

EDUCATION OF NOMADIC (MIGRANT) FISHERMEN OF THE NIGER DELTA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The National commission for Nomadic Education has been established to cater for the education of migrant fishermen in addition to that of the pastoralists. This is in line with the National Policy on Education which stressed that education is the birth right of every child and should be brought close to the environment of the child. Therefore, the Nomadic Education Programme was started officially in the country in 1986. This paper highlights the inception of the programme, the problems that are impeding its progress as well as its prospect of achieving the aims of establishing it, it finally made recommendations on how to improve the programme

Introduction

Education occupies a center stage in Nigeria's social and economic development. The importance of education cannot be over-emphasized. Education serves as the spring board for social and economic change. All who have mediated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of any empire depends on the education of the Youth. Education is considered so important in Nigeria that it is suggested that education should be given large budgetary allocation in the national development plans (Wennergren, Antholt and Whiakar, 1984). The Government of Nigeria believes that learning is the primary means of upgrading the socio-economic condition of the rural population (Iro, 2009).

The old Rivers State (now Bayelsa and Rivers States) had been in the forefront of the campaign for the inclusion of the migrant fisher people in the Nomadic Education Programme in

Nigeria. In conjunction with other states that have migratory problems (Ezewu and Tahir, 1977) papers were presented on the desirability of providing separate educational opportunities for the children of the migrant fisher folks. Since the Federal Government was bent on providing education for all irrespective of work role, location and lifestyle, the National Council in Education (NCE), in March 1990 approved a National Programme for the education of migrant fishermen in the affected Riverine state Viz: Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa-Ibom, Delta, Ondo and Ogun States. The number has since increased (Tawari; 2002).

The National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) was given the responsibility to cater for the migrant fishermen education in addition to that of the pastoralists. Schools have been built and are still being built in the fishing ports by the communities, NCNE, the Local and State Governments concerned. Research Statistics (Tawari, 2002) for year 2000 showed that there were 30 migrant fishermen children schools in the country with a teacher and pupil population of 852 and 40, 826 respectively.

The National Commission for Nomadic Education has since its inception:

- a. Established four university centers to cater for Teacher Training, Curriculum Development, Research and Evaluation for Nomadic Education in country
- b. Created 6 Zonal Offices with Headquarters at Minna (North Central), Kano (North-West), Enugu (South-East), Bauchi (North-East), Benin (South-south) and Ibadan (South-West)
- c. Appointed state coordinators and directors in the states of the federation

d. Appointed supervisors of schools in all the Local Governments/ each state. These are put in place for better coordination and success of the programme.

It is believed that the education acquired will truly enable the people to acquire knowledge, skills and values that would improve the lives of the pastoralists and fisher folks who provide the porteinous requirements for good health of the Nigeria nation.

Who is a Migrant Fisherman?

According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (Hornby, 2005), a migrant is a person who moves from one place to another especially in order to find work, hence, a migrant fisherman moves from one place to another in his fishing occupation. He is one who leaves his natural community and moves from habitation to another in fulfillment of his occupation. He moves in search of fish as directed by the type of fish required, the movement of the tide and the season of the year. This explains why we have people from Cameroon, Ghana, Togo etc. and from other parts of Nigeria in the fishing ports located in the most inaccessible areas of the Riverine and Coastal areas of the country. It is worthy to note that the Nigerian migrant fishermen, who are mainly Ijaws, are responsible for 95% of the fishes caught and sold for consumption nationwide.

Unique Features of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region covers the states such as; Cross River, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo and Ondo states. Generally, the place is waterlogged, often covered by flood for most part of the year. The soil is swampy. There is difficulty in cultivation in waterlogged soil. Because of the peculiar terrain, the mainstay of the migrant fisher folks is fishing. Fishes caught with hooks, nets, lines etc. are sold fresh or dry on particular market days in far away communities. There are some, who, apart from

fishing, do minor farming, palm wine tapping, carving of dugout canoes and basket. Fishing is done by all members of the family. The men and boys go fishing while women and girls process the fishes and paddle canoes to big communities to market them. Canoe making, palm wine tapping and Jumbering of mangrove trees is engaged purely by the men.

The Ijaws who inhabit the coastal parts of Delta region do live in itinery huts. Rain falls almost throughout the year. Transportation system is mainly by canoes. Despite their being the main area of mineral oil production in the country, the Delta region is deficient in terms of infrastructural development. This makes it difficult to attract teachers into the coastal and interior parts of the Niger Delta. Paddling canoes from the camps to where the schools are located becomes very difficult, yet, the National Policy on Education emphasizes equal educational opportunities for all people of the country (FME, 2004). The few migrant fishermen that manage to go to school do meet lots of obstacles as fishing affects their schooling. Migrant fishing children engage most often in fishing business during school period. Some who live in sedentary communities do miss boats on certain days and therefore, incapable of going to school in most of the days. Other problems encountered in the Niger Delta are absence of portable water, electricity and Modern Fishing Gear. They are also ravaged by erosion, oil pollution which affects the fishes and sources of drinking water as well as flood. They are facing inadequate attention from Government, mosquitoes, Tse-tse flies and warps, non availability of loans, no storage facilities etc. In a study (Tawari, 2002) on how they respond to the harsh conditions, 50% of the respondents indicated that they endure while 20% indicated that they only mange to help themselves. It can then be imagined what fellow Nigerians are passing through that calls for the establishment of migrant fisher folks children schools. After all, the 1999 constitution

(FGN, 1999) of Nigeria demands that the government ensures fair learning opportunities for its citizen.

Problems of Migrant Fishermen Education in Nigeria

Despite the obvious circumstances which have prompted the establishment of migrant fisher folks children schools in the Niger Delta, there have been lots of problems that have bedeviled the programme. These include:

a. Most of the school buildings are temporary structures. This is partly due to the fact that during the flood season (months of wet season) many of the camps are flooded to the extent that pupils cannot go to school.

Some camps are deserted because they are 75% covered with water. In the few permanent structures put up by National Commission for Nomadic Education and Shell Development Company, the heat of the sun and the rain make them uncomfortable, hence, few learn under them.

b. Fishing affects the schooling of most of the pupils in the migrant schools. During peak fishing periods, pupils are hardly in school.

Those who manage to attend are conscious of when they are supposed to be out fishing immediately after school. Other migrant fishing children engage in domestic chores before going to school. After school, they go with their parents to fish. The girls engage in processing fish caught, while the boys go for firewood in the forest. They also render assistance and other activities.

c. There is shortage of teachers to teach in the Nomadic schools. Because of the poor terrain, it has been difficult to attract teachers into the camps to teach in the schools. In most schools, it is observed (Tawari, 2002) that only few of the teachers have Teachers Grade 11 Certificate which means that the few teachers who managed to be employed are not adequately qualified.

d. The learning materials are inadequate. Most of the migrant fisher children do not have textbooks let alone other learning aids.

This makes learning to be difficult

e. The school timetables where the children are forced to abide by Government stipulated opening and closing (12 noon and 2PM) are not suitable. This is because it encroached into their fishing time, which affects their catch.

They

fishermen do not adjust their time effectively to give room for their children's schooling.

f. Regarding the curriculum, the migrant fishing folks children education curriculum is the same as the National Curriculum. The textbooks are the same as those used by upland people. The relevant textbooks are therefore inadequate. Fishing is not taught in school though that is a vocational skill their parents teach them when they are out fishing. Though normal education is necessary, fishing which is good and interesting are done away with.

g. Nomadic education is not well financed. It is as a result of the improper finance that not much impact is made on the migrant fisher folks, especially as basic amenities which will attract development are not provided.

Inadequate finance is also responsible for the poor teaching availability as adequate finance could have helped in training teachers.

h. Most of the children are isolated from others due to the long distance of the journey before getting to the nearest community in the tidal water. There is also the danger posed by clashes between the sedentary communities. The activities of militant youth in the Niger Delta and Military Actions by the Joint Task Force (JTF) against the militants are also not helping matters.

Prospect of Migrant Fisher Children Education

In spite of the obstacles outlined, there are evidences that the programme is to some extent, achieving its set goals. This is evident as:

1. Pupils of the migrant fisher folks are happy going to schools, though they require more teachers and modern amenities as enjoyed by sedentary pupils to make them happier e.g. health facilities, sporting facilities, electricity and clean drinking water.
2. There are instructional materials, which the National Commission on Nomadic Education, World Bank, and Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) are sending. However, they need to improve on this as the materials are all in short supply.
3. Evaluation of Community Based Organization (CBO) and Non-Government Organizations indicate that although migrant fisher folks children education is not well financed, it has been able to turn out primary school children some of which are now in secondary schools and universities. If more funds is put into the fisher folks education and well utilized, the success of educating all Nigerians, including the Nomadic children will be tremendous.
4. In a study by Tawari (2002), the fisher folks children gave positive response on gains to be derived from education. Most of the people explained that education will enable become good people, gain white-collar jobs; improve their living condition and fishing methods. They further indicated that they will interact better with people outside their enclosure and have better tomorrow than their parents. These responses show positive prospect for fisher folk education, as the children are willing to learn, only that more conducive learning atmosphere should be provided for them.
5. On discussing with the pupils as to type of culture taught in Nomadic schools, majority of them agreed that apart from mainstream, Nigeria culture, the life style of migrants, their occupational roles, their health issues and their history are also taught. Though they contend that their history is not adequately taught, all agreed that education has taught them better ways of

living. This indicates that the right type of education is being given to them to a large extent. What is required is revisiting their curriculum, so that, they could be adequately empowered to be contributing their own quarter to the development of the nation as well as being useful to themselves while not abandoning their natural occupations and environment

Conclusion

As can be seen from above, Nomadic Education Programme was introduced by Nigerian government to remove the chronic illiteracy among the mobile population of Nigeria, including the migrant fisher folks of the Niger Delta. Though there are problems that are jeopardizing its smooth take off, there are prospects that the objectives of the Government would be realized. This is more so as the migrant fisher folk children are enjoying the programme, participating enthusiastically and seeing education as a means to meet up with benefits enjoyed by their upland neighbours. However, for further improvements of the programme for the realization of the importance of education for the entire Nigerian citizens, and improvement in fishing skill acquisition, the following recommendations are made:

- 1 The school time table should be adjusted to more suitable periods that will not encroach into their fishing time
- 2 The problem of inadequacy of textbooks should be given appropriate attention. CBOs, NGOs, Government Agencies, the Oil Prospecting Companies like SHELL and others involved in Nomadic education should make provision of textbooks a priority in all their plans
- 3 The Problem of inadequacy of teachers should be tackled by giving incentives, probably in the form of higher pay to the teachers who are involved in the programme. It has been found that the few ones available are not qualified, even though they are enthusiastic about their job. The

Government can assist by sending them on in-service training.

4 More permanent structures should also be provided for the children. The temporary structures which are often flooded are not good for the children's comfort. The Government should provide conducive learning atmosphere for the pupils.

5 Government should provide basic infrastructure for the Riverine communities. It has been found that transportation and flooding are major hindrances to the education of fisher folks in the camps. Canoes should be provided, roads should as well be constructed to link these Riverine areas, after all, the bulk of the country's wealth comes from those areas.

6 More efforts by the teachers are required, skill acquisition programmes should be organized and the pupils from these schools should be exposed to competition with upland pupils

7 All levels of education should be made available to pupils, secondary education should be provided for them with time. Nursery and primary education alone are not enough for migrant fishing children after which they should learn a trade

8 In addition to other subjects taught, they should also learn modern fishing techniques such as Carving, Music, Dancing and accepted international swimming styles in the migrant fisher folks children schools

9 Migrant fishermen should not be isolated from the formulation and implementation of the Nomadic Education Policy that bother on their education/activities. Nomadic education should also be incorporated into the mainstream of National Education System. The content of the curriculum should also be modified in such a way that it will attract pupils and their teachers to stay in the classroom.

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