

## CHILD LABOUR AND THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The paper has acknowledged that the UBE Scheme, aimed at providing a free and a compulsory education to the child up to the Junior Secondary School level is a noble venture. However, the scheme is likely to be impeded by such factors as political will, availability and management of financial and material resources and above all, child labour. Child labour which is caused mainly by poverty and inequality refers to any exploitative work done by the child that is detrimental to the dull development of the child, socially and psychologically. The trend has the propensity to barricade the child from formal schooling. In order to make the UBE Scheme successful, child labour must be tackled headlong through appropriate and sustained ways.

### Introduction

It has been repeatedly acknowledged that the child's right to education, especially, in Nigeria is not fully achieved (for example, Bakari 1999; Bakari, Girei and kaibo 2000 and Saura 2000). It has equally been consistently argued that socio economic or geographical considerations should not barricade the child from fully participating in formal education, most especially primary school, these suggest a strong advocacy for the religious protection of their right to education which will hopefully guarantee a brighter future for them.

It is within this argument that Federal Government of Nigeria (National Policy on Education, 2004), declares that, equal education opportunity would be provided for all children irrespective of their background. Although Bakari and Kaibo (1998), reviewed a number of Government's effort towards achieving equal education opportunity, especially for all children that however, acknowledged the apparent inadequacy of those efforts towards achieving this desirable goal. As an acknowledgement of its failure in that regard, the FGN launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme to complement previous efforts.

The UBE is unique in that, for (he first time, it declares a free and compulsory basic education up to the Junior Secondary School Level. The launching of the UBE is certainly a credible political effort. It is signpost for the enhancement of one of the internationally acknowledged child's right and can also enhance the realization of other rights such as health.

Notwithstanding this optimism, what remains problematic is the practicability of this laudable programme: implementing free and compulsory basic education. Implementing the former could be easier with political will, albeit, the compulsory of basic education will certainly require a gigantic effort. This is because, for it to be realized, all the relevant stakeholders must be willing to support the programme. These stakeholders are the government, the parents, the school and the pupils themselves.

Already, a lot of sensitization programmes have been mounted, particularly at the state and local government level with the aim of mobilizing grassroots support for the programme. The major fear however, is how adequate is the sensitization drive towards mobilizing a sustainable support for the scheme, especially, the compulsion of the first nine years of formal education.

In this, it is hereby submitted that for the effectiveness of the UBE scheme, a lot of issues need to be addressed. Earlier, adequate funding and proper condition of service for teacher (Banu 1999), curricula reform, efficient management of resources, and a strong political will (Bakari 1999), were some of the major recommendation made for better access to, and effectiveness of Primary Schools. In addition to these, we submit in this paper that child labour is one of the major impediments to the successful implementation of compulsory basic education in Nigeria. Within the scope of our thinking, child labour, which is itself a violation of the child's right, is capable of challenging the UBE's effort. We therefore, attempt to discuss how this problem could affect the effectiveness of the UBE as well as provide solutions.

### Child Labour: How Does it Affect Schooling?

It is observed that children do a lot of work in a divergent situation (UNICEF, 1997). At one end, the work could be beneficial, which is capable of promoting a child's physical, psychological, spiritual and or social development "without interfering with schooling, recreation and rest (UNICEF, 1997). At the other end, children do some work that are physical, mentally or socially exploitative or destructive. Thus, define

child labour as any form of work engaged by children can be misleading and even confusing. It will also "trivialize the issue and make it more difficult to end the abuses" (UNICEF, 1997). Indeed, in Nigeria, it is part of the responsibilities of the child to assist his/her parents "in case of need" (the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 1995). Thus, what constitutes child labour does not encompass all forms of work that is done by the Nigerian child. Therefore, only exploitative work that is done by the child is referred to as child labour in this paper. By "Exploitative work", we mean any work that is detrimental to full social or psychological development of the child. Thus, any work that barricades the child from formal schooling (which is an institution where social and psychological development is expected to be considerably developed) is considered an exploitative child labour.

In Nigeria, it is common to find children generally assisting their parents in domestic chores such as sweeping, fetching water, washing dishes, baby-sitting and the like. These do not constitute serious threats to a child's education since they are mostly casual and can fall within some specific hours without necessarily interfering with school hours. These can be difficult to stop, because parents often see them as processes of providing necessary training to their children for adult roles.

But there are situations whereby the child is engaged in a "full time" work in form of hawking, farming, fetching firewood, herding, etc. these are usually time-consuming and hectic that the child's time is completely devoted to these activities with no time for schooling or recreation. In rural settlements for example, many children are full-time farmers and herders. As well as in the urban settlements, hawking and petty-trading are renowned features of many children. At any time one goes to the street, markets and motor parks, children are seen hawking or engaged in other income-generating activities which not only deter them from schooling, but the nature of some work do have damaging effect on their physical, mental and social growth. Another dimension of child labour that needs mention is that many children especially in the north are used as aides to "life-time" beggars. Most of the disabled, such as, the blind and the crippled are accompanied by school-going age children who often direct them from one place to another in their 'business' of begging. This also takes virtually the morning through evening times, which makes attendance at school a difficult task. In addition, Bakari (2000), noted that, some children are forced into 'career' begging by their religious teachers. The major education implications of this kind of child labour are that access to schooling is impeded, and retention in schools became extremely difficult. It is perhaps necessary to ask: What causes this exploitative child labour?

The major reason for this exploitative practice against the child is poverty. As rightly posited by UNICEF (1997), "The most powerful force driving children into hazardous, characterized by poverty and inequity, the incidence of child labour is likely to increase, as does the risk that it is exploitative". This position is relevant in the Nigerian scene. Characterized by poverty, unemployment and inequity, the Nigerian society allows the growth of this national embarrassment unabated. The fact that much of the proceeds accruing from child-labour goes to the parents or guardians of the child is refreshingly realistic. As a means of fighting poverty, parents involve their children in income generating activities for the upkeep of the family. Children's contributions to the well being of families are enormous especially in developing economies, in a review of nine Latin American countries for instance, it has been observed that poverty will rise by between 10 and 20 percent without the income of working children aged 13-17 (UNICEF, 1997).

The need to inculcate discipline in the minds of children could be another factor. Generally, the traditional African Society place premium on the training of the child to be productive. Thus, at an early stage, parents do introduce their children into the world of work. However, child labour due largely to the need for training could not be as hazardous and exploitative so as to deter the child his/her right education and health. Thus, the major obstacle to the solution for child exploitative is poverty both at macro and family level.

### **Implication for the UBE**

The foregoing analyses have signaled that even though the UBE will be provided free by the Government, other children will still be left out of the school cycle. Hence, it is questionable if the compulsion of the nine years of schooling as proposed in the UBE would be effective. What is glaring here is

that parents and guardians are the custodians of these children. Implicitly, they determine whether or not the children enroll in and attend school. Secondly, children within the primary school category for instance, lack the understanding of their right to education. Even if they do understand it is difficult for them to persistently demand for such right due largely to their cultural background socialization process, which stipulate strict respect for and obedience to parents. This coupled their pitiful life condition; the children will themselves become more sympathetic to work schooling.

Similarly, enforcing compulsory schooling for these children could be retarded due to lack of proper records by the government on the exact number of school-going age children. Most birth rural settlements are not registered with the government, which could have helped to track those parents who fail to enroll their wards in school. In the same vein, it will even be more difficult to address the problem when the form of child labour involves herding and farming. This is because the parents and children become inaccessible. In respect, it is mainly the parents who will have moral obligation to enroll their children into school.

To make the situation complex, as a general conclusion, the citizenry can hardly assist the constituted authority in identifying defaulters. As a general observation, people do exhibit a culture of silence on issues that do not directly affect them. Thus, the government is likely to fail if it relies on the general public to report parents who refuse to send their children to school. This, again, suggests that parents and guardians, one of the invaluable stakeholders in the UBE, must be willing and able to educate their children, if the scheme is to succeed. However, child labour is a threat that can ban allow many parents to willingly allow their children to school. In this regard, the provision of education which takes care of the direct costs of schooling such as school fees and writing material will be inadequate. This is because, as we earlier noted, the child is an indispensable contributor to the economic upkeep of the entire family. Safety nets, must be provided particularly for parents compulsory education is to be effective. As Fafunwa (1980), cited by Bakari (1999), observed, there are many parents in the country who are too poor to release their children from farm work to school. Thus, solutions should be sought to arrest the situation.

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

For the realization of compulsory basic education, we wish to suggest the following measures:

- 1) Realistic safety nets in form of Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) (soft loans, welfare facilities and farm implements) should be made affordable to people, especially the rural dwellers. This will help improve the lot of the poor and make the means of livelihood easier. It should be mentioned that the gains of PAP initiatives need to be consolidated improved upon and ensured that the poorest benefit from it. Presently, there are complaints that the initiative has been heavily politicized and grossly inadequate to yield a large-scale impact on the sufferings of the people. Thus, whereas the free UBE is being implemented, the problem of unemployment, and abject poverty should simultaneously addressed. This will reduce the burden on children, who are mostly the only reliable asset that these poor parents have at their disposal.
- 2) It is necessary to introduce welfare packages such as free health care facilities for the elderly and children. The elderly often rely more on their children for care than those who are still active. Similarly, if free health care is guaranteed for children, parents will be relieved of another burden that forces them to engage in child labour.

Importantly too, there should be active sensitization programmes on the need for schooling, the effects of child labour on children's health and education as well as how child labour itself viciously sustains poverty at the family level. This sensitization drive requires a systematic approach, so that relevant arguments and facts should be utilized for effectiveness, equally, children themselves need to be sensitized on the need for education for their socio-economic, political and cultural advancements. The mass media, religious

- 4) institutions and non-governmental organizations can play a useful role in this respect. Effective participation of children would also require effective community involvement in the management of the scheme, they will have the feeling of ownership of the programme. This will facilitate the mobilization of grassroots support for the scheme. It will also help in problem/need identification, and realistic suggestions that are workable in local situations,

### **Conclusion**

The provision of Universal Basic Education scheme is one of the expected democracy dividends for the Nigerian child. For the first time the civilian Federal Government has signaled a practical concern for the enforcement of children's legitimate right to education. However, policy formulation and statements regarding equal educational opportunity in the country are not a thing. As far back as 1976, a similar programme was launched, mid-way implemented and crashed. The 1976 Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme, was frustrated by a number of factors including poor planning mismanagement, poor mobilization drive and inadequacy of schools and teachers. These

same fears were raised as a likely problem that could reoccur to impede the effectiveness of the UBE. While acknowledging those fears, this paper has also posited that child labour could be another strong factor that will affect the compulsion of the programme. Nevertheless, a strong political effort and social mobilization can be useful in reversing the problem.

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