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Secondary Education in Nigeria Versus Poverty: A Litmus Test for Economic Development of African States

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Abstract

Education is a social indicator which when harnessed positively, leads to economic development. Secondary school education in Nigeria can lead to achieving economic development. Unfortunately, this sector of our educational system is dysfunctional simply because of poverty and lack of political will power by government to make it work. This is evidenced in the lackadaisical approach of the federal government's expenditure on education which is hugely below the 26% of national budgets recommended by UNESCO. To change this ugly trend, what Nigerian government or any other government in Africa must do is to significantly increase her gross national product on education for effective economic development.

Secondary education is very crucial in the educational system of any country. A sound and functional secondary education can bring about poverty reduction and economic development both to the recipient and the country. This unarguably is the position of the authors with regards to how secondary education can be used for economic development and in alleviating poverty.

Secondary Education: The Nigerian Perspective

Secondary education in Nigeria is the form of education that children receive after primary education and before the tertiary stage. The broad goals of secondary education are to prepare the individual for:

- i. Useful living within the society.
- ii. Higher education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

In specific terms, secondary education shall:

- i. Provide all primary school leavers with the opportunity for education of a higher level, irrespective of sex, social status, religious or ethnic background.
- ii. Offer diversified curriculum to cater for the differences in talents, opportunities and future roles.
- iii. Provide trained manpower in the applied science, technology and commerce at sub-professional grades.
- iv. Develop and promote Nigerian languages, art and culture in the context of world cultural heritage.
- v. Inspire its student with a desire for self improvement and achievement of excellence.
- vi. Foster national unity with an emphasis on the common ties that unite us in our diversity.
- vii. Raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect the dignity of labour, appreciate those values specified under our broad national goals and live as good citizens.
- viii. Provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development (FRN, 2004).

To achieve the stated goals, government made secondary education to be of six-year duration and to be given in two stages of junior and senior secondary school respectively. Each stage shall be of three-year duration. Generally speaking, the two-tier secondary education is the most revolutionary aspect of the 9-3-4 system both in terms of structure and curriculum. Similarly, the major curriculum advantage is that grammar school subjects which emphasizes Liberal Arts Education is now de-emphasized in favour of technical, vocational and commercial subjects which are crucial to the nation's aspirations for a technological take-off (Nzulumike, Onyeocha and Oli, 2013).

The Junior Secondary School

The junior secondary school which falls under the upper basic education of the 9-3-4 system of education took off in September 1982. The reason for this is obvious. The Universal Primary Education was launched in September 1976 and the first products were due to graduate in July 1982. The intention of starting the J.S.S in 1982 was to ensure that the primary school leavers were given the benefit of the new system of secondary education which was to be both functional and practical (Abimbade, 2008). The junior secondary school is to be pre-vocational and academic, tuition free, universal and compulsory and to teach all the basic subjects including the emerging issues of value orientation, peace and dialogue, human rights education, family life/HIV and AIDS education, entrepreneurial skill etc as suggested in the 9-year basic education curriculum that will enable students acquire further knowledge and develop skills. According to the policy document on education, every student at this level is to offer:

- i. A minimum of 10 and a maximum of 13 subjects.
- ii. All subjects in Group A.
- iii. At least, one subject each from Group B and C (FRN, 2004). This means that the junior secondary school curriculum is structured alongside core subjects, pre-vocational subjects and non-prevocational electives. The core subjects in 'Group A' are English; Mathematics; French; Integrated Science; Social Studies and Citizenship Education; Introductory Technology; Language of Environment to be taught as L1; One major Nigerian language other than that of the environment to be taught as L2. Here, the language of environment is to be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not, it is to be taught with emphasis on oracy as L2. The pre-vocational subjects in 'Group B' include Agriculture; Business Studies; Home Economics; Local Crafts; Computer Education; Fine Arts and Music. The non-prevocational subjects in 'Group C' are Religious Knowledge; Physical and Health Education and Arabic Studies (FRN, 2004).

The objectives of pre-vocational subjects at the J.S.S. level are expected to conform to the general objectives of Technical Education in the country.

These objectives were stated in the policy document on education and they are:

- i. To provide people who can apply scientific knowledge to the improvement and solution to environmental problem for the use and convenience of man.
- ii. To give an introduction to professional studies in engineering and other technologies.
- iii. To give training and impart the necessary skills leading to the production of craftsman, technicians and their skilled personnel who will be enterprising and self-reliant
- iv. To provide trained manpower in applied science, technology and commerce, particularly at sub-professional grade.

- v. To provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development (FRN, 2004).

The specific objective which is in consonance with the general objectives of the J.S.S. education is to develop in the students, manipulative skills otherwise known as manual dexterity, inventiveness, respect for dignity of labour and healthy attitude towards technical things. The performance or progress of each J.S.S student is to be monitored for three years on regular basis. This is to be done under monitoring and inspection; continuous assessment and final assessment. Through this method, each student's aptitude for academic, technical or commercial career is discovered and encouraged. What this means is that by the end of the third year, it becomes clear as to whether the student is to pursue academic, technical or commercial course at the next stage of the three-year senior secondary school. Hence, the Junior School Certificate (JSC) is based on continuous assessment and examination conducted by state and federal examination boards.

There is provision for students who completed J.S.S to be screened into the senior secondary school, technical college or take up some suitable apprenticeship system or some other scheme for out-of-school vocational training. The fact that they have had some vocational, technical or commercial training makes post-primary technical institutions a lot more attractive than would otherwise be. Furthermore, a highly reduced number will need to go on to senior secondary school. In this way, the competition for entry into the universities will be less as many will by choice, go into polytechnics having become attracted to technical and commercial education. This corrects the old system of education (such as 6-5-3 etc) where all secondary school students are on the struggle to complete their five-year course and enter the university straight.

The Senior Secondary School

The senior secondary school education now represents the second stage in the progression of the numerically coded system of education known as the 9-3-4 system of education. The nomenclature notwithstanding, the S.S.S system of education is designed in a way that by the end of the junior secondary school education, students must have been exposed to many disciplines as has been spelt out in the National Policy on Education. What this means is that the senior secondary school is aimed at continuing the progression of the policy implementation by preparing youths with fundamental vocational skills in their chosen fields of interest and competences so that they can enter a relevant work-setting and explore it as a career. Admittedly, students in the S.S.S. are nearing the finished product stage as some may branch off into the job market while others continue into the tertiary education. As such, it is essential to continue to give them a general education in order to raise a generation of students who

are vocationally sound and who can think reflectively, respect the dignity of labour and are competent in science and language-oriented curricular.

Certification at the end of senior secondary school is based on a continuous assessment which is internally done and a national examination set by West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO). This examination is known as the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE). This implies that the continuous assessment must be comprehensive, systematic, cumulative or additive and guidance-oriented. It also implies that the higher school certificate (i.e. sixth form) is to be abolished and that universities would have to re-structure their courses from the 3-year to the 4-year degree course pattern to suit the 6-year secondary school system. This is in line with Nigeria's quest to develop technologically or in preparing her youths to develop self-employment skills. Such self-employment skills will be a tool to those who are to pursue an out-of-school education for reasons of ill-health, financial difficulties, intellectual short-coming, early family responsibilities among others (Nzulumike, Onyeocha and Oli, 2013).

For senior secondary school education, the core school subjects are English Language; Mathematics; A major Nigerian Language; One of Biology, Chemistry, Physics or Health Science; One of Literature-In-English, History, Geography or Religious Studies; A Vocational subject. These form the Group A. For Group B which is vocational electives, we have a list of 18 subjects. For Group C which is non-vocational electives, we have a list of 16 subjects (FRN, 2004). This means that every S.S. student is expected to take all the six core subjects in Group A and a minimum of one and a maximum of two from the list of elective subjects in Group B and C to give a minimum of seven and maximum of nine subjects (FRN, 2004). These wide arrays of subjects adumbrate the flexible and liberal stance entrenched in secondary education system. This is true because the blend of vocational and purely academic subjects makes for an adequate provision for those who are likely to continue their tertiary education and those that will likely drop out of the regular school education. For the latter group, it means that they must have developed employable skills through the combination of six core subjects and the list of elective subjects from which three may be selected as appropriate for studying at S.S. I and S.S. II. Certainly, this will enable them live effectively even without public employment. From the foregoing, it is clear that at the end of senior secondary school education, students should be able to:

- i. Demonstrate reasonable vocational skills in their field of interest into which they have been placed.
- ii. Exhibit career exploration skills, particularly for those likely to go into out-of-school education and work.
- iii. Demonstrate competences in their chosen fields for academic pursuit.
- iv. Show adequate readiness for a further educational or vocational placement (FRN, 2004).

Influence of Poverty on Our Educational System

Education is one of the most important factors that distinguish man from other animals. This means that the importance of education to man cannot be neglected as it is a human right and a key index of development. Education brings about empowerment, improves productivity, health and reduces negative features concomitant with life. In other words, the goals of wealth creation, employment generation, value reorientation, and poverty alleviation can be effectively pursued, attained, and sustained only through an efficient, relevant and functional education system (Nzulumike; Enemu; Achugbu, 2008). For Ali-Akpajiak and Pyke (2003), the level of education of a country's population is used as an indicator of its socio-economic development. Fasokun (2008) argued that no country has succeeded in eradicating poverty if it has not educated its people. This means that education is not only important in reducing poverty but is also a key to wealth creation and development. Thus, quality basic education, as well as secondary and higher education, vocational training and skill acquisition throughout life are indispensable tools to eradicate the vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion. It is the foremost agent of empowerment, the passport to liberation, political and financial empowerment. It brings about a positive change in our lifestyles and has the benefit of increasing earnings, improving health and increasing productivity. Variables such as hygiene, productive health and behaviour among others are also affected by education. Hence, the role of education in poverty alleviation is particularly one of achieving universal primary education and adult literacy. Achieving universal primary education and adult literacy must include improving children's developmental readiness for school, especially for excluded children and among disadvantaged groups via community sponsored childhood education and health initiatives (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). This is true because without the chance to learn, children will grow up in poverty with no hope, no ambition and no future (Hope, 2006).

In contradiction to the role of education in poverty alleviation, one can say that poverty affects education seriously. It does that by reducing the access of people to educational opportunities. In Nigeria, many girls for example, are not in school because of the state of poverty of their family. They are particularly at risk more than boys because of the belief that they tend to inherit the poverty of their mothers. They are prone to abuse of all forms and very often, are confined to households in which they tend to be virtually slaves (Jellema and Unterhalter, 2005). Still stressing on the influence of poverty on education, there are several reasons as to why people do not go to school; those that are usually excluded; and the impact of the introduction of user fees. The reasons as to why children of school age do not go to school include costs of schooling, opportunity cost, illness and hunger, limited economic costs of education and low quality of schooling (Action Aid 2003). Illustrative in this regard is the fact that primary and junior secondary education in most part of Nigeria is free in theory but

not in practice. Federal and state governments are unsuitably resourced to implement the citizens' constitutional right to education and this has resulted in schools charging levies for building maintenance, parent-teacher association and examinations among others. Relatively, few parents can afford the fees to enroll their children in public schools and support them to attend regularly. This implies that school enrolment rates do not provide an indication of actual school attendance. Children may well enroll in their local school, yet, may not be able to afford daily classes. Educational statistics of 1996 has shown in this regard that out of the 21 million children of school age, only 14.1 million children were enrolled in schools. The completion rate was 64% while transition to junior secondary school was only 43.5% (Alabi, 2005). Attending a well organized private school is out of the picture because it is meant for the privileged few. Hence, inability to afford school fees is a major reason why children leave school. Other reasons why children are taken out of school include supplementing the household income and lack of employment prospects. With increasing unemployment, schooling is seen as a waste of time and resources while employment is seen as a medium to acquire wealth, honour and respect. On the other hand, the categories of children excluded from the formal schooling system include children from the poorest families, the landless, working children, children of minority groups, children of migrant or pastoralist families, orphans, those affected by HIV/AIDS and those with physical or mental disabilities. Literature has also shown that whenever the user-pays-fees are introduced in the provision of social services, the utilization by the rich increases while that of the poor decreases (Action Aid, 2003).

The decline in literacy level in the country is unimaginable. This is attributable to poverty. The overall literacy rate declined to 64.1% from 71.9% in 1991. The most affected are males and females whose ages fall between 15-24 years. For the males, the rate declined from 81.35% in 1991 to 69.8% in 1999, while for the females, it is from 62.49% to 59.3% during the same period (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005). Interestingly, the age range falls within the bracket of those in school, mainly in post-primary or tertiary institutions. Those receiving training as an apprentice still fall within this age bracket. The implication is that this group constitutes the worst hit category by poverty with regards to education. At the primary school level, it is estimated that 7.3 million school age children are out of primary school and majority of them are girls (Igbuzor, 2006). The reasons for this are not far-fetched. One is poverty while others are religious and cultural practices. Again, the educational level of household head can act as a contributing factor to poverty. Recognizing that illiteracy is high in the country, and that school enrolment is very low, while school dropout is increasing, government of the country committed itself to achieving education for all by the year 2000; increase adult literacy to 70 per cent by 2003; bring total eradication of illiteracy by 2010 and 100 per cent school enrolment by the same target year (Ali-Akpajiak and Pyke, 2003). Paradoxically, the years in question have come and gone. Yet, government has not done

sufficiently enough in this regard. Interestingly, government seeks to achieve the foregoing through creating an enabling environment for training and learning comparable to those in the most progressively industrialising countries and by encouraging private-sector participation, curricular improvements, and judicial enforcement. Unfortunately, despite attempts to reduce Nigeria's appalling illiteracy statistics, her education system has continued to be hampered by problems such as lack of essential and adequate manpower, incessant strikes by academic and non-academic staff over the dysfunctionality and collapsing status of education, inability of supervising agencies to set or enforce standards, poor and uninviting environments, overcrowding, poor provision of materials and resources, poor curricular, and an absence of infrastructural facilities.

The foregoing situation made government of the country to establish in 1999, the Universal Basic Education Scheme which made it compulsory for every child to be educated free of charge from primary school up to junior secondary level, in order to meet the nation's need for development. Yet, statistics have shown that the overall literacy rate in Nigeria is not too encouraging (National Planning Commission, 2004) despite the compulsory education scheme. Furthermore, geographical disparities indicate that illiteracy is higher in rural areas of the country where 67 per cent of adults in urban areas are literate compared with 42 per cent who live in rural areas (Ali-Akpajiak and Pyke, 2003).

The above matrices are pointers to the fact that the three tiers of government are not doing much to arrest the effect of poverty on education in the country. Translating this into concrete terms is to take a look at our school's building and facilities which are dilapidating and unfriendly to the learners. Statistics have shown in this regard that there are about 2,015 primary schools in Nigeria with no building of any type (Dike, 2002). This makes the environment of teaching and learning uncondusive. Again, the curriculum does not reflect the necessary changes that will put the pupils on a par with the outside world. This is true when we consider the fact that more than 95% of our public primary and secondary school students do not have an idea of computer education (Dike, 2002). Their teachers are not excluded from this plight. Hence, in this 21st century, where Information and Communication Technology is the in-thing, most classroom activities are still being dominated by the chalkboard and textbooks. The implication is that the influence of poverty in the education sub-sector is still gripping on the very poor who cannot afford education. This is inspite of the fact that education is the foundation of all human development and the best tool to fight poverty (National Poverty Eradication Programme, 2006). The lackadaisical approach of government towards arresting the effect of poverty on education in the country is also evidenced in the federal government's expenditure on education between 1997 and 2000 which was below 10% of overall expenditure as against UNESCO

recommendation of 26% of national budgets (Igbuzor, 2006). This trend of not allocating 26% of national budget to education has not changed significantly. Worse still, when we compare Nigeria's allocation with that of less affluent countries in Africa, one observes that such countries have done better than Nigeria. Countries such as Uganda and Tanzania spent 2.8% and 3.4% respectively of their Gross National Product (GNP) on education in the year 2000 while Nigeria committed 0.7% of her GNP to the same sector in the same year. Kenya and South Africa topped the list by spending 6.5% and 7.9% respectively of their GNP's on education in the same year (Dike, 2002). The implication of this is that the Nigerian government is paying lip service to education and consequently towards eradicating poverty through education. This negative scenario hampers economic development which according to Todaro and Smith (2003); and Jhingan (2005) is measured in four ways viz gross national product, gross national product per capita; economic welfare and the social indicators.

Conclusion

Education is one of the social indicators. It leads to economic development. This claim is exemplified in the secondary school curriculum of the country. Unfortunately, this sector of education is dysfunctional because of poverty and lack of political will power by government. This is evidenced in the lackadaisical approach of the federal government's expenditure on education which is hugely below the 26% of national budgets recommended by UNESCO. To change this ugly trend, what Nigerian government or any other government in Africa must do is to significantly allocate her gross national product on education for effective economic development.

Recommendation

The importance of education in nation building and in the reduction of poverty cannot be quantified. It is recommended that government of the country should make primary and junior secondary education practically functional, free and compulsory as is provided in the Universal Basic Education Scheme of 1999. Levies by whatever form should be discouraged at these levels while defaulters should be seriously punished. There should be no lip service to this.

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