

The Role and Impact of UNICEF Indonesia in Preventing and Addressing Out-Of-School Children: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

The issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) remains a persistent challenge within Indonesia's education system, particularly in remote and marginalized regions where disparities in access, infrastructure, and socioeconomic conditions continue to hinder educational equity. As one of the Government of Indonesia's strategic partners, UNICEF plays a significant role in catalyzing the strengthening of policies, programs, and inclusive education interventions for children at risk of being left behind. This study aims to analyze the role and influence of UNICEF Indonesia in addressing the issue of out-of-school children through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). The review was conducted by systematically collecting and examining scholarly publications and official reports from databases such as Google Scholar and the UNICEF Indonesia website, using keywords including "UNICEF Indonesia", "quality education", "out-of-school children", and "strategic partnership". A total of 16 articles and four reports met the inclusion criteria. They were analyzed thematically with respect to the scope of intervention, methodological approach, and key findings related to Indonesia's government-UNICEF collaboration. The results reveal that the partnership between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF has significantly improved access to and the quality of education through programs such as early-grade literacy initiatives in Papua, non-formal education pathways for marginalized groups, and the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative in urban areas. Furthermore, cross-sectoral collaboration among government, civil society organizations, and international partners has enhanced policy effectiveness in reducing the number of out-of-school children. This study emphasizes that evidence-based strategic partnerships and participatory approaches are key factors in promoting inclusive and sustainable education aligned with "Quality Education," the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4).

Keywords: quality education, strategic partnership, systematic literature review, UNICEF Indonesia, out-of-school-children

Introduction

Out-of-school children (OOSC) remain a persistent and complex challenge in Indonesia's education landscape. Based on the OOSC data from the Data and Information Center (Pusdatin) of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Kemendikdasmen) as of November 6th 2025, the number of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Indonesia stands at 4,149,742. The OOSC population is categorized into three main groups. First, school dropouts (25.57%) refer to children who leave school before completing their current level of education. Second, graduates who do not continue to the next level (26.98%), referring to those who complete a level of schooling but fail to transition to higher education. Third, and most concerning, children who have never attended school (47.45%), represent nearly half of the total OOSC population, highlighting persistent barriers to initial access to formal education.

This figure is the result of an integrated dataset compiled from three main sources: the Education Data System (Dapodik) managed by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the Education Management Information System (EMIS) under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and population administration data (Dukcapil) from the Ministry of Home Affairs. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2015 entitled "Global Initiatives on Out of School Children: Indonesia Study Case" identified multiple factors that contribute to the high number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Indonesia, including the remoteness of their place of residence, regional development gaps, poverty and family economic background, socio-cultural conditions, and limited access to adequate education services. In addition, several challenges arise for education service providers regarding the availability, quality, and relevance of existing education services.

Recent national efforts supported by development partners show encouraging progress. According to the UNICEF 2024 Annual Report (UNICEF, 2025), Support for out-of-school children has been expanded to 56 cities/districts across seven provinces. This effort has helped prevent 176,000 children from dropping out of school and has facilitated the return of 71,300 school-age children to formal education. These achievements underscore the importance of cross-sector coordination among national and subnational governments, civil society, and international organizations to strengthen education policies and services.

The partnership between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF is aligned with the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN), which emphasizes equitable human development as a prerequisite for leaving no child behind. UNICEF's support covers essential areas of child rights, including nutrition, health, education, and protection. It is also aligned with Indonesia's constitutional mandate under Article 31 of the Undang-Undang Dasar 1945, which guarantees every citizen's right to education. The partnership also contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), one of Indonesia's national development priorities (Asta Cita), and is further emphasized in the 2025 – 2030 RPJMN, which focuses on expanding access, strengthening quality, and ensuring equity across the education sector.

Indonesia's classification as a lower-middle-income country, with a GDP per capita of USD 4,580 in 2023 and a poverty rate of 9.36 percent, indicates that 25.9 million people remain below the poverty line (BPS, 2023), underscoring additional structural constraints. Limited fiscal capacity and human resources constrain the government's ability to provide equitable basic services, including education. These development challenges reinforce the need for strategic collaboration with international partners to accelerate progress toward inclusive and resilient education systems.

While numerous studies have examined the determinants of OOSC and the effectiveness of educational interventions in Indonesia, there remains no comprehensive synthesis of UNICEF's specific role. Therefore, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to analyze how

UNICEF Indonesia contributes to the prevention, reduction, and reintegration of OOSC through evidence-based programs, policy advocacy, and collaborative governance mechanisms.

The contribution of this paper lies in providing a consolidated, analytical understanding of UNICEF's role in Indonesia's OOSC response, highlighting the impacts of key programs, collaborative frameworks, and policy implications. The findings aim to inform policymakers, practitioners, and researchers on effective partnership strategies to strengthen inclusive education systems in Indonesia.

Theoretical Review

Partnership Theory

According to (Brinkerhoff, 2002), a partnership is a dynamic relationship among parties, based on mutually agreed objectives and realized through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labor based on each partner's comparative advantages. Partnerships involve mutual influence, with a careful balance between synergy and autonomy, and are characterized by mutual respect, equal participation in decision-making, mutual accountability, and transparency. Brinkerhoff also explains that partnerships between governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged in response to the state's limitations in efficiently providing public services. This model is part of a global trend that emphasizes New Public Management (NPM), in which the government plays a more steering role. In contrast, the non-governmental sector, including the private sector and NGOs, plays an implementation role.

Brinkerhoff identifies two main dimensions of partnership: Mutuality and Organizational Identity. Mutuality refers to a sense of interdependence between partners, grounded in mutual trust, equality, and a commitment to common goals. Each party has equal rights and responsibilities in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation, so the ideal form is a horizontal rather than a vertical relationship. Organizational Identity emphasizes that each party in a partnership must maintain its own identity, values, and mission. If each party's identity is lost and they influence one another, the partnership's added value will be lost.

Collaborative Governance Theory

According to (Ansell & Gash, 2008) Collaborative governance is a model in which government and non-governmental actors work together through a formal, transparent, and consensus-driven decision-making process to solve complex public problems. This model emphasizes joint problem-solving through structured and transparent interaction among stakeholders. Several core elements shape the effectiveness of collaborative governance. It begins with starting conditions, which refer to the initial context influencing collaboration, including the history of relationships among actors, existing levels of trust, and the balance of power and resources between parties. These initial conditions significantly affect the willingness and capacity of stakeholders to collaborate.

Another essential component is institutional design, which encompasses the formal and informal rules that structure the collaboration, such as inclusive participation, transparency, and clear communication mechanisms to ensure fairness and accountability. Facilitative leadership also plays a crucial role, as leaders are expected to act as mediators and facilitators who encourage dialogue, manage conflict, and foster synergy among participants. At the center of the model lies the collaborative process itself, characterized by direct face-to-face dialogue, gradual trust-building, shared understanding of problems, intermediate outcomes that reinforce commitment, and ultimately, joint decision-making. Together, these elements explain how cross-sector partnerships can function effectively in addressing multifaceted public policy challenges.

History of UNICEF and The Government of Indonesia Partnership

The partnership program between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF is based on a basic agreement signed by the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adam Malik, and UNICEF Regional Director, Brian Jones, on November 17, 1966, in Jakarta. However, even before the agreement was signed, UNICEF had provided considerable assistance to Indonesia in its national reconstruction efforts, focusing on the development of health care programs after the end of the war of independence. Initially, UNICEF assistance included Specific Grant funds to help meet children's health and education needs, thereby aligning the aid more closely with UNICEF's global considerations and strategies.

The assistance began to align with national development strategies and priorities in human resource development, as outlined in the 1969 Five-Year Development Plan. This cooperation entered its 12th cycle in 2021-2025, involving 13 provinces: Central Java, East Java, East Nusa Tenggara, West Nusa Tenggara, South Sulawesi, Aceh, Papua, West Papua, Maluku, Papua Highland, Southwest Papua, South Papua, and Central Papua.

Out-of-School Children

The National Strategy for Handling Out-of-School Children (Stranas ATS) defines Out-of-School Children (OOSC) as children of elementary school/MI equivalent age (7-12 years), junior high school/MTs equivalent age (13-15 years), and high school/vocational school/MA equivalent age (16-18 years) who have never attended school, dropped out of school without completing their education (dropped out while in elementary school, junior high school, or high school/vocational school and dropped out of school without continuing to a higher level of education (did not transition from elementary school, junior high school, or high school/vocational school). Meanwhile, Children at Risk of Not Attending School (Anak Berisiko Tidak Sekolah, or ABTS) are defined as children and adolescents who remain in school but are vulnerable to dropping out due to one or more risk factors.

Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach and a systematic literature review (SLR). This method is used to develop a comprehensive understanding of UNICEF Indonesia's role and influence in addressing Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Indonesia by searching for, assessing, and synthesizing scientific literature and relevant policy documents.

The data used in this study are secondary, obtained from various scientific publications and official documents, including national and international journal articles and UNICEF Indonesia's Annual Reports. These sources were obtained from Google Scholar and the official websites of relevant institutions. The author established selection criteria to ensure that the literature used was appropriate and credible. The literature reviewed in this study was deliberately limited to publications from 2015 onwards for both substantive and methodological reasons.

First, 2015 marks a critical turning point in global and national education policy, particularly with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 on Quality Education. Since the Out-of-School Children (OOSC) agenda is closely linked to SDG 4, studies published after 2015 are more likely to reflect updated policy frameworks, indicators, and programmatic approaches aligned with the SDG agenda. Earlier studies tend to rely on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework, which differs conceptually and operationally from current education strategies.

Second, UNICEF's role and partnership modalities in Indonesia evolved significantly after 2015, especially in relation to evidence-based planning, inter-sectoral collaboration, and decentralized education governance. Restricting the review to post-2015 literature ensures that the analysis captures contemporary forms of partnership, policy influence, and program

implementation that remain relevant to current decision-making contexts. Third, from a methodological standpoint, post-2015 studies generally demonstrate stronger standards of transparency, data availability, and analytical rigor, particularly due to improvements in education data systems, household surveys (such as Susenas), and program monitoring frameworks. These criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Selection Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publications published between 2015 and 2025	Literature that does not focus on the UNICEF partnership in Indonesia
Discussing Out-of-School Children (OOSC), inclusive education, and UNICEF partnerships in Indonesia	Documents without clear sources and methodology
Available in Indonesian or English	Literature in the form of news or non-scientific publications and theses
Possess empirical data, conceptual study results, or policy analysis relevant to the research topic	

This study employed a systematic literature review. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) study design was used to demonstrate that a systematic literature review is a comprehensive approach for identifying, selecting, and assessing relevant studies, and for collecting and analyzing the resulting information. The search process began with identifying keywords on Google Scholar, including: “UNICEF Indonesia,” “Anak Tidak Sekolah,” “Out-of-School Children,” “non-profit partnerships,” and “cooperation between the government and international institutions.” Next, an initial screening was conducted based on the title and abstract to select relevant literature. A full-text review was performed on the literature that met the inclusion criteria. The next step was data extraction to collect key information from each selected study, including the research objectives, methods, main findings, and their relevance to UNICEF’s role in improving the quality of education in Indonesia. The article review steps are shown in Figure 1 below.

The study selection process followed the PRISMA guidelines and is summarized in the flow diagram. In the identification stage, a total of 200 records were identified through database searches, with no additional records identified from registers. Before screening, 50 duplicates were removed, while no records were marked as ineligible by automation tools. After this process, 150 records were screened based on their year of publication, titles, and abstracts. At the eligibility stage, 50 full-text reports were assessed for eligibility. Among these, 30 reports were excluded that did not specifically address out-of-school children (OOSC) and were not relevant to the research topic. Finally, 16 studies met all the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. In addition, 4 reports of newly included studies were incorporated, forming the final set of studies analyzed in this review.

To ensure the credibility and robustness of the review, the included studies were assessed based on clear source identification and methodological transparency. In terms of source clarity, priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, official institutional reports, particularly from UNICEF and government agencies, and publications with clearly stated authorship, institutional affiliation, and publication context. Regarding methodological quality, the selected studies were required to explicitly describe their research design, data sources, analytical methods, and the scope and limitations of the study. Studies that lacked a clear explanation of data sources, relied on anecdotal evidence without methodological justification, or did not explicitly link findings to OOSC-related outcomes were excluded. This approach ensured that the synthesis was based on

methodologically sound and verifiable evidence, allowing for meaningful comparison and theoretical interpretation using partnership and collaborative governance frameworks.

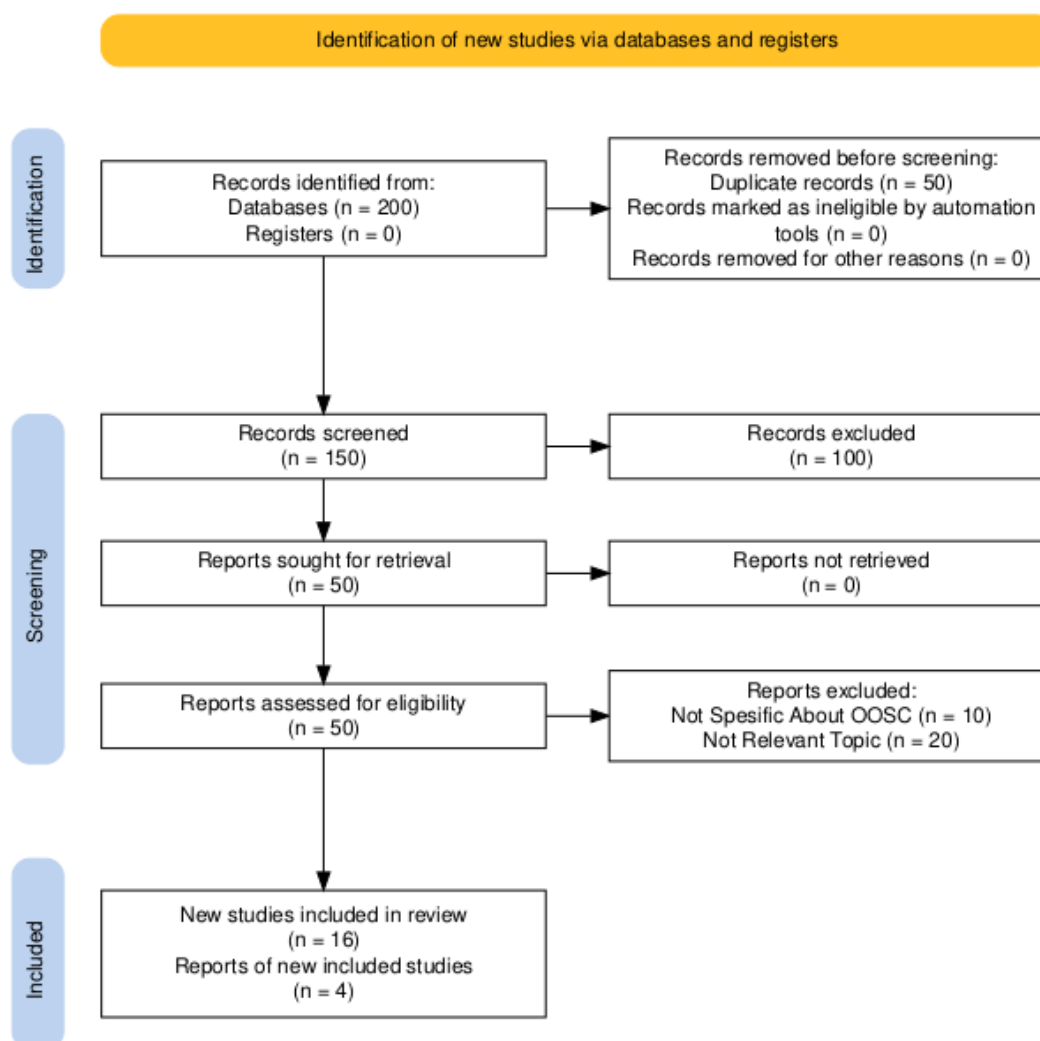


Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results and discussion of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) by organizing the findings into clear thematic categories. Based on a synthesis of 16 peer-reviewed journal articles and four institutional reports that met the inclusion criteria, four major themes emerged regarding the role of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia–UNICEF partnership in addressing the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC). These themes include: (1) determinants of out-of-school children in Indonesia, (2) UNICEF-supported program interventions to expand access to education, (3) capacity building and evidence-based policy support, and (4) collaborative governance and partnership sustainability. This thematic structure allows for a more systematic interpretation of the literature and facilitates analytical linkage with partnership and collaborative governance theories. The literature reviewed spans the period 2010 to 2025 and employs diverse

methodological approaches, including quantitative surveys, case studies, policy analyses, and program evaluations.

Determinants of Out-of-School Children in Indonesia

The first theme highlights the multidimensional determinants that contribute to children's non-attendance at school in Indonesia. The reviewed literature consistently identifies socioeconomic conditions, geographical barriers, and socio-cultural factors as the primary drivers of OOSC. While most studies examine the issue at the national level (Muttaqin et al., 2017; UNICEF Indonesia, 2021), several adopt a subnational perspective, including research conducted in West Java. (Anggrayni, 2024) Furthermore, Papua (Hastira et al., 2025) highlights regional variations in challenges and intervention strategies. Several studies highlight the social, economic, and geographical determinants of children's non-attendance at school. In contrast, others emphasize the effectiveness of UNICEF intervention programs, including non-formal education in Papua, basic literacy, and Child-Friendly Cities initiatives across various regions. A thematic analysis of the research results shows three main patterns. First, the partnership between the government and UNICEF contributes to increasing the capacity of educational institutions at both the central and regional levels. Second, UNICEF interventions have been shown to expand access to education for children at risk of nonattendance through alternative learning innovations. Third, cross-sector collaboration among the government, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations is a key factor in sustaining programs and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the fourth goal on quality education.

The synthesis results indicate that the main factors affecting children's non-attendance at school in Indonesia are poverty, distance to school, infrastructure conditions, and cultural and gender-related factors. (Muttaqin et al., 2017) identified socioeconomic barriers and access as the main determinants, while (Anggrayni, 2024) emphasized the importance of a local approach that takes into account the context of rural areas in West Java. A study by (Amalia Pratiwi, 2024) shows that the collaboration between the South Sulawesi Provincial Government and UNICEF has strengthened the Action Plan to accelerate OOSC reduction through data mapping, cross-sector coordination, and the implementation of alternative education service models.

UNICEF Intervention

In terms of program intervention, the study (Nursabaha et al., 2022) provides an in-depth description of how the Life Skill Education (LSE) curriculum implemented in UNICEF pilot schools in Bone Regency helps prevent youth problems, improve social skills, and strengthen learning motivation. This program has direct implications for efforts to prevent school dropout, especially among vulnerable youth. This reinforces the findings. (Tsaneva, 2017) The long-term negative impacts on children who drop out of school underscore the urgency of early intervention. As explained by (Lennox et al., 2021), through an analysis of uneven distance learning and declining educational participation in remote areas. The literature indicates that the partnership between the Indonesian Government and UNICEF plays a significant role in enhancing both access to and the quality of basic education. Studies by (Hastira et al., 2025) and UNICEF - Australia (2024) show that the Early Grade Literacy Program in Papua has improved early literacy skills through a collaborative approach and technical assistance. This added value illustrates how strategic partnerships can generate impacts that would be difficult to achieve by the government or UNICEF acting independently.

In addition, UNICEF Indonesia (2021), through its Situation Analysis and Policy Brief (UNICEF Indonesia, 2024), emphasizes the importance of non-formal education pathways as an alternative for children who have been out of the formal education system for an extended period. The Child-Friendly Cities Initiative approach in Surabaya (Hastira, 2024; IJAR, 2024) also

illustrates how city-level policies can strengthen educational inclusivity through programs such as PUSPAGA and child service centers. However, studies by (Heryadi et al., 2022) and (UNICEF EAP, 2021) highlight the importance of South-South Cooperation and resilient education systems in strengthening the sustainability of collaborative programs. Several publications identify effective strategies for addressing OOSC issues, such as improving the quality of basic education (Hastira et al., 2025) and empowering local communities. (Rosmilawati & Mutaqin, 2024), and strengthening evidence-based policy as described in policy briefs by (Muttaqin et al., 2017). The implementation of child-friendly cities and inclusive education programs (IJAR, 2024; Hastira, 2024) also serves as a model that can be replicated in other regions. (Gali & Schechter et al., 2020) emphasize that NGO involvement in education policy formulation is often shaped by power dynamics and trust between the government and its partners. This aligns with one of the components of Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansel & Gash, 2008), facilitative leadership. In this cooperation program, the government acts as a facilitative leader rather than a dominant one, and UNICEF acts as a technical facilitator, knowledge broker, and evidence provider. This demonstrates a collaborative leadership style that supports trust-building and power-sharing. Another pillar of Collaborative Governance Theory is the Collaborative Process, which in this case is reflected in the ongoing face-to-face dialogue process, the building of trust between the government, UNICEF, and the community, a shared understanding of the root causes of children not attending school, the collective formulation of solutions, and the creation of joint outputs such as modules, guidelines, and pilot projects.

Partnership and Collaborative Governance

Furthermore, the literature indicates that partnerships between government institutions and international organizations frequently face constraints stemming from coordination mechanisms, divergent priorities, and limited resources. In addition, the global perspective on the role of non-governmental organizations in education policy is also relevant to the Indonesian context.

In the Indonesian context, UNICEF serves as a trusted catalyst for the government to strengthen situation analysis, introduce innovations informed by international practice, and improve the effectiveness of education policy implementation. This aligns with the Theory of Partnership (Brinkerhoff, 2002), which holds that partnerships must be maintained while preserving each organization's identity and maximizing contributions in accordance with the institution's mandate. UNICEF maintains its mandate as an international agency dedicated to the realization of children's rights, while the Indonesian government remains the primary decision-maker. This reflects mutual benefit, leading to better outcomes.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Overall, the findings from the 16 publications and four reports reviewed in this study confirm several key conclusions. First, the availability of accurate and integrated data, along with its consistent use in policy formulation, is a fundamental prerequisite for effectively addressing the issue of out-of-school children. Second, cross-sectoral and multi-level government partnerships play a crucial role in reducing the number of OOSC, as coordinated efforts between national and subnational actors strengthen both policy alignment and program implementation. Third, the literature consistently shows that evidence-based and locally contextualized interventions are more effective than uniform, centrally designed approaches, particularly in addressing diverse regional challenges across Indonesia. Furthermore, UNICEF emerges not merely as a financial contributor but as a strategic partner providing technical assistance, policy advocacy, and knowledge-based support that enhances the quality of education interventions. Finally, sustained community engagement and strong involvement of local governments are essential to ensure long-term program sustainability and meaningful impact.

Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The findings from this Systematic Literature Review can serve as a basis for formulating more sustainable, inclusive education policies in Indonesia and strengthening the collaboration model between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF to support the achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) through accelerated efforts to address out-of-school children (OOC). First, there is a need to strengthen an integrated, sustainable OOC data-collection system. Most of the literature, including (Muttaqin et al., 2017), (Anggrayni, 2024), and (Amalia Pratiwi, 2024). It emphasizes that accurate and integrated data across sectors is a key prerequisite for formulating effective action plans. The government needs to ensure that mechanisms for data collection, verification, and monitoring of OOSC are carried out regularly through a digital platform accessible across agencies, including the Education Office, Social Office, and village/sub-district governments.

Second, strengthening UNICEF's role as a provider of technical assistance and a catalyst for regional education reform. Various studies have shown that collaboration between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and UNICEF has proven effective in improving the quality of program planning, developing alternative education service models, and implementing evidence-based interventions. This partnership can be expanded to strengthen regional capacity for evidence-based policymaking, including the use of spatial analysis and multidimensional poverty data to map OOSC risks more precisely.

Third, there is a need for continued investment in inclusive intervention programs that have proven to be effective. A study (Nursabaha et al., 2022) emphasizes the importance of life skills education in preventing school dropout among adolescents. Meanwhile, early literacy programs in Papua and child-friendly city initiatives demonstrate that holistic, contextual, and sustainable interventions significantly reduce the risk of children not attending school. The government needs to integrate these programs into regional policies to avoid relying solely on donor-based projects. In addition, strengthening cross-sector coordination and community involvement is required. The results of UNICEF evaluations and related literature show that addressing OOSC cannot be achieved solely by the education sector. It involves the participation of the social sector, the health sector, civil society organizations, and the business sector, particularly in expanding non-formal education services, reaching vulnerable children, and providing family support. The whole-of-society approach has been proven to strengthen policy sustainability and program effectiveness.

Fifth, expanding learning and networking through international cooperation. A study on South-South Cooperation (Heryadi et al., 2022) shows that Indonesia can benefit significantly from exchanging best practices with other countries, including in the handling of OOSC and educational innovation. UNICEF can play a strategic role as a bridge, bringing together relevant global actors to make Indonesia's education policies more adaptable and aligned with international standards.

Conclusions

Addressing the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Indonesia requires an integrated, evidence-based approach that actively engages multiple stakeholders. The findings of this study indicate that UNICEF Indonesia plays a strategic role as a key government partner by strengthening education governance, providing technical assistance, and promoting child-centered policy innovation. Interventions such as developing comprehensive OOSC data systems, implementing basic literacy programs, providing alternative learning pathways, and strengthening child protection mechanisms have consistently improved access to education and learning quality for vulnerable groups.

Through a Systematic Literature Review, this study further demonstrates that cross-sector collaboration is a critical determinant of the effectiveness of OOSC management initiatives. Partnerships among national and subnational governments, international organizations, implementing partners, and local communities facilitate policy coherence, optimize resource utilization, and enable the expansion of programs to underserved and disadvantaged regions.

Overall, the collaboration between the Indonesian government and UNICEF has made a substantial contribution to the management of Out-of-School Children by strengthening institutional capacity, reinforcing the regulatory framework, and implementing intervention models that are adaptable to social and geographical contexts. To sustain and expand these achievements, long-term commitment through sustained efforts, consistent funding, and data-driven policy innovation is essential to ensure that every child in Indonesia can fully enjoy the right to inclusive and quality education, in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

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