

## An appraisal of the safe schools initiative and its impact on girl-child education and national development

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### Abstract

Education is the cornerstone of every society and a vital tool for accelerating economic, social, political and national development. However, in Nigeria, persistent attacks and kidnappings in schools pose a significant barrier to this fundamental right. In a bid to secure educational environments, the Nigerian government launched the Safe Schools Initiative in 2014. Despite this effort, school attacks and kidnappings persist, severely impacting children's access to education in Nigeria. This study examines the Safe Schools Initiative, focusing on its impact on girl-child education and its broader implications for national development in Nigeria. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study analyses secondary data from journals, textbooks, reports, newspapers and other internet materials through content analysis. The findings reveal that the full implementation of the Safe Schools Initiative is hindered by factors such as insecurity, inadequate funding, lack of adequate safety measures in schools, lack of awareness, and corruption and mismanagement of funds. The study concludes that investing in girl-child education is pivotal to social progress, economic stability and national development in Nigeria. The study recommends strengthening school security, providing adequate funding, ensuring transparency, and raising awareness about the initiative's importance.

**Keywords:** safe schools initiative; education; girl-child; development; national development

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### Introduction

Education is the basic building block of any society and serves as a veritable tool for accelerating a country's economic, social, political and national development. Institutions of learning provide a platform to access education. They serve as an arena where students can acquire knowledge, skills, and qualifications that enable them to develop their potential and prepare them for the future. However, there has been growing concern over persistent attacks on schools. Insecurity, which is fuelled by insurgency and criminal activities, has led to a significant increase in attacks on schools and the kidnapping of students in Nigeria. This disturbing trend began in the year 2014 with the abduction of 276 Chibok secondary school girls by Boko Haram. Subsequent incidents include the 2018 Dapchi kidnapping of 110 college girls, the 2020 Kankara abduction of over 300 secondary school boys, the 2021 Jangebe abduction of 317 secondary school girls and the abduction of students at the Greenfield University in Kaduna, among others.

According to a study by the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, and Development Research and Project Centre (2021), in regions affected by violence and conflict, schools become targets of conflicting parties due to political, military, ideological, ethnic, religious or criminal reasons. Adeniran and Castradori (2021) submit that the Chibok school girls' abduction by Boko Haram was ideologically motivated, aimed at opposing Western education and pressuring



the government. However, recent kidnappings have become more profit-driven, with both organized and unorganized criminal groups seeking ransom.

A report by Save the Children (2023) reveals that since the Chibok incident, over 1,680 school children have been kidnapped, with more than 180 fatalities and approximately 90 injured in 70 attacks spanning from April 2014 to December 2022. Audi, as cited in Idoko (2023), reports that between 2009 and 2018, 2,295 teachers were killed, 19,000 were displaced, and 1,500 schools were destroyed, resulting in over 1,280 casualties among teachers and students. The United Nations Children's Education data is equally alarming, with 25 schools attacked, 1,470 learners abducted, 200 still missing, and over 1 million children terrified to return to school. The data indicates that in 2020 alone, 11,500 schools were closed due to attacks, with the North-West zone accounting for 76% of attacks (UNICEF, 2022b).

This insecurity has disrupted children's access to education, contributing significantly to the staggering number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF, 2022a) estimates that 10.5 million children are out of school in Nigeria, making it the highest globally. A more recent estimate by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics and the Global Education Monitoring Report (2022) indicates that approximately 20 million children are out of school in Nigeria.

Deliberate attacks on schools, particularly the kidnapping of students, have exacerbated this issue. These attacks affect students of various age groups and education levels, with secondary school students being more frequently targeted. Boys face the risk of being recruited into armed groups and enduring psychological trauma, which disrupts their education (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2016). The severity of these attacks is even greater for girls, as they not only face immediate threats to their safety but also long-term socio-economic disadvantages. According to Human Rights Watch (2024), the impact on girls is double-edged: they risk rape and other forms of sexual violence if kidnapped, and if kept out of school, they risk child marriage. Furthermore, a report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attacks (2018) indicates that women and girls have been compelled to either pause their education temporarily or drop out permanently. This situation has led many girls who are out of school to early marriage, which makes them further encounter difficulties in continuing their education due to household duties or resistance from their husbands. Early pregnancy, rape and other instances of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) further impede their ability to attend school and jeopardize their future prospects.

Due to the severity of the impact of these attacks on girls, it becomes imperative to ensure that the girl-child has unfettered access to education. A girl-child refers to a biological human female offspring from birth to eighteen years of age. That is the period before adulthood, usually covering early childhood (pre-primary), basic education, which comprises primary and junior secondary education, and lastly, senior secondary education. This stage is usually a sensitive time in a child's life for their personality, as well as physical, mental and emotional development (Mohammed, 2020). Girl-child education is, therefore, about ensuring that girls have equal access to quality education, which empowers them with knowledge and skills that can promote national development. Recognizing the significance of this developmental period, it becomes essential to provide education and opportunities that can ensure the well-rounded growth of girls.

The importance of educating girls cannot be overemphasized. Education is a tool for girls and women to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance their status for social interaction and self-improvement. As highlighted in a report by (Wodon, Montenegro, Nguyen, and Onagoruwa (2018), the denial of education to girls, particularly secondary education, carries significant cost for the girls themselves, their families, communities and societies at large. This deprivation results in higher poverty rates, increased cases of child marriage, increased fertility rates, and reduces their involvement in personal, family and community decision-making processes (Wodon et al., 2018). Similarly, the World Economic Forum (2016) indicates that excluding girls from education severely impedes the productive potential of an economy and its overall development. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attacks (2018) equally underscores the multitude of risks faced by teenage girls who are not in school, including early marriage, early

pregnancy, and missed opportunities for personal autonomy, employment, and economic independence. Educated girls become agents of change, making them fully contribute to national development. Thus, the more educated girls are, the better their chances of building the economy.

In response to the escalating insecurity and the need to protect the educational environment, the Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) was introduced in 2014. This initiative aimed to ensure that children in conflict zones or affected by insecurity can pursue their education without interruption. It focused on making schools safe and secure for children and teachers in these regions. As rightly observed by Guven (2003), creating a safe, secure and comfortable school environment is fundamental to achieving the goals of education. Such an environment fosters student success, safeguards their mental health and promotes overall development. The Safe Schools Initiative promotes the safety and security of education, making it more conducive for children, especially girls, to attend and continue their education. That empowers the girl-child to participate in the workforce, which ultimately contributes to Nigeria's social, economic and political development. However, despite government efforts through the Safe Schools Initiative, the attacks have continued unabated as schools in the country continued to struggle with incessant attacks by extremists, bandits and kidnappers (Tunji, 2023).

This study, therefore, examines the Safe Schools Initiative and its impact on girl-child education and national development in Nigeria. The study specifically seeks to interrogate the Safe Schools Initiative programme, identify the challenges confronting the Initiative, provide an understanding of how the Safe Schools Initiative programme contributes to securing the school environment that fosters the education of girls as key players in national development, and lastly make recommendations to enhance the safe and secure school learning environment.

## Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth analysis of the issue under consideration. It used the secondary method of data collection. That is, relevant data were sourced from journals, textbooks, reports, newspapers and other internet materials. This approach was chosen because it saves time and resources while providing unobtrusive access to information that may be difficult to obtain through direct personal contact (Creswell, 2014).

The search for relevant literature was conducted across several databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and the Google search engine. The search strategy involved using keywords such as "insecurity in Nigerian schools", "abduction of school-children", "Safe Schools Initiative", and "girl-child education and national development". Literatures were selected based on their relevance to the research and credibility. More recent publications, specifically from 2014 onwards, were prioritized as this marks the period when the abduction of schoolchildren became widely known in Nigeria, and the Safe Schools Initiative was launched.

The data obtained from the secondary sources were analysed using content analysis. This method was chosen for its ability to systematically analyse textual data and identify patterns, themes, and meanings within content (Kothari, 2004; Kumar, 2011). Each piece of literature was carefully read, and a customized data extraction form, aligned with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) framework, was used to extract data relevant to the research objectives manually. The extracted data were then organized to draw conclusions. To ensure validity and reliability, data from multiple sources were compared and corroborated to provide a comprehensive view of the research topic.

## Results and Discussion

### An overview of the safe schools initiative

The concept of 'safe schools' is important in promoting a conducive educational environment. Safe schools are defined in the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (MSSS) published by the Federal

Ministry of Education (2021a, p. xvii) as “the system that promotes the protection of students from violence, exposure to weapons and threats, theft, bullying and the sale or use of illegal substance on school grounds.” The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools (NPSSV), which is also published by the Federal Ministry of Education (2021b, p. 2), defines school safety and security as “a set of rules and regulations that guides the prevention and mitigation of hazards occurring in formal or informal education settings across primary, secondary and tertiary schools in Nigeria, whether private or government-owned.”

The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) was launched in May 2014 by the Nigerian Government in partnership with the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown and a Coalition of Nigerian Business Leaders. The initiative was in response to the prevailing attacks and insecurity in schools in Nigeria. The aim of the Safe School programme was to establish community security groups that would promote safer zones for education. These groups comprised teachers, parents, police, community leaders and young individuals. The strategic objectives of the initiative included relocating students from high-risk areas to schools in safer regions of the country, providing and distributing learning materials and rebuilding schools with enhanced security measures (U. Anyanwu, 2016).

According to the Global Business Coalition for Education (2014), the Safe Schools Initiative encompasses a combination of interventions within schools and communities aimed at safeguarding schools, along with specific measures tailored for at-risk populations. The Coalition listed some of the measures that can be deployed to enhance the Safe Schools Initiative. These include reinforced school infrastructure, deployment of armed guards, capacity building and training staff as school safety officers, establishment of school security plans and designation and employment of school counsellors to help students who have experienced trauma by providing psycho-social support to the victims. Additional measures include involving the community in the school protection efforts through the establishment of community education committees, teacher-student-parent defence units and engagement with religious leaders.

To underscore the commitment to secure schools, the Nigerian President signed the Safe School's Declaration ratification document in December 2019. This Declaration, initiated by the governments of Argentina and Norway, is an inter-governmental political commitment aimed at enabling countries to demonstrate political support for safeguarding students, teachers, schools, and universities during times of armed conflict (Schmidt-Martin, n.d.). The Declaration set out a series of commitments to enhance the protection of education from attacks and prevent the use of schools and universities for military purposes. Its primary objective is to ensure the uninterrupted provision of safe education during armed conflict (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, n.d.). By endorsing the Declaration, states pledge to carry out various measures to reduce the likelihood of attacks on educational institutions and alleviate the adverse effects when such attacks occur.

Nigeria was among the initial group of 37 countries to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) on May 29, 2015. Subsequently, in April 2017, the Education in Emergencies Working Group Nigeria (EiEWGN) established the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) sub-committee to raise awareness and implement the SSD in Nigeria. The Minister of Education officially endorsed the Declaration in March 2018. Following this endorsement, the Federal Executive Council ratified the Memorandum on “Mainstreaming and Implementation of the SSD Laws and Policies in Nigeria” in March 2019. This approval paved the way for the development of the ‘National Policy on Safety, and Security in Schools (NPSSS)’ which addressed many aspects covered in the draft ‘National Policy on Violence-Free Schools (NPVFS)’. Consequently, the Federal Ministry of Education and other stakeholders harmonized both policies, which gave rise to a comprehensive National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools (NPSSVFS) in August 2021.

The NPSSVFS seeks to ensure that school safety and security are at the top of the agenda for government at all levels. The policy uses an all-hazard approach which builds on existing school safety and security laws and policy initiatives to identify and put mechanisms in place that will address all kinds of hazards, including natural, man-made, structural and non-structural hazards that affect the well-being of learners, teachers, school users and the school community to ensure the

safety and security of schools in Nigeria. Most importantly, the policy also responds to the needs of children and the violence that affects them in and around schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021b). Building on the NPSSVFS, the Federal Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Education in Emergencies Working Group in Nigeria (EiEWGN), developed the 'Minimum Standard for Safe Schools' in June 2021. This document serves as an implementation roadmap and outlines principles for NPSSVFS. It sets the minimum qualities and practices that schools must adhere to in order to keep learners, school users, and schools safe, secure and violence-free.

To advance the Safe Schools Initiative, the 'Financing Safe Schools Secretariat/Unit' was established in the Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, and in December 2022, the National Plan on Financing Safe Schools was launched. The plan was developed by a Technical Committee comprising critical agencies, including the Ministry of Education, the Nigerian Governor's Forum (NGF), the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), the Department of State Security Service (DSS), and the Defence Headquarters (S. Anyanwu, 2023). The plan covering 2023 to 2026 proposes a total investment of N144.86 billion, with N32.58 billion proposed to be allocated in 2023, N36.98 billion in 2024, N37.15 billion in 2025 and N38.03 billion in 2026. The funding is expected to come from annual budgetary provisions from federal, state and local government, government interventionist agencies, foreign and multilateral institutions, businesses and philanthropists, donors, and partners. The implementation strategy aims to cover 50% of the most at-risk public schools over the medium term from 2023 to 2026. The implementation of the National Plan kicked off in 18 high-risk states and 48 schools (Opanuga, 2023).

The Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) plays a significant role in the Safe Schools Initiative. The NSCDC is saddled with the responsibility of protecting and ensuring the security of critical national infrastructure, including national institutions. The NSCDC carried out a vulnerability survey of all schools in Nigeria to determine the number of schools that are prone to attack by bandits and kidnappers so as to help in developing and working out strategies towards achieving the Safe School Initiative of the Federal Government (Idoko, 2021b). According to the vulnerability survey by the NSCDC, over 60,000 of the 81,000 schools are vulnerable and without any form of protection (Idoko, 2021a). As a result of these findings, the NSCDC created the 'Civil Defence Female Squad' in 2022, charged with the mandate of providing security to some of the 81,000 schools found to be porous nationwide. The Corps also introduced the 'School Community Security Vanguard', which engaged Teachers, Pupils, Parent-Teachers Association, Traditional Rulers and Community Leaders (Agency Report, 2022). Furthermore, the Federal Government flagged off the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre (NSSRCC) in February 2023, with the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps being the lead agency (Idoko, 2023). The Corps also created the Safe School Special Response Squad (SSSRS), which is the armed unit of the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre. By virtue of the creation, the Rapid Response Squad and Female Response Squad collapsed into the SSSRS (Odeyemi, 2023). The report reveals that the NSSRCC was able to prevent 48 attacks in schools across the country, especially in the North and South East, in 8 months, from February when it was set up to October 2023 (Uthman, 2023).

Similarly, recognizing the need for specialized effort, the Nigeria Police established the Schools Protection Squad (SPS) in July 2023 to enhance security and safety in educational institutions. The School Protection Squad is a specialized unit equipped with relevant assets and advanced training to draw up policies and engage relevant stakeholders to ensure the safety and protection of students, teachers and school infrastructure. To solidify the commitment, the Nigeria Police launched a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) handbook, which outlines the best practices and guidelines for securing schools, risk assessment, emergency response protocols, and collaboration between various stakeholders. The SOP is a crucial reference for educational authorities, security agencies, and other participants involved in the Safe School Program. It empowers them to take coordinated and effective measures to ensure the safety and protection of schools (Omonobi, 2023; Sunday, 2023). Therefore, the Safe Schools Initiative, through aligned policies, mobilization of financial

resources, and collaboration among security agencies and stakeholders, seeks to create a resilient and secure educational landscape that safeguards the future of the Nigerian nation.

### **Impact of safe schools on girl-child education and national development**

A safe and secure school environment is essential for conducive and productive learning and also a crucial factor in ensuring girl-child education, thereby contributing to national development in Nigeria. According to the British Council (2014), the perceived safety of the journey to school is a significant factor influencing girls' participation in education. This perspective is reinforced by Behounek (2020), who highlights the role of safety in education settings as a barrier to equality for women and girls, thus contributing to educational inequality. Women and girls have also faced the necessity of either pausing their education or abandoning it altogether due to increased attacks on schools (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2018).

The Federal Ministry of Education (2021b) emphasized that schools play a crucial role in nation-building, asserting that comprehensive education can only flourish in a safe and secure learning environment. Lacoe (2020) and Shumba et al. (2019) stress the importance of a safe school environment in fostering conducive and productive learning across all levels of education. According to Lai, Esnard, Lowe, and Peek (2016), safe schools are crucial in shielding both children and adult staff from the immediate dangers and long-term repercussions of disasters. Themane and Osher (2014) argue that children and youth require secure and supportive school environments to excel academically, grow healthily and thrive. This position is in line with Michael, Merlo, Basch, Wentzel, and Wechsler (2015), who assert that safe and supportive school environments are linked to enhanced health behaviours and academic achievement. Alimba (2018) maintained that a secured school would promote academic exercise freely and easily mitigate both uncomplicated and formidable security threats. Adequate security in and out of school can, therefore, help address attacks and kidnappings of school children, which is one of the factors affecting girl child education in Nigeria.

Onah, Akanimoh, and Ndome (2021) asserts that girl-child education addresses negative attitudes and promotes self-reliance and critical thinking, which can effectively foster national development in Nigeria. National development is the process of improving the economic, social, and political well-being of a country and its citizens. It is the progress made by a nation in its strive for sustainable growth (Idang & Ette, 2015). Tsetimi (2016) describes national development as a process that involves the interplay of people and their living environment to enhance living standards. National development is gauged through material and social indices, which reflect the overall welfare of citizens. Habib (2015) submits that national development requires the participation of each and every member of society, with participation determined by education level and human capacity. In essence, national development is a process that is aimed at advancing the well-being of the country and its population. It can be achieved by improving access to education, particularly that of the girl-child.

According to the British Council (2014), educating girls plays a vital role in fostering the growth of a stable, prosperous and healthy nation where citizens are engaged, productive and empowered. Furthermore, Ibrahim (2023) argues that no society can progress without the participation of the girl-child, as education provides them with diverse basic knowledge, skills and training that contributes to national development. Therefore, education empowers the girl-child to participate in the workforce. It plays a significant role in breaking gender-related barriers and fostering the development and empowerment of female children.

### **Challenges and barriers to the implementation of the safe schools initiative**

Despite its laudable goals, the Safe Schools Initiative faces significant challenges that have impeded its impact and effectiveness. These challenges span various dimensions, including security, funding, infrastructure, and allegations of corruption and mismanagement of funds.

### *Insecurity*

Nigeria grapples with persistent security challenges, particularly from insurgent groups like Boko Haram and Bandits. That has made it difficult to ensure the safety of schools in many regions, particularly in the Northern part of the country. Frequent and incessant attacks have a significant negative impact on the Safe Schools Initiative of the government. According to a report by Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2018), the positioning of certain schools on the outskirts of towns or even in remote areas between towns renders them susceptible to attack. This finding is further supported by UNICEF (2022a), which highlights the considerable distance from home to schools as a factor exposing children to increased risk of attacks. Moreover, boarding schools situated in remote areas heighten vulnerability to attacks and kidnappings, while the absence of real-time data tracking mechanisms for school attacks compounds these challenges.

**Table 1.**  
Notable kidnappings of female students in Nigeria educational institutions

S/N	Educational institutions	Date of kidnappings	Number of kidnapped female students	Perpetrators/ Abductors
1	Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State	April 14, 2014	276	Boko Haram
2	Government Girls Science and Technical College, Dapchi, Yobe State	February 19, 2018	110	Boko Haram
3	Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe, Zamfara State	February 26, 2021	317	Armed Bandits
4	College of Forestry, Afaka, Kaduna State	March 11, 2021	39 (23 females, 16 males)	Armed Gunmen
5	Greenfield University, Kaduna State	April 20, 2021	20	Armed Bandits
6	Federal Government College, Birnin Yauri, Kebbi State	June 17, 2021	102	Armed Bandits
7	Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State	September 22, 2023	Over 24	Armed Gunmen
8	Federal University, Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State	October 4, 2023	5	Armed Gunmen

Source: Compiled by Authors from various newspapers

Table 1 presents notable cases of female student kidnappings from various educational institutions in Nigeria. This insecurity escalates the number of out-of-school children, with girls being disproportionately affected. Many girl-child are afraid of attacks by bandits and kidnappers because of the vulnerability, porous, insecure and unsafe nature of the school environment. Hawkins, cited in Awofadeji and Sardauna (2022), notes that girls are specifically targeted, worsening the statistics of out-of-school children in Nigeria, with 60 per cent of them being girls. Table 2 illustrates the trend of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

The insecure and unsafe school environment has a significant impact on school enrolment. The consequence of the out-of-school children is apparent in the rising cases of criminality in the country. According to the Organized Crime Index published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2023), Nigeria ranks 6th out of 193 countries globally and the 2nd highest in Africa, scoring 7.28 out of 10 points. Similarly, the Global Peace Index (GPI) published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (2023) reveals that Nigeria ranks 144th most peaceful country out of 163 in the world and 37<sup>th</sup> out of 44 countries in the sub-Saharan African region.

**Table 2.**  
Statistics of out-of-school children in Nigeria, 2000-2022

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total population of out of school children (M)</b>
2000	6.563
2005	6.902
2010	8.616
2015	10.7
2020	10.5
2022	20

Source: Federal Ministry of Finance (2022, p. 142); UNICEF (2022a); UNESCO Institute for Statistics & Global Education Monitoring Report (2022)

### *Lack of funds*

Insufficient funding is another constraint to the effective and efficient implementation of the Safe Schools programme. The National Plan on Financing Safe Schools was unveiled in 2022 to cover the period from 2023 to 2026. The plan proposes a total investment of N144.86 billion, with N32.58 billion proposed to be allocated in 2023, N36.98 billion for 2024, N37.15 billion for 2025 and N38.03 billion for 2026. However, in the 2023 budget, a contribution of N15 billion was provided and approved by the Federal Government, leaving the funding gap for states, the private sector and development partners (Tunji, 2023). Furthermore, the report indicates that there are no allocations in the Federal Government's 2024 budget for the Safe Schools Initiative (Nwaogu, 2023). That has generated concerns among development partners who are awaiting a clear demonstration of political will and financial commitment from the Federal and State Governments before pledging support for the initiative (Adeyemi, 2023). Ogunode, Olowonefa, Deborah, and Musa (2022) observe that insufficient funding, corruption, inadequate monitoring and evaluation, political instability, undefined roles of government tiers, insecurity and lack of political will encumber a safe and secure learning environment in Nigeria.

### *Lack of adequate security measures in schools*

Many schools in Nigeria lack the necessary infrastructure to ensure safety. The absence of perimeter fencing, CCTV cameras, and security personnel to safeguard students and staff renders them vulnerable to terrorists and bandits who can easily gain access and perpetrate their illicit activities. There is a lack of baseline statistical data on the number of perimeter fences built and the number of CCTV cameras installed in schools in the affected areas (Adebajo & Ishaku, 2020). According to a report by Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) (2018), many schools either have no security measures or completely inadequate ones in place. The report indicates that apart from a few elderly guards, no additional measures were introduced or protocols established to address the deteriorating security situation. This finding aligns with UNICEF (2022b), which identifies poor security infrastructure in schools and a deficiency in security personnel, such as guards, as factors contributing to the vulnerability of schools, making them soft targets. A study conducted by Ekpoh, Edet, and Ukpoh (2020) further highlights the challenges faced by schools in maintaining a safe environment, citing factors such as insufficient security personnel, inadequate petrol vehicles, porous campuses, and the non-availability of electronic gadgets as significant obstacles. In offering a solution-oriented perspective, Afolabi and Adeyele (2019) opined that fencing all schools may not be enough safety measures to protect schools from attacks. Instead, they advocate for the installation of more sophisticated safety measures and strategies to protect schools, students and teachers from potential attacks.

### *Lack of awareness*

There is limited awareness among communities and stakeholders of the importance of the Safe Schools Initiative, and this hinders its adoption and support. A National Survey on Violence in Schools conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education (2014) cited in the Federal Ministry of Education (2021a) reveals that most schools are not prepared to implement the NPSSVFS due to institutional and human capacity limitations as well as limited knowledge about safety, security and violence against children. Furthermore, the survey indicates that most schools do not have risk



management and mitigation plans that would enable education to continue during and immediately after armed conflicts. A report by UNICEF (2022b) underscores the weak functionality of School-Based Management Committees (SBMC's), with only 67% reported as functional. Moreover, the lack of community awareness regarding school safety and its gender-related impacts on retention, completion, and transition rates further complicates efforts to improve the safety of educational environments.

#### *Corruption and mismanagement of funds*

The Safe Schools Initiative is fraught with allegations of mismanagement and diversion of funds meant for the Safe Schools Programme. The initiative, when launched in 2014, garnered international attention, support, contributions and funding from various entities and international donors, including the Nigerian government. A National Safe Schools Fund was established by the Nigerian Government and domiciled at the Central Bank of Nigeria to accommodate capitalization from the Federal Government, Private Sectors, and grants from donors. Reports indicate that the Nigerian government committed a sum of \$10 million (N1.6 billion) to the National Trust Fund, in addition to another \$10 million from Business Leaders through the Global Business Coalition for Education, in collaboration with World at School and the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown (Agabi, 2022). Other donors include Germany – 2 million Euro, the African Development Bank – \$1 million, Norway – \$1.5 million, and the United Kingdom – 1 million pounds (in technical assistance) (Ekhatior, 2015; Elvis, 2015).

Furthermore, the Safe Schools Initiative Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) was also established to complement the National Trust Fund. The MDTF was jointly managed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and harnesses donations from other government donor agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and global corporate (Nwachukwu, 2015). Reports show that the United States Government, through the United States Agency for International Development, and the Government of Qatar, through the Qatar Foundation, made a donation of \$2 million each to the MDTF, totalling \$4 million (Ekhatior, 2015; Elvis, 2015). This funding was meant to implement the Safe Schools Initiative.

However, despite substantial contributions, schools remain insecure, with concerns being raised about the procedures for disbursing and utilizing the funds. That has prompted calls for investigations of the over \$30 million Safe Schools Fund by critical stakeholders, including civil society organizations, such as the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) (Adewole, 2021). Cases of corruption and mismanagement of funds relating to the Safe Schools Initiative also impact Nigeria's ranking on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) published by Transparency International. Nigeria ranks 150 out of 141 countries, with a score of 24 out of 100 on the CPI 2022 (Transparency International, 2023). Transparency and accountability are essential, and any deviation from these principles poses a significant challenge to the progress and effectiveness of the initiative.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the impact of the Safe Schools Initiative on creating a safer and more secure school learning environment, particularly for the girl-child, and its broader implications for national development. The findings reveal that despite the laudable goals, the Initiative is bedevilled with significant challenges that hinder its effectiveness. That includes lack of political will, lack of proactive measures to arrest attacks, low safety education of the students and teachers, inadequate awareness and community engagement of host communities, insecurity and lack of modern and sophisticated security gadgets. The study concludes that significant improvements are needed for the safe school plan. It emphasizes adequate financing, advocacy, and sensitization of critical stakeholders in the education value chain about safety, openness, and accountability in the application and disbursement of safe school funds to engender trust in the activities of the plan.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made: 1) There is a need to develop a holistic approach and effective response strategies to tackle the conundrum of insecure schools. That includes the implementation of proactive policies, leveraging modern technology for learning, and installation of sophisticated security gadgets to deter attacks on schools. 2) Adequate funding of the education sector and a national plan for financing safe and secure schools by both the Federal, State and Local governments through collaboration and partnership with the private sectors and non-governmental organizations to make provision for necessary infrastructural facilities in schools. 3) Strengthening of government institutions responsible for the Safe Schools Initiative and promoting transparency and accountability in governance. 4) Adequate support should be given to girl-child, and there is a need to promote inclusive governance to address the menace of out-of-school, youth unemployment and poverty. 5) Adequate training and sensitization awareness of both students and teachers on safety education, as well as deepening engagement and effective collaboration with the host communities to enhance intelligence gathering.

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