

WHITE PAPER

# The Danger of the Knowledge Gap

*How Nigeria's Out-of-School Children Crisis Threatens National Stability, Economic Growth and Social Development — and What Must Now Change*

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PREPARED BY

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IA-Foundation

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## CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

# A Word from the Chairman

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Nigeria stands at a defining moment in its national journey.

As a nation blessed with one of the youngest populations in the world, we possess an extraordinary reservoir of human potential. Yet, that potential is increasingly at risk. Across our communities, millions of children remain excluded from education, denied the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to participate meaningfully in society. The consequence is not merely an education crisis—it is a national development emergency.

This White Paper, *The Danger of the Knowledge Gap*, was commissioned by IA Foundation to stimulate a deeper national conversation about the growing challenge of out-of-school children and the far-reaching implications of educational exclusion. While much attention has rightly been paid to the immediate humanitarian concerns, this publication seeks to illuminate the broader dangers posed by a widening knowledge gap: weakened economic productivity, increased insecurity, social fragmentation, democratic vulnerability, and the silent erosion of Nigeria's future leadership capacity.

One of the most compelling arguments presented in this paper is the concept of “**Adolescent Brain Drain**.” We often lament the migration of skilled professionals from our shores, yet far less attention is paid to the millions of young Nigerians whose talents are never developed in the first place because they are denied access to education. The loss of potential before it can be nurtured may prove even more costly than the loss of trained professionals after they have acquired their skills.

The statistics contained in this report are sobering. Whether the number of out-of-school children is 10m, 18m, or even higher, the reality remains unchanged: **Nigeria currently carries one of the largest educational exclusion burdens in the world.** Every child left behind represents not only an individual tragedy but also a collective loss to our nation.

At IA Foundation, we believe that the solution lies beyond government action alone. The scale of this challenge demands a coordinated response involving government, the private sector, development partners, civil society organisations, traditional institutions, faith communities, educators, parents, and local communities themselves. No single institution can solve this crisis in isolation.

This conviction has informed IA Foundation's Community-Centred Education Access Model outlined in this paper. Our approach is rooted in the belief that sustainable change occurs when communities become active partners in identifying children, removing barriers to learning, and holding stakeholders accountable for results. Education must not be viewed merely as a social service; it must be recognised as the most important investment a nation can make in its future prosperity, stability, and competitiveness.

As Chairman of IA Foundation, I am proud to present this White Paper as a contribution to the national discourse and as a call to collective action. We do not claim to possess all the answers. Rather, we seek to convene the conversations, partnerships, and commitments necessary to move Nigeria closer to a future where every child has access to quality education and every young person has the opportunity to realise their full potential.

The challenge before us is immense, but so too is the opportunity. If we act decisively, collaboratively, and with sustained commitment, we can transform today's knowledge gap into tomorrow's knowledge advantage.

I invite policymakers, corporate leaders, development partners, educators, advocates, and all Nigerians of goodwill to engage with the ideas contained in this paper and join us in building a future where no child is left behind.

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***The future of Nigeria will be determined not by the opportunities available to a privileged few, but by the opportunities we create for every child.***

***Diran Famakinwa FCA FCCA MBA***

Chairman, IA-Foundation

23 June 2026

## SECTION ONE

# Executive Summary

*Nigeria is losing a generation — not to emigration, but to exclusion. Brain drain, it turns out, does not begin at the airport. It begins in childhood, in the communities where millions of Nigerian children never enter a classroom at all.*

Nigeria faces one of the most consequential development crises in its modern history: the rapid expansion of a dangerous and widening knowledge gap, driven by a growing population of out-of-school children. While the issue is often framed primarily as a humanitarian or educational challenge, its implications extend far beyond classrooms. The persistence of educational exclusion across millions of Nigerian children now represents a direct threat to national security, economic competitiveness, democratic stability, social cohesion, and long-term national development.

Nigeria has more out-of-school children than any other country on earth. Estimates vary depending on the age range and methodology used — from 10.2 million primary-age children (UNICEF Nigerian Child Report, 2025) to 18.3 million school-age children (UNICEF, 2024) to 28 million children and adolescents when digital exclusion is included (Save the Children, January 2026). That this range is so wide is itself a crisis: **Nigeria cannot fully solve a problem it cannot yet measure.** What is not disputed is the scale, the trajectory, and Nigeria's position at the top of the global ranking.



The challenge is not only quantitative. Only one in four Nigerian children aged 7–14 can read a simple sentence or solve basic arithmetic. This “learning poverty” means that even children inside classrooms are falling behind — deepening a knowledge gap that threatens to permanently exclude a generation from economic and civic life.

This white paper argues that the crisis demands a fundamentally different response — one that goes beyond enrolment campaigns and school construction to address the underlying social and economic conditions driving exclusion. It introduces IA-Foundation's **Community-Centred Education Access Model**: a five-pillar framework built on community ownership, partnership, and measurable outcomes.

**CENTRAL ARGUMENT**

Brain drain in Nigeria does not begin with the departure of professionals out of the country. It begins in adolescence — in the moment when a talented child, excluded from learning, loses the pathway to their potential. Solving Nigeria's knowledge gap is therefore not only an education issue. It is the most urgent human capital investment Nigeria can make.

## SECTION TWO

# Understanding the Knowledge Gap

*Education has historically served as the foundation upon which stable societies, productive economies, and democratic institutions are built. In Nigeria, that foundation is cracking.*

Across the country, millions of children remain excluded from formal education due to poverty, insecurity, displacement, gender inequality, weak infrastructure, cultural barriers, and systemic failures. While the absence of children from school is itself alarming, the deeper and more dangerous issue is the widening knowledge gap emerging as a consequence.

The “knowledge gap” is more than an education gap. It is a compound divide — separating those who possess access to learning, skills, and opportunity from those who do not. In practical terms, it encompasses exclusion from foundational literacy, digital skills, civic participation, economic opportunity, and social mobility.

Nigeria’s challenge is especially significant given its demographic structure. More than 60% of Nigerians are under 25 — a demographic that should represent the country’s greatest asset. Yet if large segments of this youth population remain uneducated and economically excluded, that asset becomes a liability: a demographic dividend that was never claimed.

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*“The challenge is not simply whether children will attend school. The greater challenge is whether Nigeria can prevent the emergence of a permanently excluded generation.”*

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## SECTION THREE — CENTRAL ARGUMENT

# The Adolescent Brain Drain

*Nigeria is well acquainted with brain drain — the departure of its doctors, engineers, and academics for better opportunities abroad. But there is a more silent, more damaging form of brain drain that receives far less attention: the one that happens before a child ever has the chance to become a doctor, an engineer, or an academic at all.*

Conventional brain drain strips Nigeria of trained professionals. **Adolescent brain drain strips Nigeria of potential itself.** It is the loss of intellectual and human capital before it can even be developed — the scientist who never studied, the innovator who never coded, the leader who never learned to read.

Consider what is being lost. In the 18.3 million Nigerian children currently out of school — a figure that rises to 28 million when adolescents without digital learning access are counted — there are, statistically speaking, hundreds of thousands of gifted individuals whose trajectories have already been altered, not by lack of talent, but by lack of access. In many communities, survival has replaced aspiration. Potential entrepreneurs are selling goods on the roadside. Potential engineers are in informal apprenticeships with no pathway to qualification. Potential civic leaders are vulnerable to radicalisation or exploitation.

## THE WORLD BANK ON NIGERIA'S HUMAN CAPITAL LOSS

In February 2026, the World Bank released findings that Nigeria's existing education and skills deficits are costing the country 111% of future labour earnings — meaning that the cost of inaction exceeds the full expected lifetime income of the average Nigerian worker. In the 15 years to 2025, student test scores in Nigeria improved by just one point. The pipeline is not improving.

UNESCO has quantified the macro-economic dimension: global educational gaps cost the world economy an estimated \$10,000 billion per year by 2030. For Nigeria specifically, out-of-school children are estimated to cost between **7.83% and 13.03% of GDP annually**. This is not a humanitarian statistic. It is an economic emergency.

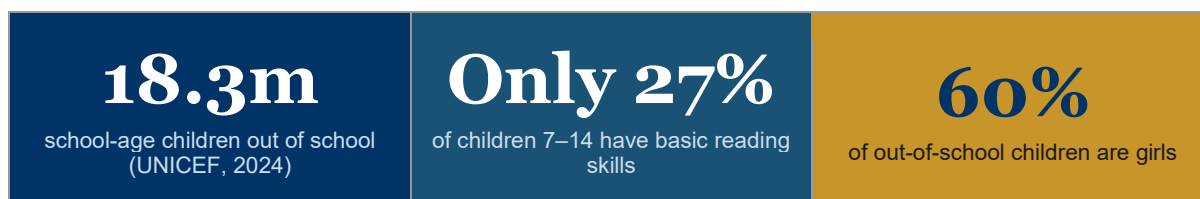
Conventional brain drain is painful, but it can — in theory — be reversed. Professionals can return. Skills can be transferred. **Adolescent brain drain cannot be reversed.** A child who misses the foundational years of learning does not simply catch up. The cognitive window narrows. The social and economic pathways close. The aspiration, without reinforcement, fades.

The adolescent brain drain concept reframes this crisis. It changes the question from “how do we get children into school?” to “what kind of Nigeria are we building — and who will build it?” When millions of children never develop their intellectual potential, Nigeria does not

simply lose workers. It loses the innovators, the entrepreneurs, the civic leaders, and the scientists that any nation needs to thrive. The knowledge gap is, at its root, a question of national capacity.

## SECTION FOUR

# The Scale of the Crisis



## Regional Disparities

The out-of-school challenge is not evenly distributed. Northern Nigeria continues to experience the highest concentration of educational exclusion, driven by insecurity, poverty, displacement, child labour, and weak infrastructure. In Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states, 113 schools were closed in 2022–2023 following armed attacks. In the North-West, child marriage rates remain among the world’s highest, profoundly affecting girls’ educational participation.

### A NOTE ON THE NUMBERS — AND WHY THE UNCERTAINTY MATTERS

Estimates of Nigeria’s out-of-school children population range significantly by source and methodology: UNICEF’s 2025 Nigerian Child Report cites 10.2 million primary-age children; a 2024 UNICEF report places the school-age figure at 18.3 million; Save the Children, citing UNICEF data in January 2026, reports 28 million children and adolescents without access to formal schooling or digital learning. In May 2026, Nigeria’s Federal Minister of Education disputed the higher figures, citing ongoing government mapping data suggesting a lower count — while UNICEF’s working estimate remains 15–18 million. The divergence itself is the argument. Without reliable, community-level data, Nigeria cannot target interventions, allocate resources, or measure progress. The data gap is inseparable from the education gap.

Yet the crisis is not confined to the North. In Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Abuja, large populations of children in informal settlements remain outside formal education due to economic hardship and social exclusion. Urban poverty is a quiet crisis that generates few headlines but affects millions.

## The Hidden Dimensions

Many dimensions of Nigeria’s educational crisis remain underreported. Children engaged in street hawking, domestic labour, informal apprenticeships, and child trafficking exist largely outside official statistics. Displacement caused by flooding and communal conflict continues to disrupt educational continuity in ways that are difficult to capture. Children living with disabilities face significant barriers due to limited inclusive learning infrastructure and weak support systems.

**THE SIX DANGERS OF THE KNOWLEDGE GAP**

<b>Crime &amp; Insecurity</b> Educational exclusion creates fertile ground for gang recruitment, trafficking, violent extremism, and cybercrime.	<b>Economic Stagnation</b> A poorly educated workforce weakens productivity, discourages investment, and limits competitiveness in technology-driven markets.
<b>Adolescent Brain Drain</b> Potential scientists, entrepreneurs, and leaders are lost before their intellectual potential can be developed.	<b>Democratic Fragility</b> Low educational attainment increases vulnerability to misinformation, political manipulation, and ethnic division.
<b>Intergenerational Poverty</b> Educational exclusion perpetuates cycles of poverty across generations, becoming self-reinforcing without deliberate intervention.	<b>Social Fragmentation</b> Extreme inequality in educational access fuels resentment, regional disparities, and long-term instability.

## SECTION FIVE

# Why Previous Responses Have Not Been Enough

*Nigeria has not ignored this challenge. Governments, development partners, civil society, and the private sector have invested significantly in education over two decades. Yet millions of children remain outside classrooms, and learning outcomes remain among the worst globally. The question is not one of effort. It is one of approach.*

CHALLENGE AREA	PAST APPROACH	WHAT IS NEEDED
Programme Design	Isolated, project-based interventions	◆ <b>Systems-based, coordinated ecosystem</b>
Funding	Short grant cycles; insufficient for scale	◆ <b>Long-term, outcomes-based investment</b>
Data	Weak identification and tracking	◆ <b>Community-level digital beneficiary data</b>
Barriers	Focus on enrolment; indirect costs ignored	◆ <b>Comprehensive barrier removal (fees, uniforms, transport)</b>
Community	Communities as passive beneficiaries	◆ <b>Communities as active co-designers</b>
Private Sector	Ad hoc CSR; limited accountability	◆ <b>Strategic, institutionalised partnerships with measurable outcomes</b>
Security Context	Education treated separately from security	◆ <b>Integrated response connecting education, security, and governance</b>

## The Encouraging Exceptions

It is important to acknowledge that Nigeria's response is evolving. The Lagos Education Access Fund (LEAF) — a \$25 million outcomes-based financing initiative involving the Government of Lagos State and the Education Outcomes Fund — represents exactly the kind of bold, systems-level thinking that this white paper advocates. LEAF builds on Project Zero's remarkable achievement of re-enrolling more than 36,000 out-of-school children, and introduces results-based financing that places Lagos at the frontier of global education innovation for developing nations.

**WHAT LEAF DEMONSTRATES**

Outcomes-based financing works. Community re-enrolment works. Linking funding to evidence works. The lesson of LEAF is not that the problem is unsolvable — it is that the right model, at sufficient scale, with the right partnerships, can move the needle. IA-Foundation's framework is built on these lessons.

**SECTION SIX — IA-FOUNDATION'S CONTRIBUTION**

# A Community-Centred Response Framework

*What makes IA-Foundation's approach distinctive is not that it is entirely new. It is that it combines what the evidence shows works — community ownership, outcomes measurement, barrier removal, and multi-sector partnership — into a coherent, scalable model that Nigeria's fragmented landscape has not yet produced at national scale.*

IA-Foundation's Community-Centred Education Access Model (CCEAM) is built on five interconnected pillars. These pillars do not operate in sequence — they operate in parallel, recognising that educational exclusion is a compound problem that requires compound solutions.

## **01 EARLY IDENTIFICATION & COMMUNITY MAPPING**

Deploying community education registers, local education volunteers, and digital beneficiary databases to ensure no child remains invisible. Every child identified. Every barrier understood.

## **02 REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACCESS**

Addressing the real cost of school beyond fees — uniforms, transport, materials, feeding, menstrual hygiene support for girls, safeguarding. Access means removing every obstacle, not just opening the school gate.

## **03 PUBLIC-PRIVATE-CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERSHIPS**

Building institutionalised, accountable multi-sector coalitions where government, corporations, NGOs, and communities share both responsibility and accountability for outcomes.

## **04 EDUCATION-TO-EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS**

Connecting learning to aspiration through vocational training, digital skills, entrepreneurship education, mentorship, and employment pathways — so children and young people can see a future that school makes possible.

## **05 ADVOCACY, AWARENESS & BEHAVIOUR CHANGE**

National awareness campaigns, community mobilisation, policy dialogue, and media engagement to elevate education from a charitable issue to a national development priority — challenging the harmful social norms that drive exclusion, and sustaining political and public attention on the crisis.

## What Makes This Model Distinctive

**1**

### COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP, NOT CHARITY

Research consistently shows that community-led approaches outperform top-down programmes in achieving lasting outcomes. A 2025 analysis of community-driven strategies found that locally-owned models significantly outperformed generic top-down programmes in achieving durable change. IA-Foundation's model places communities not as beneficiaries but as co-designers, implementers, and accountability holders.

**2**

### OUTCOMES-BASED FROM DAY ONE

Every IA-Foundation intervention is designed around measurable outcomes — not inputs or activities, but children re-enrolled and retained, girls completing cycles, young people entering vocational pathways. This makes IA-Foundation credible to government, fundable by development finance institutions, and accountable to communities.

**3**

### THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN DRAIN LENS

IA-Foundation reframes the crisis not as an enrollment problem but as a national human capital emergency — one that demands the same urgency that Nigeria applies to economic growth, security, and infrastructure. This framing is what makes IA-Foundation's advocacy distinctive: it speaks to government, business, and civil society in the language of their own interests.

**4**

### A CONVENING ARCHITECTURE

The IA-Foundation Education Summit is not a standalone event. It is the public-facing expression of a year-round architecture of partnerships, policy dialogue, and community engagement. Every summit generates a white paper, every white paper generates policy conversations, every policy conversation generates partnerships, and every partnership generates interventions on the ground.

**5**

### THE BRIDGE NO ONE ELSE IS BUILDING

Nigeria has government agencies focused on education, development partners focused on data, corporations focused on CSR, and NGOs focused on community delivery. What it lacks is a credible, independent institution capable of connecting all of these into a coherent national response. That is the institutional role IA-Foundation is building — a bridge between policy and practice, between ambition and accountability, between the child on the street and the minister in the office.

## SECTION SEVEN

# Recommendations for Stakeholders

Closing Nigeria's knowledge gap is not the responsibility of any single institution. Below are the specific actions that each sector must take — and the partnerships that IA-Foundation is positioned to facilitate.

## Government

- Increase education spending toward the UNESCO-recommended benchmark of 15–20% of the national budget (Nigeria currently allocates 7.2%).
- Strengthen community-level educational data systems to ensure no child is invisible to formal tracking.
- Scale LEAF-style outcomes-based financing beyond Lagos State to other high-exclusion states.
- Institutionalise public-private-community partnerships as a standard delivery model for educational programmes, not an exception.
- Implement and enforce the Safe Schools Declaration in all conflict-affected states.

## Corporate Nigeria

- Shift CSR education investments from short-term giving to long-term, outcomes-based partnership with credible implementing organisations.
- Recognise educational investment as workforce pipeline development, not charity — and align it with ESG commitments and sustainability frameworks.
- Support digital literacy and vocational pathways that connect excluded youth to the skills the private sector needs.

## Development Partners

- Fund community-centred, evidence-based models that prioritise retention and learning outcomes, not just enrolment.
- Invest in Nigerian civil society organisations with the capacity to connect policy, advocacy, and community delivery.
- Promote coordination among implementing organisations to prevent duplication and build a coherent national ecosystem.

## Media

- Sustain public attention on the knowledge gap as a national security and economic issue, not only a humanitarian story.
- Amplify the voices of communities, young people, and frontline educators.
- Hold government and private sector partners accountable for commitments made at forums like this Summit.

## SECTION EIGHT

# A National Call to Action

*Nigeria stands at a crossroads. The country possesses one of the largest youth populations in the world — and therefore one of the greatest opportunities for demographic and economic transformation. That opportunity is being squandered, child by child, community by community, in silence.*

The knowledge gap is not a future problem. Its costs are being paid right now — in the insecurity on our streets, in the unemployment rates that threaten stability, in the innovation that never happens, in the leaders who never emerge. Every year that passes without coordinated action is another cohort of children whose trajectories are set — not by their talent, but by their exclusion.

*“The question before us is not whether Nigeria can afford to invest in educating its children. The question is whether Nigeria can afford not to. The answer will shape the nation for generations to come.”*

— Olufunke Sotinwa, Executive Director, IA-Foundation

IA-Foundation was established to ensure that this question is not merely asked, but answered — with action, with partnerships, and with accountability. Our model is grounded in community ownership, driven by evidence, and designed to scale. We are not here to add another programme to a fragmented landscape. We are here to help Nigeria build the coherent, collaborative response that this crisis demands.

For every stakeholder in this room — government officials, corporate leaders, development partners, educators, and advocates — the invitation is the same: not to give to a cause, but to invest in a country. The children excluded from Nigeria’s classrooms today are not someone else’s responsibility. They are Nigeria’s future. And the future begins now.

## IA-FOUNDATION’S COMMITMENT

IA-Foundation commits to serving as a credible, accountable, community-embedded bridge between Nigeria’s most consequential education stakeholders and its most vulnerable children. We invite every institution represented at this Summit to stand with us — not as sponsors, but as partners in the most important national investment Nigeria can make.

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