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Qualitative Study on Access to Sport Participation: A Panacea for Reducing Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract

In recent time across the globe, the world has been experiencing conflicts, dispute, political unrest, civil disobedience and war. The escalation of security threats including banditry, kidnapping and other challenges that is having a profound impact on quality of education, particularly in certain regions in Nigeria. This paper examines the complex security situation affecting the Nigerian education system, with particular focus on North West Nigeria. It explores how access to sports participation and strategies can serve as a mechanism to reduce insecurity, resolve crises, and transform conflicts between families, states, and regions by mobilizing both youth and adults toward common goals in high-risk zones. The paper also concludes that, throughout history, sport has been an integral component of civilized society and represents a symbolic culture that attracts participation from governments, citizens, and athletes alike, as a universal language that resolve conflicts, reducing insecurity and educating people in ways few other activities can. The paper recommends addressing insecurity in Nigeria through social inclusion, strengthening political systems, and introducing sports education as a core subject in the school curriculum. This approach would be particularly valuable in enhancing peace processes for the next generation in the North West Zone, ultimately reflecting positively on access to quality education throughout Nigeria.

Keywords: Insecurity, Access, Quality, Education, Sports.

Introduction

Education forms the foundation of civilization and serves as the primary instrument necessary for achieving national security. Nations, whether developing or developed, invest in education with the expectation of addressing societal needs, particularly insecurity challenges. Education involves the transmission of valuable ideas necessary for individuals to appropriately adjust to their environment (Basson, 2022). It plays a crucial role in equipping citizens with essential knowledge, values, skills, and attitudes to foster a united, resilient, strong, and equitable society, as outlined in the educational goals of the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2022). Education enables people to realize their potential and enhance their quality of life, equipping them to make meaningful contributions to a peaceful, democratic society and improved wellbeing. Quality education represents the key to all forms of development and is central to advancing human capital necessary for sustaining political, social, and economic progress in any nation. It constitutes a critical component and stands as the most powerful mechanism for transforming human development indices. Quality education has proven to be the most effective vehicle for creating change across various facets of human existence and remains crucial for shaping the future. Such education is only feasible when mechanisms are established to determine citizens' needs, provide learning experiences tailored to satisfy identified needs and demands, and implement measures to maintain standards. Issues of quality and standards in Nigeria's government education sectors have been of national concern, particularly regarding infrastructure, instructional materials, learning environments, teacher training, recruitment and professional development, learning outcomes, and support systems to ensure access to equitable and quality education (FRN, 2022). The National Policy on Education further stipulates that quality assurance should be present at all levels of the Nigerian education system.

Access to quality education represents an undeniable right for every society member, formally accepted by all countries and applicable to all according to their national realities, capacities, development levels, policies, priorities, and environmental challenges (United Nations, 2023). Access to education involves integrating all society members into the school system; similarly, equitable access promotes a holistic educational vision. In this context, equity implies that all learners can learn and should have the opportunity to do so without hindrances related to their backgrounds. Access to education means free,

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unlimited, unhindered, and unfettered privilege at each educational level to acquire knowledge, skills, and potential necessary to participate and contribute optimally to societal development (Okeke, 2020). The National Challenges Review Report 2022, from the perspective of SDG-4, revealed that fundamental challenges to education relate to "poor quality of education, lack of access, equity and governance, budgetary constraints, poor teaching quality and absenteeism, lack of textbooks and weak management, and external factors such as poverty, destruction caused by natural disasters and insecurity." Security challenges in Nigeria, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency and banditry, have disrupted education in many parts of the country. Numerous schools have been closed, students and teachers abducted, making it extremely difficult for students to access quality education (Arop & Owan, 2022; Idika et al., 2023).

Nigeria generally, and the North West Zone in particular, currently faces significant insecurity issues. Unemployment, poverty, socio-economic challenges, illiteracy, and mineral resource factors continue to create pathways for youth to be lured into illicit activities including banditry. Attacks and abductions of pupils/students by bandits and criminal gangs have become an unfortunate reality that Nigerians face daily, presenting a substantial threat to providing quality education to young citizens in this zone. Access to and participation in sport has long been recognized as a fundamental right in various international conventions. UNESCO (2022) describes sport and physical education as a fundamental right for all. However, until today, the right to play and participate in sports has often been ignored or disrespected. Sport possesses a unique power to attract, mobilize, and inspire. By its very nature, sport promotes participation and inclusion of citizenship. It embodies human values such as respect for opponents, acceptance of binding rules, teamwork, and fairness principles that align with those contained in the United Nations Charter. The United Nations recognizes sports as a powerful tool for advancing social inclusion, equality, peace, health, and development. The important role that sport plays in advancing social progress is also emphasized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Research conducted by UNICEF (2023) evidenced the potential benefits of sports participation, including enhanced learning and academic performance, decreased risk of substance abuse, reduced stress and depression, increased confidence and self-esteem, and decreased insecurity. Sports serve as instruments for mobilizing both youth and adults to achieve common goals in danger zones in Nigeria for security, peace, and development. Sports are active rather than passive endeavors, involving direct participation.

Sports participation represents a global phenomenon and an integral component of society with substantial economic impacts. Recent studies demonstrate that more than 85.7 million people worldwide participate in some form of sports daily, with approximately 28 percent of these individuals coming from developing nations such as Nigeria (WHO, 2023). Engaging in sports activities is both interesting and entertaining for individuals. The number of people participating in sporting activities increases daily, emphasizing that sporting activities will continue to maintain continuity at the individual level, transferring from one generation to another (Yerima et al., 2023). These illustrations demonstrate that sports participation is vital to human health, quality of life, sound body maintenance, skill acquisition, social and economic development, and reducing insecurity throughout the country.

Nigerian State Insecurity and its Effects on Education

The insecurity situation in the global context represents a major source of concern in both academic circles and the general public. Many schools and physical structures in most learning institutions have suffered violent attacks from insurgency with substantial loss of lives and destruction of property. Most African countries, whose experience has been compounded by colonial legacies of national states with artificial boundaries cutting across many divisions, have experienced insecurity with significant national discomfort, continuing to manifest in forms of corruption and poverty. Education in Nigeria has recently come under significant threat due to increasing mass kidnappings of students from schools. This represents a new strategy adopted by terrorist and bandit groups. School kidnappings have become a major disincentive for both parents and students, leading many to opt against enrolling in schools to ensure their safety. Today, Nigeria has one of the world's highest numbers of out-of-school children with about 13.2 million according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023). A wave of school kidnappings has worsened the situation, with some state governments closing boarding schools until security can be guaranteed. Between December 2020 and June 2022, over 1,500 students and staff were kidnapped in 12 school abductions reported in the North West Zone (Musa, 2022). Insecurity signifies a state of being unsafe, fearful, terrorized, or threatened. Security, in simple terms, means the protection of lives and property from destruction (Adams et al., 2022). Umeifekwem (2021) defines insecurity as a state of fear or anxiety stemming from concrete or alleged lack of protection. It represents a lack of inadequate freedom from danger. This reflects physical insecurity, the most visible form, which feeds into many other forms

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such as economic and social insecurity. Ogunode et al. (2023) explain that insecurity in schools constitutes a direct threat to learning. The authors further assert that the prevailing peace or conflict within communities surrounding schools often has ripple effects on the teaching and learning activities of such schools. Insecurity has worsened already, low levels of access to quality education in Zamfara State. According to a 2022 assessment of this sector, 38 percent of those surveyed had no nearby latrines, 58 percent used pit latrines, and 42 percent practiced open defecation. Children do not attend schools due to lack of money, destruction of classrooms, safety fears, lack of teachers who have fled violence, and the need to earn incomes: 33 percent of children aged 5-17 had completely dropped out of school, and a further 29 percent had never attended school. Some families have withdrawn children from Islamiyya schools for these reasons. Some almajirai have been recalled by families due to safety concerns, while others continue as families cannot provide for them if they return (Zamfara Conflict Analysis, 2022). Okobia (2023) reports that Nigeria currently faces a severe insecurity crisis with regionalized patterns. In the southern region, militia groups cause disturbances, while kidnapping rates remain alarmingly high in the east and south, and ritual killings prevail in both the east and west. The northern region suffers from insurgency, and assassinations occur throughout the entire country. Considering the overall situation, it is evident that Nigeria can no longer be considered safe. Many individuals begin journeys but fail to reach their destinations, not due to accidents or natural causes, but because they fall victim to kidnapping. People are abducted from their homes or workplaces for ransom, subjected to torture, and tragically, some are shot dead. No safe haven exists in Nigeria, whether in urban or rural areas.

The effects of insecurity on the educational system are enormous, as reported by Hamidu and Audu (2022). Educational institutions often suffer the worst impacts. For instance, the incessant attacks by Boko Haram insurgents in North-eastern Nigeria have led to the closure of many schools in that region. Casualties of these attacks frequently include teachers, other school staff, and students; students and staff are also often kidnap victims. These circumstances result in low pupil/student enrolment because of displaced families and the children themselves. Additionally, these situations cause psychological trauma and health-related challenges, as many students/pupils in attacked areas experience anxiety, uncertainty, apprehension, sleepless nights, and sometimes displacement to refugee camps. Teachers often retire or relocate to areas less prone to attacks. The insecurity challenge has led to the killing of at least 280 teachers and students across Northern Nigeria, with many schools closed or abandoned. This menace has resulted in school closures, parents withdrawing children from school, student transfers, teacher transfers, decreased student enrolment, increased numbers of out-of-school children, poor student performance, and fear among teachers and students, among other consequences (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund, 2023). In this paper, insecurity is conceptualized as a situation where human and national security of a state is compromised by internal or external forces or interests, exacerbated by weak or poor economic, military, and human resource development conditions. This study presents the necessary conditions to assess the significance of sport in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria facing ethno-communal tensions, terrorism, banditry, killings, kidnappings, and various crises. Nations worldwide have used sports to strengthen national goals such as integration. Even in obvious circumstances of disintegration, sports have offered the restoration that nations required for reconstruction, particularly in contexts of insecurity. The United Nations (2021) resolution adopted for crisis regions stated that sports should be used as a means to promote education, health, peace, and development.

Access to Sports Participation and Strategies in Reducing Insecurity in Nigeria

Sports help the tendency to broaden, spread, diversify and helps to assume a greater role in the general security system of any Nation if properly maximized mostly in Nigeria to reduce idleness, tension and anxiety caused by banditry, killing, kidnapping and insurgency in Northern regions. Political leaders, governments, and heads of numerous national agencies have identified the universal value of sports in resolving problems of nations, states, and the world. Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated his belief that:

"Sports can play a significant role in improving the lives of not only individuals but entire communities. It is the right time to build on this understanding by encouraging governments, development agencies, and communities to consider how sports can be more systematically included in plans to help children and youth, particularly those living amid poverty, disease, and conflict."

This aligns with the United Nations (2021) General Assembly resolution underlining the importance of sports as a means to encourage, enhance, and promote peace, dialogue, and understanding among peoples and civilizations. The UN resolution adopted for crisis regions states that sports should be used to promote quality education, health, peace, development, and

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security. Sports development in Nigeria today, has led to the promotion and involvement of youth in active sporting activities and this make the youth to be more responsible and put their minds off violence. Well-designed sport programs that educate, support and empower youth can encourage positive behaviour change by enhancing self-perception, imparting self-esteem, and promoting more conscious care and respect among youths to curb substance abuse, kidnapping, killings, and any act of hooliganism. Sport is used to reach those most in need, including refugees, child soldiers, and victims of conflict and natural catastrophes. Sports are more than running, jumping, kicking a ball, or hitting an object. They extend beyond play, fun, and recreation, beyond competing for medals or laurels. Sports represent an aspect of education that addresses the whole body and helps build a nation. A nation intending to grow and remain viable must involve its citizens in sports literacy. The intervention of sports in reducing insecurity and resolving conflicts provides meaningful life experiences at an early stage for young people who might otherwise be used in criminal acts, thereby reducing the risk of their involvement in antisocial behavior. Sport has become the most popular form of physical activity for children and youth today (Ahmad, 2022).

According to President Obasanjo (1999) in a goodwill message at the 8th All Africa Games, sport serves as a unifying factor that binds diverse people together as one. At a time when the continent faces numerous challenges in the new millennium and is threatened by war, hunger, and disease, sports continue to present a unique opportunity to foster coexistence, good neighborliness, understanding, and friendship among diverse peoples and cultures. Sport can unite people and create mutual understanding regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, culture, or religion. The International Development Agency (2022) reports that by teaching basic social values such as tolerance, teamwork, fairness, and constructive conflict management, sport contributes to a culture based on peaceful values and thus reinforces civil structures. Clearly, sport possesses a significant ability to connect individuals and groups in the peace-building process and transcend segregation and misconception. Moreover, sport allows people to learn important social skills such as conflict management. In the peace-building and insecurity eradication process, sport can function as a healing instrument for traumatized victims of natural disasters or ex-combatants in post-conflict situations.

Conclusion

No nation thrives in an atmosphere of insecurity. Access to quality education and sports reduces inequality, exclusivity, and the negative consequences associated with social deprivation, school failure, and dropouts. The fact that addressing school failure helps overcome the effects of social deprivation, which often causes school failure, indicates that these two dimensions are closely intertwined. Sports constitute a component of human and social development that contributes to social cohesion, tolerance, and integration, forming an effective channel for reducing insecurity. As a universal language, sports represent a powerful medium for social and economic change, capable of bridging cultural gaps, resolving conflicts, reducing insecurity, and educating people in ways few other activities can. Therefore, in critical or difficult political situations, governance effectiveness depends on the ability to address contemporary challenges. Connected to this, sport has been an element of civilized society throughout history a symbolic culture attracting participation from governments, citizens, and athletes alike.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government, through its military and paramilitary forces, must make deliberate efforts with international community assistance to eradicate the insecurity menace that has continuously hindered educational programs in Nigeria's Northern region.
2. Government attention to sports will yield benefits as citizens maintain faith and hope in national leadership under stringent economic, educational, and political conditions. This will enable every citizen to pursue common goals and objectives, working toward unity, peace, and reduced insecurity throughout the country.
3. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and other NGOs should implement programs connecting sports, peace, and security, using sports to help curb insecurity by bringing people closer together and keeping traumatized youth engaged in non-sport-based education.
4. States should include sports and physical activities in their development policies and promote initiatives to increase participation and access to sports, emphasizing young people particularly. Sports programs must be explicitly designed to develop core skills and values learnable through sports.
5. State and Federal governments should prioritize sports as tools for development and peace, considering the economic, social, cultural, educational, political, and environmental dimensions.
6. Crisis regions, particularly in the North West, should introduce sports education as a subject in the primary school curriculum, providing a valuable tool to enhance peace processes for the next generation.

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7. Sports should be implemented equitably and in culturally relevant ways. Sports programs must follow the "sports for all" model, ensuring that all groups have participation opportunities, particularly those who gain additional benefits, such as women, persons with disabilities, and young people.

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