more conditional cash transfer programmes, school feeding initiatives, and scholarships for at-risk children would help reduce dropout rates due to financial constraints. To enhance the relevance and quality of education, the curriculum should be updated to better align with the demands of today's job market and technological advancements. These measures would directly tackle the human and systemic challenges identified in the study, significantly improving Nigeria's prospects of achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030.

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