

APPRAISING BASIC EDUCATION FOR FUNCTIONALITY: ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Nigeria's educational system has witnessed a catalogue of changes in policies and programmes. Some of the changes have appeared to a number of people desirable while some continue to doubt the need for the changes. The launching and implementation of universal basic education in Nigeria in 1999/2000 despite its setbacks still holds a future for universalizing basic education of equal treatment for maximal development of children's potentialities that will enable them contribute to the development of the society. Some of the recommendations to stem the tide of UBE inadequacies include among others, proper documentation of the procedure, improvement in the number of teachers, desks, seats and books; adequate planning and funding and provision of opportunity for parents to participate actively in the programme for functionality.

Introduction

Education is an instrument par excellence for effective capacity building and maintenance of national development. It is the greatest investment that a nation can make for the accelerated development of its economic, political, social and human resources. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that "everyone has a right to education". This declaration triggered efforts from all countries of the world to Universalize Basic Education, which Obanya (2000) described as that level, type and form of learning needed to build firm roots for literacy and numeracy, to inculcate basic life skills and more importantly, to consolidate the skill of learning-to-learn; self-awareness, citizenship and life skills.

The origin of Basic Education can be traced to two major sources viz: international

collaboration and national aspiration on the international scene. Maduewesi (2005) posited that the story of Basic Education dates back to 1961, as part of the recommendation of Addis Ababa Conference which stated "that African Countries should aim at providing universal primary education; at the same time, special attention should be given to adult education and on-the-job-training". The conference went further to stipulate long-term objectives for the whole continent, namely: universal, free and compulsory primary education; increase in percentage of national revenue devoted to financing education; priority of teaching, training and adaptation and reform of the content of education among other recommendations.

Nigeria officially adopted these views and in 1976, implemented most of them in its Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme. The scheme which was welcomed in many quarters, was abandoned midway. In 1990, Nigeria became a signatory to yet another international forum for the promotion of Universal Basic Education. The Jomtien Declaration and Framework of Action on Education for All was launched amidst hopes of making available to the generality of peoples, the basic education required for purposeful living. The declaration sees education in its broadest sense as of "a close articulation of the formal, the non-formal and informal approaches to a mechanism for the wakening and all-round development of the human potential (FRN, 2000). Since the Jomtien Declaration was done at a global level, it became necessary for its implementation to be conceived and applied to individual country's development needs. Thus, Nigeria launched in November 1999 the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme. The

relaunch of a similar programme to UPE by the Federal Government of Nigeria, indicates that there is something desirable which the scheme is expected to enable Nigerians achieve. For Nigeria, Basic Education as seen in the National Policy on Education, (2004) Section (3) in its inclusive sense comprises of the following:

- (i) Programme/initiatives for early childhood care and socialization;
- (ii) Educational programmes for the acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy and life skills;
- (iii) Special programmes for nomadic populations;
- (iv) Non-formal programme for school leavers (or drop-outs) who have not acquired the basics needed for life-long learning;
- (v) Non-formal skills and apprenticeship training for adolescents and youth who did not have formal education;
- (vi) The formal school system from the beginning of primary education to the end of the junior secondary school.

The expanded vision of UBE comprises the universalizing of access and promotion of equity, focusing on learning and enhancing the environment of learning and strengthening partnerships. The objectives of UBE programme in line with the Millennium Development Goals as specified in the implementation guideline by government in 1999 are as follows:

- (i) Developing in the entire citizenry, a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
- (ii) Provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school going age.
- (iii) Reducing drastically the incidence of drop out from the formal school system.
- (iv) Catering for young persons, their schooling as well as other out-of-school children or adolescents through

appropriate form of complementary approaches to the provision of UBE.

- (v) Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life long living.

The Need for Universal Basic Education Scheme

The training of children and adolescents in the norms and aspirations of the nation is a veritable instrument for national integration and development. It was expected that educational reforms or re-organization would be carried out to enable Nigeria's education cater for the future professional needs (Ayeni, 2000). The restructuring is important, if we are to expect optimal result from our envisaged objectives of education.

The Federal Government's involvement in the organization of UBE scheme was therefore necessary if the integration of the nationals was to be achieved. The scheme was also desirable to enable the Federal Government ensure that children are taught the culture of the society. The desire to inculcate in children the knowledge of literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate and eradicate poverty made the UBE scheme worthwhile.

In view of the implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme, universalizing basic education will imply equal educational treatment and breaking of all barriers to education and participation for all children. Children with special needs inclusive, such that will enable them develop their potentialities maximally; live normal life as possible and able to contribute to the development of their societies. Equalizing educational treatment for this category of Nigerian children will therefore mean: access to school; access to a diversified and appropriate curriculum; to qualified and

effective teachers; and access to appropriate special facilities. Only through the UBE will the universality of the Basic Education and principle of the “full integration of the individual into the community” on which Nigeria’s philosophy of education is based, be realized.

Apart from the above, there is the need to lay a sound foundation for scientific and reflective thinking, character and moral training and the development of social attitude and above all, develop in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004). If we reflect on the definition of education as an instrument for conserving, transmitting and renewing culture (Alude, 2006), it will clearly become obvious that the school system occupies a very important position if the objectives for the primary and secondary education as stated by the Federal Government will be realized. This therefore, necessitated the launching of the Universal Basic Education scheme in November 1999.

Universal Basic Education: Issues Arising

The Universal Basic Education has been described as laudable but it appears that it is leaving many issues unresolved and these are likely to bedevil the programme just as the UPE scheme was. The one big difference is that while UPE was seen as purely government affair aimed at bringing education to the doorstep of all, this time around, education for all is seen as the responsibility of all.

As contained in the official reference of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Gazette (2004), the act provides for compulsory universal basic education. Ordinarily, it would have suggested that every Nigerian child, without exception would have access to basic education without hindrance. Now that the ceiling has been placed on the enrolment figures for each state of the federation, it is obvious that limitation has been introduced. This quota limitation, according to the national co-ordinator, was informed by the

differential level of literacy in the states of the Federation (Enemuo, 2000). The questions from this statement are: is it possible to realize the national aspiration of building a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens?

- (a) Does the placement of ceiling on enrolment figures not portray the UBE Scheme as yet another device for strengthening and perpetuating the principles of “Quota system”, “educational disadvantaged” and “educational advantaged” in admission?
- (b) Is attainment of literacy in education measurable in terms of enrolment?
- (c) Does the fact that one comes from the so called educationally advantaged state render one also educationally advantaged and vice-versa?
- (d) Is the UBE really not an instrument for unjustly denying children in some areas access to or right to education and perpetuate illiteracy contrary to the words and spirit of Section 18 (1) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria?
- (e) Will the UBE Scheme not attract similar counter balancing schemes by states whose sensibilities have been injured by the measure of deprivation as it happened when the Quota Admission policy scheme was introduced in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria? and
- (f) Will such states not run a counter primary education scheme that will render UBE meaningless?

Another issue of concern in the implementation of the Universal Basic Education Scheme is proper planning. The question that bother us is how are we prepared for the implementation scheme?

- (a) Have we been able to estimate the number of pupils and students that will be in our school system?

- (b) Have we improved on our method of keeping birth and death records to enable us know of the children that will be of school age and for what class at any given time?
- (c) How many schools will be required at each ward level, in each local government area and each state?
- (d) If the number of schools on ground are not going to be adequate, what preparations have we made to build new ones and renovate existing ones?
- (e) If nothing of sort has been done, have we learnt anything from the moribund Universal Primary Education scheme that was introduced thirty-four years ago?

Another issue of importance is the curriculum itself. Has the curriculum been reviewed to cater for the differential needs of the Nigerian populace? The existence of language problem needs to be resolved because the extent to which we shall be able to realize our hopes and aspirations in our educational programmes is dependent on our language skills. In Nigeria's current language situation, which of the over five hundred and thirteen ethnic languages (Aluede 2006), are we going to use for communication in schools? What is our teacher training programme like? Have our teachers been trained to read and write in many of these ethnic languages? What is the projected teacher – pupils/students' ratio? Proper planning and implementation is necessary for the goals of the UBE to be realized.

Problems of UBE

Since its inception in 1999, the Nigerian public has been discussing the problems likely to face UBE implementation (Maduewesi, 2006). Most of the projections seem to have arisen out of fear that the UBE might fail as the UPE did in the late 1970s. Conscious of the fear expressed in certain quarters, some of the problems and

possible solutions have been well documented (Obanya, 2000).

It is worrisome to note that in the 21st Century, a programme of this nature is being embarked upon without proper planning. Coupled with this is the twin problem of dearth or absence of reliable data as a result, forecasts and projections are always overtaken by events. There are usually numerous "unforeseen" and "unpredictable" circumstances in government's conduct of its affairs. Often, the people are not carried along and as such government's affairs attract little or no involvement of the governed. Thus far, education has had its fair share of failure due to inadequate teacher supply, poor facilities for personnel, poor infrastructure; inadequate/inappropriate materials; negative impact on access, retention, efficiency, quality and above all inadequate funding (Obanya, 2000).

There has been little or lack of political will to conceive, plan and implement a national educational programme in a systematic, sustainable manner. The reason adduced for this phenomena is that those in position of authority have little regard for quantitative or qualitative education. The problem of discontinuation of lofty government policies after a change of government constitutes another problem but fortunately, things are changing and they appear positive.

There is also the problem of inability to project the estimated population that will be in school during the period, lack of knowledge of the number of teachers that will be required, inability to estimate the cost of providing the accurate number of school buildings, learning facilities and the financial implication of the entire programme. These problems could as well bring about the failure of the UBE Scheme.

Prospects of UBE

The objectives of the UBE as stated in the Implementation Guidelines (2000) hold a lot

of promise for a better tomorrow. The attainments of the objectives constitute a major prospect for most, if not all Nigerians of school going age. The UBE when properly implemented, is expected to benefit three distinct categories of people, namely those who undergo formal basic education encompassing the first nine years of schooling (primary and junior secondary education); nomadic education for school age children of pastoral, nomads and migrant fishermen; literacy and non-formal education for out-of-school youths and illiterate adults (Maduewesi, 2005).

The prospect of UBE is therefore enormous as it cuts across different categories of people and age groups as its beneficiaries. It is capable of developing in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its promotion. It is also expected to reduce drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system. Perhaps, the most important prospect of UBE for the youngsters of this country is its potential for ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life coping skills as well as ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for the life long learning. This scheme will bring about national unification if properly reappraised for functionality. The scheme is an expression of the strong desire of Government to reinforce participatory democracy in Nigeria by raising the level of awareness and general education in the entire citizenry. Apart from this, it portrays government visible evidence of strong commitment to the Jomtien (1990) declaration of the promotion of Education for All. It also shows Nigeria's willingness to implement the New Delhi (1991) Declaration, requiring stringent efforts by the E-9 countries with the largest concentration of illiteracy to eliminate it within the shortest possible time. Finally, it takes care of the Durban Statement of Commitment (1998) and OAU now

All Decade of Education in Africa (1997-2000). These required African states to generate access to quality basic education as a foundation stone for a sustainable socio-economic development of the continent stated in the Implementation Guidelines for the UBE Programme (2000).

Conclusion

The issues arising from the implementation and expected outcome of the UBE programme are enormous. So also are the problems or challenges faced by the programme. The benefits are also many to reap. It is common place in Nigeria for any and all intended programmes conceptualization, theorizing, planning and even replanning being adequately done. The perpetual problem is the implementation state. It is expected that the mistakes of the past will assist the planners and implementers of the UBE to achieve a lasting success. As the Guideline for its implementation (2000) states "Education for All is the responsibility of All"; let us join hands to make the UBE programme succeed.

Recommendations

It would have not been out of place for the Federal Government of Nigeria who had witnessed the failure of a national programme of the type that she is now implementing to go into:

- (1) proper documentation of the procedure she will adopt to realize the national hopes and aspirations for education.
- (2) the number of teachers, desks, seats, books and other learning materials that will be required for the programme should be provide for its success.
- (3) proper computation which is considered important in arriving at the financial implication for running such a scheme.
- (4) recruitment, training, retraining and motivation of teachers which is a pre-requisite to effective implementation of UBE programme.

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- (5) adequate funding for the recruitment of necessary “things of education”.
(6) maintaining and implementing the programme policies for sustainability
(7) adequate planning for the programme
(8) Creating room for the parents to participate actively in the programme.
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