

INSIGHTS-IN-ACTION

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# Accelerated education provides path to learning for Nigeria's conflict-affected children

How a targeted programme helped displaced and marginalised children regain access to education, with lessons for broader policy efforts

Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria, Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs),  
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ASK THE EVIDENCE

## If you have only have one-minute:

Nigeria has the world's highest number of out-of-school children, with over 20 million affected by conflict and poverty. In the northeast, where insurgency has deliberately targeted education, an accelerated learning programme has shown that targeted interventions can deliver results even in fragile environments.

From 2018 to 2021, the USAID-funded Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria (AENN) initiative helped over 200,000 children regain access to learning through Non-Formal Learning Centres. Delivered by FHI 360, the programme used a condensed curriculum in local languages, integrated trauma-informed teaching, and increased female enrolment through targeted interventions.

### **Key lessons for similar contexts include:**

- A compressed curriculum helped students catch up quickly.
- Community engagement – local buy-in improved enrolment and retention.
- Social-emotional learning aided recovery from trauma.
- Radio and mobile learning mitigated COVID-19 disruptions.
- A scalable, cost-effective model

With AENN having worked with government partners to develop standardised mainstreaming guidelines, the programme provides a roadmap for tackling learning crises in conflict-affected and low-resource settings worldwide.

Kantum, 14, was forced to flee her village in Borno state in northeast Nigeria when it came under attack and her father was killed. She escaped with her mother and five siblings. Thanks to an accelerated education project in the community in which her family was hosted, she was able to pick up her studies and develop a love for mathematics.

“I like calculations because if you learn calculation, you learn how to solve problems. This is where the problem is. I want to help solve it” – Kantum

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There are more out-of-school children in Nigeria than any other country in the world, largely as a result of poverty and insecurity. Nationwide, more than 20 million children and youth have either never attended school or dropped out early. The economic costs are estimated at US\$40bn in modest terms.

In the northeast, where the decade-long Islamist insurgency has deliberately targeted education, this learning crisis is at its most acute: 1,200 schools have been destroyed and 1,700 have been forced to close. Hundreds of teachers have been killed and high-profile abductions of schoolgirls have drawn global attention. Even before the COVID-19 school closures, three quarters of children were out of school in Yobe and Borno states which have the highest numbers of displaced people.

In spite of this unstable situation, an accelerated education programme has managed to reach displaced children like Kantum and help them to catch up their learning in safe spaces. From 2018 – 2021, the USAID-funded Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria (AENN) programme targeted students aged 6–15 in 180 communities to help them recover their lost learning and transition into formal schooling.

Rolled out by the US-based non-profit FHI360 and partners, the programme set up over 900 “Non-formal Learning Centres” offering a compressed curriculum in the local languages, Hausa and Kanuri, along with English. As well as basic literacy and numeracy, it included a strong emphasis on “social and emotional learning” tailored to the needs of students who have experienced trauma from witnessing violence, displacement, and being orphaned.

As well as setting up Non-Formal Learning Centres, the programme supported 119 formal schools in the two states with local language materials and teacher training for 2,412 educators in conflict-sensitive education practices.

Girls have been particularly marginalised in the region, partly because of longstanding cultural attitudes around the value of girls’ education. Initial surveys showed they were also out of school because of concerns about their safety, both on the way to and while in school. The project took a proactive approach to tackling these barriers, including when enrolling children into the Non-formal Learning Centres. Girls accounted for 53 per cent of the total in the first year, 58 per cent in the second year, and 59 per cent in the final year.

As the project progressed, it enhanced its focus to reach more of the most marginalised learners, by adding ten Non-Formal Learning Centres for girls only, and two that catered only for learners with disabilities. Almost half of all learning facilitators recruited were women. In all its teaching and learning approaches AENN’s stated aim was to “go beyond gender inclusivity, demonstrating gender transformative norms to allow both boys and girls to imagine and realise a future of true equity and empowerment.”

The COVID-19 pandemic presented huge challenges to the project. With schools closed for more than 100 days and partially closed for another 84 days, AENN pivoted to distance learning by employing radio education, home learning info-lines, SMS messaging, home learning kits, and phone monitoring.

By working closely with communities and local authorities, by the end of its three-year life, it had supported 201,555 vulnerable children and youth to access education (75,576 in Nonformal Learning Centres and 125,979 in formal schools).

The results, catalogued in an evaluation at the end of the work in 2021, showed AENN had more than doubled the percentage of learners in Non-Formal Learning Centres who could read 30 words per minute, from 13 to 30 per cent. The evaluation concluded:

“Accelerated education is an effective and cost-efficient approach to providing quality access to certified Basic Education for out-of-schoolchildren (OOSC) in Borno and Yobe states. The unit cost of \$53.40 per learner for basic literacy content yielded learning outcome increases of 27% and 17% in cohorts 1 and 3 among learners respectively.”

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These results are complemented by qualitative evidence which reported improved teaching methods, enhanced well-being of learners and facilitators, stronger feelings of school safety, and better parental attitudes towards education. The programme met its target of transitioning more than 60 per cent of children into the formal system.

In the final year of the project, AENN's compressed curriculum was officially adapted into the national Accelerated Basic Education Program. To enhance education opportunities for nonformal learners to transition into the formal system, AENN worked with government partners to develop standardised mainstreaming guidelines. The programme also established five state and local-level data hubs to support government capacity to collect, analyse, and utilise education data, training local managers in planning education in a conflict zone.

Following the end of the USAID project, much of the work is now being continued in the Opportunities to Learn programme launched in January 2022, led by International Rescue Committee (IRC).

Nigeria is highlighted as one of eight “focus countries” in Education.org’s accelerated education research which distils a wide range of evidence and provides guidance for education leaders on how they can use accelerated education to tackle pandemic-related learning losses – and the broader challenge of out-of-school children and youth.

Dr. Randa Grob-Zakhary, Founder and CEO of Education.org said:

“ The experience in Nigeria’s northeast shows how accelerated education can be tailored to the most challenging of contexts, helping the most vulnerable conflict-affected children to catch up on lost learning in a safe and supportive environment.”

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