

Rethinking education plans: In Nigeria's rural community, a lack of supervision is escalating volunteer teachers' absences

By Anibe Idajili

Outside the Government Junior Secondary School in Kwandere community of Nasarawa State, students laugh as they kick around a football in the sands. But their upbeat mood belies the more serious problem the school faces: Soaring teacher shortage and absenteeism.

“A number of N-Power teachers struggle through their stay here. Some never come back,” said Muhammed Muazu, a student at the school.

There is however one teacher, Lucia David, who has made an effort to be the kind of teacher her students have always wished they had. For almost one year, she has worked under the N-Teach category of the [N-Power](#) programme in the school. Initially tasked with teaching English Language, she now alternates with another teacher to cover all subjects, including Civic Education, Economics, and Basic Science.

“I go to the school to teach three days a week,” Lucia stated. “I feel like I'm genuinely making a difference, although the job is tasking and stipends are occasionally delayed.”



Government Junior Secondary School, Kwandere, Nasarawa State. Photo Credit: Anibe Idajili

The school, which has 689 students enrolled, has had no fewer than 9 N-Power teachers assigned to it over the years, but only 3 have ever reported for duty. As do many others in the State, the school faces a teacher shortage and struggles with high teacher turnover. The issue is the same throughout Nigeria, where rural schools in remote areas have reported problems filling openings for N-Power teachers because they either abscond or just do not show up to work on a regular basis.

The teacher shortage hasn't gone entirely unnoticed by the Nasarawa State Government. In addition to the 400 teachers already hired, Governor Abdullahi Sule approved the recruitment of an extra 550 teachers in June of this year. This followed the formalization of more than 2,000 teachers who had been recruited by the preceding administration.

Still, parents in Kwandere complain that there are not enough teachers for their children.

"My daughter tells me that one teacher is responsible for five subjects. Can you imagine that?" "Tell me how these children can learn anything meaningful," worries Mr. Shettima Kabir, a concerned parent.

Good idea, poor implementation

To substitute teacher shortages and reduce unemployment across the country, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the N-Power initiative (N-Teach), has engaged over 1 million graduates as volunteer teachers since its inception by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2016. The volunteers receive a monthly stipend of ₦30,000 and are provided with tablet computers to facilitate their work.

Unfortunately, school principals and headmasters/headmistresses have complained that they rarely see the volunteers assigned to their schools as they are either employed elsewhere or solely interested in the monthly stipends.

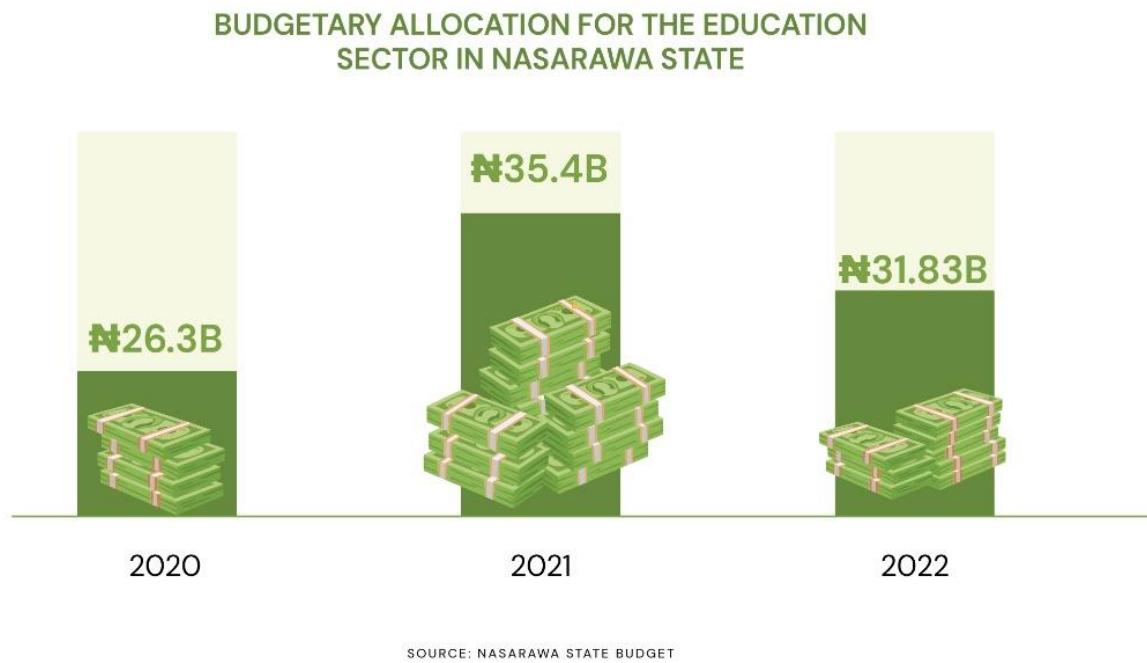
Despite the programme's merits, teacher absence has persisted due to the Federal Government's lack of oversight.

"We only ever had one supervisor come by since the programme began. He didn't specify whether he was from the State or Abuja. He just inquired about the number of N-Power teachers in our school. We haven't heard from him since," said Osanaku Abdulkumuni, Headmaster, Pilot Science Primary School, Kwandere.

Amidst the challenges with monitoring, the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) accounted for 66% of a ₦549 billion budget increase approved by the Nigerian National Assembly in 2021. The [Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme \(GEEP\)](#) and N-Power, two of the Buhari administration's signature programmes, are part of the NSIP, which

aims to keep local talent in local schools. However, the unemployment rate, which stood at [7.06%](#) in 2016 when it was launched, has risen to [33.3%](#) by 2022.

At the State level, limited funding for the education sector has undermined many of the long-term solutions to the teacher shortage, including control measures.



There is no point of interaction between the Federal and State governments regarding the programme, according to Mr. Adeyi, a Director at the Nasarawa State Ministry of Education.

“Neither the recipients' identities nor the schools to which they are assigned are known to us. How do we then keep an eye on their activities? The initiative is a well-intentioned effort to address a teacher shortage, but we have no oversight duties.”

The demand for qualified and accessible teachers remains significant

Across Nigeria, during the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 61,200 primary schools in Nigeria—the majority of which were situated in rural areas, according to [Statista](#). To alleviate teacher deficits in these schools, Nigeria requires as many as 250,000 teachers yearly, according to Professor Josiah Ajiboye, the Registrar of the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN).

Admittedly, the situation was already dire enough because schools in communities like Kwandere had problems hiring and retaining qualified teachers long before the NSIP was

introduced. Some of these institutions have reportedly discontinued delivering specific courses and hired teachers without relevant qualifications.

Regrettably, going by evaluations of their implementation, the NSIP and other related programmes have not produced the intended results. In 2020, the ₦421 billion purportedly spent on the N-Power scheme between 2016 and 2020 was [queried](#) by the House of Representatives' Committee on Public Accounts.

Although rural communities are the worst-hit, the issue of teacher shortage is widespread. In the end, it circles back to the need for performance assessments prior to stipend disbursements. The N-Power programme appears to be implemented haphazardly rather than strategically. It has never been difficult to launch projects in Nigeria. Follow-up, evaluation, and review of projects and programmes are the main issues.

Declines in students' performance and other issues

Studies [have linked](#) teacher absences and lack of training to declines in student performance.

Schools in Kwandere continue to suffer competition from jobs in other more lucrative fields as there seems to be no effort made to improve the quality of substitute teaching and ease a staffing shortage.

For instance, although volunteers in the N-Teach category of the N-Power programme receive no training, the Federal Government allocated more than ₦14 billion in March of this year to fund the nine-month [training of 50,000 N-Power non-graduates](#). In fact, the federal government [trained 3,000 beneficiaries](#) from the North Central geopolitical zones, which include the Nasarawa, Plateau, Kogi, and Benue States, as well as the FCT, in skill acquisition and provided them with start-up items like laptops after they graduated.

“My son can’t even solve simple Mathematics problems. I still pay for extra classes for him at home. And I am only a farmer. I hope the government would give these children trained and consistent teachers,” said a parent who wishes to be unnamed.

“Even as a science school, we don’t have a science teacher. In fact, for the past 3 to 4 years, we’ve not had teachers for some classes. Since 2017, there hasn’t been recruitment for new teachers in this school,” said Mr. Osanaku Abdulkumuni, the Headmaster of Pilot Science School in Kwandere.

Mr. Adeka Abubakar Muktar is the Director of Studies and the only Mathematics Teacher for six classes at the Government Junior Secondary School in Kwandere. He says that it has been 3 years since volunteer teachers were last posted to the school.



Adeka Abubakar Mukthar, Director of Studies, Government Junior Secondary School, Kwandere, Nasarawa State. Photo Credit: Anibe Idajili

Without clear academic direction and any immediate plan for improving teacher training, recruitment, and retention in remote schools like those in Kwandere, students like Muhammed Muazu may only dream of receiving quality education.

The stakes to find more permanent solutions are high

For school in rural areas, finding N-Power teachers like Lucia more than once in a great while is no small luck. This is due to the difficulty in retaining volunteer teachers in schools, which arises from a variety of factors including low pay and high transportation costs to remote areas.

Another N-Power teacher who requested anonymity said, "Some of us have stable jobs, but we still applied because we needed the money. N-Power beneficiaries have other priorities, even with the community's willingness to accommodate them and schools' urgent need for teachers."

What then convinced Lucia to stay? Her love for imparting knowledge. However, for recent graduates like her, teaching with such meager pay is not a very viable career option.

"I've never been interested in teaching, but when I got the job, I knew I had to be committed to doing it. After the programme, I have no plans to pursue a profession in education," Lucia declared.

Abdulmumuni, the Headmaster of Kwandere's Pilot Science Primary School, also laments the scheme's lack of accountability. "We are not engaged in their evaluations, so we can only hope that they come with a genuine enthusiasm for teaching."

On the government's side, he continued, "the necessity for effective oversight of volunteer teachers remains crucial."



Pilot Science Primary School, Kwandere, Nasarawa State. Photo Credit: Anibe Idajili

Time to make hard choices

It's still unclear how a largely unsupervised N-Power scheme will address the current teacher shortage, and there's a sense among some advocates and key stakeholders that no one cares.

Ameh Agadah, a public policy analyst, believes that increasing the N-Power budget is not the best course of action. The government cannot continue financing the scheme without periodic monitoring and assessments of teachers' attendance and performance. Announced and unannounced monitoring, in his words, "will help identify the inactive N-Power teachers and provide some control and accountability."

Aladi Ugbede from the Connecting Villages Initiative, a non-profit that promotes access to high-quality learning opportunities for children from extremely impoverished households, also thinks the N-Power programme is a really brilliant concept. However, she went on to say that "considering its impact on student or teacher performance, there are many issues surrounding the implementation of the N-Teach category that need immediate remedies."

The Chief Imam of Kwandere, Usman Saliu Akwai, agrees that there is still much work to be done in terms of checks on N-Power beneficiaries. He argued that, "Volunteer teachers who fail to show up for work should be duly penalized because they have offended God, their designated schools, the community, and the government."

The N-Power programme for unemployed graduates is one of the NSIP initiatives that the Federal Executive Council aims to [institutionalize](#). The initiative, which receives funding from

the 2017 deal with Switzerland on the return and oversight of the \$322 million [Abacha loot](#) and credit from the World Bank, was initially intended to last for six years, from 2016 to 2022.

Lucia's time at the school might be coming to an end. She nevertheless thinks that "some of the money set aside by the government for education should also go to programmes focused on teacher supervision."

Additionally, Ugbede of the Connecting Villages Initiative asserts that "volunteer teacher absences will persist, but the government needs to find a smarter approach to deal with them." "N-Power teachers are currently a crucial component of the Nigerian education system. They shouldn't be allowed to venture off on their own without efficient supervision."

Bottom-line

This investigative report backs up all interviewees' and respondents' concerns. In-person and phone interviews with students, school administrators, community members, community leaders, and N-Power volunteer teachers in Kwandere, as well as an official of the Nasarawa State Ministry of Education found that the most likely way to improve N-Power's value-added measure in Kwandere was to take extensive steps to monitor and supervise the volunteer teachers' attendance.

The scheme is great but fraught with issues, as revealed by the interviews, which included open-ended questions on teacher shortages, student experiences, and the scheme's overall implications for Kwandere community.

The report anticipates that relevant stakeholders such as community leaders, community-based NGOs, and the State Ministry of Education will drive advocacy efforts to track down volunteer teachers missing school and reverse unprecedented levels of absenteeism. In turn, this would enhance the standard of living for students in Kwandere by increasing child enrollment status indices.

Ultimately, this will strengthen the resilience and capacity of Kwandere community in securing the education of its children.

This report was produced for the "Journalists Against Corruption Sub Project" of the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) and has not previously been published or used anywhere.