

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: HAS EDUCATION IN NIGERIA BEEN EQUIPPED TO RESPOND?

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Introduction

All said and done, the pivotal objective of education at any level and in all societies is to invest on the training of people for sustainable development. The corollary of this assertion is that if the people are poorly trained the level of their development is in jeopardy. Therefore, this conference could not have come at a better time than now when the current reforms in the education sector in Nigeria are raising such questions as What is the type of education Nigerians have all along been exposed to? What is its value content and the future trajectory? Although education can be said to be most voluble in the context of the culture of a particular people, its universality cannot be gainsaid. Since we are operating in a global village and in view of the present pervading technology, it will be foolhardy to circumscribe our vision and mission of education. The universal mission of education is enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) adopted by the United Nations at 58th Annual Conference in September 2005 (UN, 2005). The eight goals which range from eliminating extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS have at their center point the provision of quality education which is a *sine qua non* for achieving the other goals. These goals form a blueprint agreed to by all the countries of the world and all the world's leading development institutions. We cannot, therefore, as a country refuse to be part of this call to make education development oriented. The stark fact is that if we fail or refuse to galvanize our educational agencies and institution to pursue these goals we will only be compounding our problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

It is against this back drop that this paper wishes to examine what is required of our

education in Nigeria in the light of MDGs and the reforms currently pursued by the government in Nigeria. The rest of the presentation is organized, in three sections. Section one examines the recent attempts to awaken education in Nigeria as a driving force in achieving the country's National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Section two, discusses these attempts in the light of their passing the acid test of being *efficient, relevant and functional* as required by the Millennium Development Goals Section three in concluding suggests a way forward if Nigeria will be part of this fast moving millennium where education is being recognized as the critical mover of all sectors of development.

Education in Nigeria: Attempts to Reform

The Nigeria Constitution gives all, citizens of the country the right to education. Indeed it is a fundamental human right. However, the delivery of education in Nigeria has suffered an unimaginable neglect. Education is in the concurrent list in the Nigeria Constitution. This is not by accident because all the three tiers of government are supposed to devote a quantum of their resources to education. This provision notwithstanding, the current national literacy rate is only 57 per cent compared with about 70 percent in India, 76% percent in China and 80 percent in Malaysia (*See NEEDS*) more perturbing is the fact that same 49 percent of the teaching force in all Nigerian schools is unqualified. As we know, there are basic minimum qualifications required to teach in primary and secondary schools. The impact of this on the quality of education imparted to the recipient can only be imagined. This is a because

the material content is deficient and the pedagogy is disgusting. Generally, across the nation in this our present country access to basic education is inhibited by many environmental, socio cultural, religious, and gender issues, when a spatial analysis is applied to this high illiteracy rate in Nigeria, these socio cultural and environmental issues show in a bold relief. In such an analysis, we will content with the male/female imbalance in school enrollment in some parts of the country, the religious beliefs that dictate the type and quality of educational delivered and received, the ecological parameters that determine who will benefit and for how long, and the resource availability that shapes the whole content of education. In sum, the educational system in Nigeria has shot changed a good proportion of her citizens. It has also placed unmerited emphasis on theoretical knowledge to the detriment of technical vocation, and entrepreneurial education.

The government having realized these inadequacies is tinkering with a number of reforms which we will shortly x-ray in this discussion. First, the challenge facing every tier of government is to provide unhindered access to compulsory universal basic education to all citizens. It is proposed that the primary education will be free and compulsory hence the initial proposal of the 9-3-3-4 system. The achievement of the proposal has become a herculean task. No detailed impact assessment has been carried out. Thus, the extent of success and the reasons for failure have not been fully analysed and debated before the current 9-3-4 formulation which envisages free and compulsory education to the level of junior secondary school. The basic question to ask at this junction is: Who is receiving this free education? How universal is it? What is the quality? If the answers to those questions are juxtaposed with facts on the ground, they show that a number of parents are shunning the so-called free public schools in preference to the fee-paying private schools. We hope someone in this conference will provide score statistics to back this assertion.

Secondly, recent government reforms are aimed at establishing and maintaining enhanced quality education and standards through relevant and competency-based curricula and effective quality control at every level of our educational system. So far, we have seen some re-organization in the inspectorate division of the Ministry of Education both at the Federal and State levels. This proposal for quality control is commendable -if the necessary logistics are provided. Recently, however, about 11,000 primary schools and 14,500 secondary schools were assessed in which the best scored 32.2 percent, average score was 11 percent while the lowest scored 4 percent. Standard syllabus is usually provided for schools but the level of delivery usually differs according to the nature of management, the quality of teachers and other local circumstances. The recent public concern about the quality of education offered in the country's Unity schools lends support for a well-coordinated quality control.

Thirdly, an added proposal is to enhance the efficiency, resourcefulness and competence of teachers and other educational personnel through training, capacity building is the core of any educational reform because the students are as good as their teachers. Quality teachers, all things being equal, produce quality students. For this formula to work, the training and retraining of teachers should be a constant feature in our educational system. Sponsoring of teachers to conferences and workshops is not a luxury but a worthy investment in capacity building.

Fourthly, there is a further proposal to strengthen Nigeria's technological and scientific base by revamping technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial education. This is a move towards decolorizing education in order to make education a problem-solving undertaking.

The essence of education is to train the mind to use the hands. Education as much as being universal should be environment specific. This translates to using education to solve our immediate problems therefore, directing attention to civic education, acquiring vocational skills,

and providing education for sustainable living. Lastly, the success of these proposals is dependent on providing an enabling environment and stimulating the active participation of the private sector, civil society and non-governmental organizations, communities and development partners in educational development. The involvement of private individuals in the ownership and management of even erstwhile public schools under the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) is a new dimension to this proposal. We are aware of a recent campaign by the Federal Ministry of Education for individuals and organizations to adopt some schools. Although the proposal has not fully crystallized, the idea seems a right step in the right direction. But more importantly, the funding formula for public schools has to be worked out. A recent survey has shown that 85 percent of public primary schools and 60 percent of public secondary schools in the country are dilapidated (FG, 2006). This level of dilapidation will obviously scare away would be participants if government with all the resources at its disposal will allow the current intolerable level of decay and its attendant consequences.

These proposals and reforms are attempts at refocusing education in the country to meet the threshold of tolerance stipulated by the Millennium Development Goals. The next section will attempt a critique of these reforms against the vision and mission of MGDs.

Educational Strategies and Challenges of MGDs

As earlier stated in this paper, MGDs recognize education as the vital tool that will transform societies and empower the individuals. They conclude that development is knowledge driven. These objectives are only achievable if countries are to focus persistently on the following targets:

- (i) unfettered access to education;
- (ii) Improvement of the quality of education at all levels;

- (iii) Using education as a tool for improving the general quality of life;
- (iv) Evolving a dynamic curriculum;
- (v) Creating a network on improvements and developments in education;
- (vi) Providing a sustained source of

funding for education. These strategies provide immense challenges for any country which would want to keep abreast with the global trend which recognizes education as a panacea for many ills. Here in Nigeria, the country has a comparatively low enrollment rate in the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of educational institutions. MGDs target a hundred percent level in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy at the primary schools level and at least up to 50 percent secondary school graduates who would move to tertiary institutions. General education is expected to enhance productivity while tertiary, education will stimulate entrepreneurial activity. However, the MDGs believe and recommend that the quantum jump in the production of tertiary institution graduates will be replicated in the growth and expansion of job opportunities to absorb these graduates. This strategy provides a formidable challenge to Nigerian education since the country is still far away from achieving 'universal primary and secondary education.

The demand for quality education is even more challenging. Many primary school teachers in Nigeria still do not possess the minimum teaching qualification of the Nigeria Certificate in Education while some secondary school teachers lack the academic and professional qualifications. Unfortunately, the crash programmes mounted to train unqualified teachers are suspect in their quality (See Adesina, 2006).

Improving the quality of life through education implies that the contents of the curriculum should be focused on life building, skill acquisition, and exposing the students to work study for practical knowledge and experience. The quality of life is an aggregate measure of all the ingredients that contribute to a

good texture of life. That the world's poorest are found among the most uneducated is a simple confirmation that education can contribute to the improvement of the quality of life. Make no mistake about it, the world campaign against poverty goes pari pasu with a similar campaign for liberalizing education. In Nigeria the areas of endemic poverty coincide with spots where the level of literacy is equally low (see Okafor, 2005).

Networking the changes and the dynamics of education curriculum is a fair demand that will encourage comparison and ginger progress. This requires a good availability and use of information technology MGDs are a global initiative which underlines the world as a global village. As much as we emphasise the peculiarity of the local environments, there are universal phenomena which require networking and dissemination. MGDs envisage a situation where these universal issues provoke cross-country comparisons. To do this, the assumption is that the knowledge and exposure to information communication technology (ICT) is high.

Finally, MDGs also assume that the funding of education is assured and sustained. There are prescribed levels of funding required of the government. Education is a social service for which an average citizen can claim a right to. The present beggarly posture of government in Nigeria for public private partnership is beyond the tolerable level. The private sector in Nigeria should be involved in offering education but not to the point of government abdicating her responsibility.

Education should be accorded priority status in budget at all levels if the sustained level of funding is the target. The ultimate goal of MDGs is to develop a formula of funding per primary, secondary or tertiary education beneficiary.

Conclusion

The essence of this paper is to set the stage for meaningful discussions on the quality of education in Nigeria and to generate an intelligent discourse regarding the on-going reforms. At the outset it was stated that the millennium Development Goals provide a universal guide for cross-country comparisons. Nigeria has tried to respond since it is clear that the country is lagging behind in producing the enabling environment for effective and efficient delivery of education. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy has enunciated some measures to ameliorate the ills but the country is still deep in the quagmire.

The task before us is to use our field experience to suggest some policy guidelines that will put the reforms on the right course. From the reactions so far generated from the stakeholders, it is clear that some suggested reforms lack proper consultation. For example, the recent directive to merge some Colleges of Education and Polytechnics with Universities and to phase out Higher National Diploma courses seems counter productive. The middle level manpower is still relevant to our development agenda. Also, the sending of the Unity Schools to orphanages where they are left for adoption does not instill hope on numerous parents and stakeholders.

Lastly, it is proper to emphasize the fact that some of the reforms are in the right course to envision education in the country to measure with world standards. The fear usually entertained is inconsistency in policies and policy implementation following any change of government. We hope that the change in government will not involve throwing the accumulated and consolidated gains overboard. We may not have done our duty as educators and educationists if we do not assist politicians who are not trained in the complexities of education management to craft compromise solutions.

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