



POLICY BRIEF

When the Floodwaters Rise, Classrooms Empty:

Nigeria's Overlooked Climate-
Education Crisis

By **Martin Ufi** and **Onyinye Onuh**

Introduction

Despite the policy of free and compulsory primary education, Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children in the world, with an estimated [10.5 million](#) of the country's children, aged 5 to 14, not currently enrolled. This figure accounts for about [15 percent of the global out-of-school population](#). The scale of exclusion highlights the fragile state of Nigeria's education system and points to a deep, persistent crisis in access to basic learning opportunities.



Yet as daunting as this reality is, it is being quietly and rapidly intensified by another force: climate change. Across the globe, climate hazards disrupted learning for at least [242 million children in 2024 alone, according to UNICEF](#). In Sub-Saharan Africa (Fig. 1), Nigeria was among the most affected, with over [2.2 million children](#) facing school interruptions due to floods, a major extreme weather event battering infrastructure, displacing families, and derailing education systems.

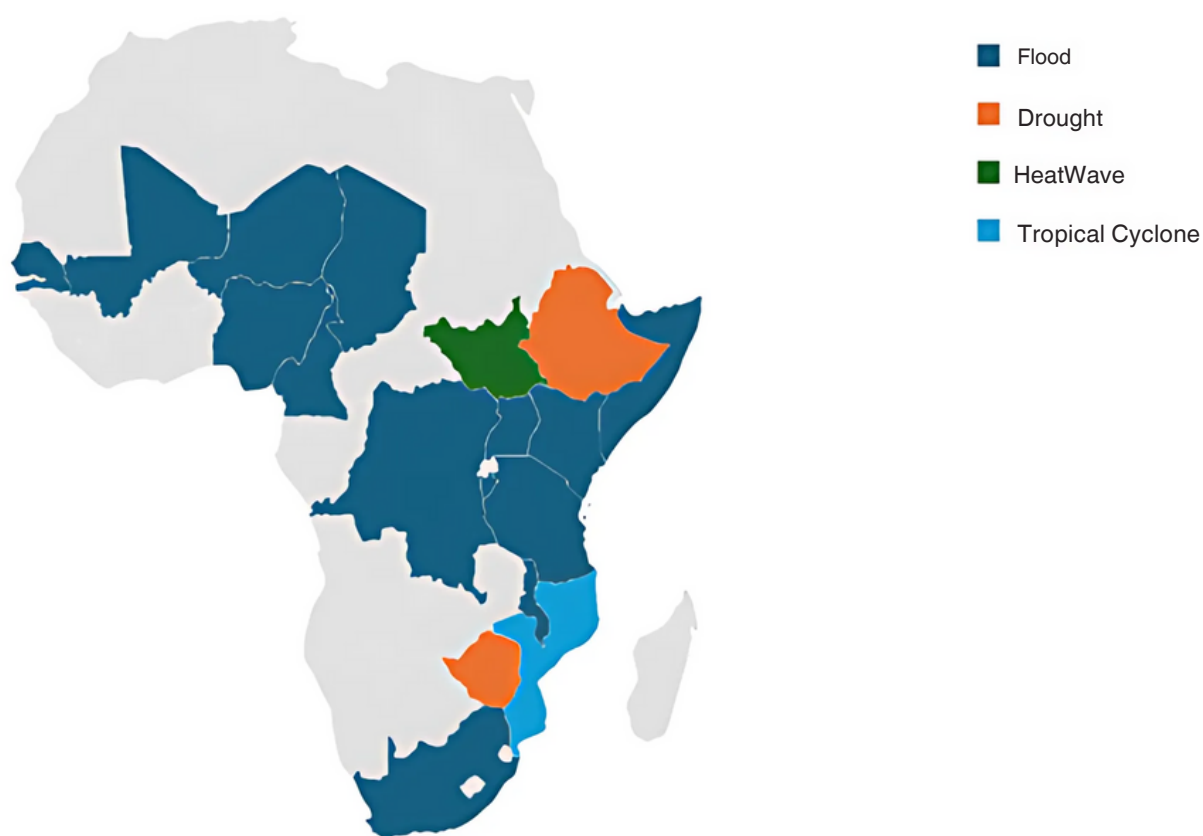


Fig. 1: Major climate hazard causing the largest school disruption in selected Sub-Saharan Countries (Source: [UNICEF, 2024](#))

The climate crisis is not just about melting glaciers or rising seas; it is a learning crisis in disguise. Extreme weather events are destroying schools, displacing communities, and forcing children into survival modes where learning takes a backseat. Children are not only losing valuable time in the classroom; many never return at all. For some, education ends the moment disaster strikes.

This brief unpacks how climate change is quietly becoming one of the biggest threats to education in Nigeria. It examines the specific ways floods disrupt learning and deepen existing inequalities. Understanding how to break this cycle and what must change has never been more urgent. Nigeria must act now to build climate-resilient education systems that protect the right to learn. The sections that follow outline practical, time-sensitive actions to keep classrooms open and children learning, no matter the weather.

Climate Change in Nigeria: A Growing Threat



Nigeria continues to face increasing climate-related disasters that severely impact lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure across the country. The 2022 floods affected over [three million people across 34 states](#), destroying hundreds of schools, damaging homes, and disrupting essential services.

In 2024, the crisis deepened (Table 1). In Borno State, for example, the 2024 collapse of the Alau Dam submerged nearly half the city, destroyed key infrastructure, and [displaced more than 400,000 people](#), many of whom now live in schools converted into camps. According to the [2024 IOM Flood Situation report](#), 84 percent of affected schoolchildren in Borno State lost access to education facilities following the flooding.

Table 1: Regional Impact of 2024 Flooding in Nigeria

Region	Affected Persons	Displaced Persons	Lives Lost	Affected Houses	Affected Farmlands
North-East	647,262	477,916	125	41,127	103,943
North-West	398,195	134,113	148	44,719	47,841
South-South	122,704	35,592	25	7,163	13,979
North Central	71,221	42,388	14	13,790	27,665
South-East	62,522	36,265	7	7,815	1,209
South-West	44,509	6,036	7	5,076	0

Source: [NEMA \(2024\)](#)

Across the country, the impacts of climate change vary by region but collectively contribute to a worsening humanitarian situation. The northeast remains the hardest hit, with nearly [650,000 people affected and almost 480,000 displaced](#), along with a significant loss of farmlands. The northwest and other regions also face considerable disruption, with thousands of homes and farmlands damaged, compounding food insecurity and economic challenges. These conditions disproportionately affect children and youth, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and safe living conditions.

These climate-induced displacements overlap with Nigeria's deepest educational vulnerabilities. The regions most affected by flooding in 2024, particularly the North East and North West, are the same ones with the highest rates of out-of-school children. According to the [Nigeria Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey \(2021\)](#), the North West has an out-of-school rate of 42.4 per cent, while the North East follows closely at 36.8 percent (Fig. 2). This stark overlap reveals a troubling pattern: the regions most affected by climate-induced displacement are the same ones where millions of children are already excluded from learning. Climate change is deepening this divide, compounding existing vulnerabilities and pushing the goal of universal education even further out of reach.

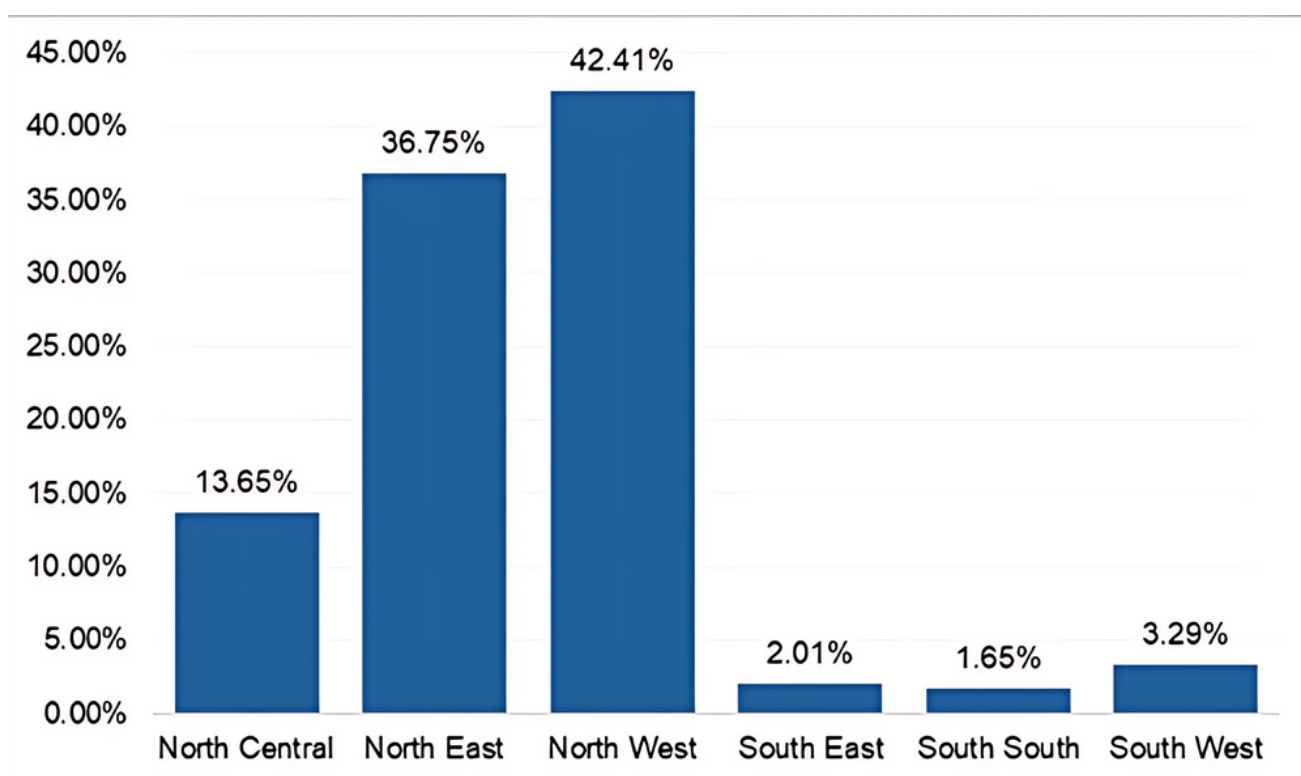


Fig. 2 – Percentage of out-of-school children in Nigeria across Geopolitical Zones
Source: [Nigeria Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2021](#)

Furthermore, the May 2025 heavy flooding in Mokwa, Niger State, showed how Nigerian communities continue to be very vulnerable to climate shocks. According to the [National Emergency Management Agency \(NEMA\)](#), 3,018 people were displaced, over 500 households were affected, and 151 lives were lost. As seen in previous disasters, such large-scale displacement increases the likelihood that schools will be repurposed as emergency shelters, forcing temporary closures and disrupting learning for both displaced children and host communities.

The cycle of climate-induced displacement and insecurity poses long-term risks to Nigeria's social and economic development. With schools and health centres damaged and large populations forced into overcrowded camps, access to education, healthcare, and basic services is severely disrupted. Addressing the root causes of Nigeria's climate vulnerability through enhanced disaster preparedness, resilient infrastructure, and inclusive policies remains critical to protecting the nation's most vulnerable populations.

How Climate Change Disrupts Education



Climate change has emerged as a critical but under-addressed driver of Nigeria's education crisis, compounding existing vulnerabilities linked to conflict, poverty, and weak infrastructure. From the 2012 and 2022 nationwide floods to the 2024 collapse of the Alau Dam in Borno and the 2025 Mokwa flooding in Niger State, climate-related disasters have destroyed schools, displaced entire communities, and interrupted learning for millions of children. These repeated shocks undermine Nigeria's progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and expose a gap in how education systems plan for and respond to environmental risks.

The impacts of climate change on education in Nigeria are complex and operate primarily through four interconnected levels: the system, school, household/community, and individual levels. At each level, it amplifies existing vulnerabilities and creates new obstacles that go beyond physical damage.

- **At the System Level**, climate disasters strain national and subnational education planning and budgets. School infrastructure damaged by floods results in prolonged closures and costly repairs. Emergency funds are often diverted from education budgets (and other sources) to disaster relief, while education sector plans rarely integrate long-term climate risk assessments or adaptation budgets. Such behaviour leads to reactive rather than proactive responses, leaving the system ill-prepared for future disruptions.

- ▶ **At the school level**, flooding interferes with learning continuity and creates unsafe environments. In many flood-prone regions in Nigeria, schools are frequently repurposed as shelters for displaced families, causing delays in academic calendars. Even after reopening, students return to overcrowded classrooms, damaged facilities, and teachers who may themselves be victims of the crisis.
- ▶ **At the household and community level**, floods reduce household income and displace entire communities. This forces families to make difficult choices: many withdraw children, especially girls, from school to work, marry early, or care for younger siblings. In flood-hit regions like Niger and Kebbi State, this pattern is common, as parents prioritise immediate survival over long-term learning. Community norms may also shift, leading to formal education being viewed as less relevant due to recurring displacement and loss of livelihood.
- ▶ **At the individual level**, children affected by climate disasters experience trauma, anxiety, and instability, which takes a toll on mental health and academic performance. Once displaced, many lose school records or uniforms, face long commutes to temporary learning spaces, or drop out entirely. Girls are at particular risk; many never return to school after crises due to safety concerns, household responsibilities, or forced marriage. These invisible barriers accumulate, particularly in a country where [75 percent of children aged 7 to 14](#) cannot read a simple sentence or solve a basic math problem.

To respond effectively, Nigeria must reimagine its education system through the lens of climate resilience. This requires moving beyond short-term fixes toward integrated, forward-looking policies that address risks at every level, from national planning to the classroom, household, and learner.

The following section outlines concrete, actionable policy recommendations tailored to the Nigerian context. These measures are designed not only to protect learning in times of crisis but also to position education as a core pillar of climate adaptation and long-term national development.

Ways Forward



Building a climate-resilient education system in Nigeria requires a coordinated, multi-level strategy that addresses the diverse vulnerabilities children face across the education ecosystem. Responses must tailor to the realities on the ground, from system-wide infrastructure planning to targeted community and household interventions.

Table 2 below outlines practical policy actions and investment priorities across four levels: system, school, household or community, and individual, ensuring that resilience-building is both inclusive and actionable. Each recommendation is designed to not only reduce current It also equips learners, educators, and institutions to better withstand future climate shocks while addressing risks.

Table 2: Strengthening Education Resilience to Climate Change in Nigeria

Level	Climate Risks to Education	Resilience and Adaptation Pathways
System Level	Damage to educational infrastructure due to floods, droughts, and storms disrupts school calendars and policy continuity.	• Mainstream climate risk assessments into education sector planning and budgeting to guide resilient infrastructure investment • Establish a National Climate-Education Risk Observatory (NCERO) under UBEC and NiMet to monitor displaced learners, infrastructure damage, and recovery outcomes
	Climate disasters divert public funds away from education budgets to emergency relief.	• Strengthen inter-ministerial collaboration (e.g, education, environment, finance) to align disaster response with education continuity plans. • Train and certify climate-education facilitators through NCE programmes with modules on disaster response, trauma-informed pedagogy, and climate literacy.
System Level	During emergencies, schools serve as shelters, disrupting learning and reducing teaching effectiveness due to overcrowding, poor ventilation, and heat stress.	• Invest in climate-resilient school designs (eg, elevated structures, renewable energy, passive cooling, and water harvesting). • Mandate climate-responsive school design in building codes via UBEC and SUBEB, including elevated foundations, solar-powered ventilation, and raised latrines. • Stockpile emergency education kits such as the UNICEF 'School-in-a-box' kit.
	Water scarcity and damaged toilets worsen hygiene, especially for girls, leading to absenteeism.	• Implement school-based WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) programs and menstrual hygiene management to support girls' attendance. • Require emergency continuity plans at schools in all LGAs, including protocols for rapid transitions from shelter use to learning resumption.
Household / Community Level	Displacement, crop failure, and income loss from climate events lead families to withdraw children from school to cope through child labour or early marriage.	• Expand social protection (e.g., cash transfers, school feeding, fee waivers) targeted at climate-affected households to reduce education dropouts. • Deploy a national network of climate learning hubs in disaster-prone LGAs to provide temporary access to education and ensure community engagement continues during non-crisis periods.

	Community-level disasters reduce local education demand and erode traditional schooling norms.	• Support community learning hubs and alternative education centres in displaced or vulnerable areas. • Embed community awareness campaigns into hub activities to promote girl-child retention and re-enrolment. • Facilitate access to climate-resilient livelihoods (e.g., climate-smart agriculture training) to reduce household dependence on child labour.
Individual Level	Children suffer trauma, reduced concentration, and long commutes due to environmental changes, which discourages attendance and learning.	• Provide psychosocial support services in schools to address trauma and stress linked to climate disruptions. • Incorporate trained climate education facilitators into temporary learning centres and regular classrooms to support continuity and wellbeing. • Introduce flexible learning models (e.g., radio education, mobile classrooms) for children in remote or crisis-affected areas.
	Children suffer trauma, reduced concentration, and long commutes due to environmental changes, which discourages attendance and learning.	• Integrate climate action projects into extracurricular activities to build student agency, leadership, and problem-solving skills. • Enable youth leadership roles in school emergency planning and preparedness activities.

Climate change is no longer a distant threat; it is a present and escalating crisis that intensifies existing challenges in Nigeria's education system. As the table above highlights, climate-related risks emerge at every level of the education ecosystem, from damaged infrastructure and disrupted school calendars to deepening inequalities and long-term learning loss among vulnerable children.

Investing in climate-resilient education is not only crucial for protecting learning outcomes amid recurring climate shocks but also vital for advancing Nigeria's broader development priorities, including the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the Climate Change Act, and the long-term ambitions outlined in the Nigeria Agenda 2050. Millions of Nigerian children face the permanent risk of falling behind without urgent and coordinated action. Strengthening the resilience of education systems today will ensure that children are not only protected from future disruptions but also empowered to shape a more inclusive, climate-smart future.