

THE LIBERAL AND ELITIST PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC POLICIES IN NIGERIA: A FOCUS ON THE NATIONAL POLICY ON WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN THE NIGERIAN FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

This paper through the liberal perception of public policy unfolds the need for greater women participation in the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria through the National Policy on Women. The paper also vividly stresses the divergence between policy statements and policy outcomes; which often tend to be elitist by looking at the National Policy on Education vis-a-vis the present democratic administration in Nigeria from the elite perception.

Introduction

A policy can be defined as a course of action and a programme of actions which is chosen from among several alternatives by certain actors in response to certain problems (Ikelegbe, 1996:3). However, it is important to differentiate a decision from a policy, on the basis of scope or magnitude. That is, a policy usually establishes a framework according to which particular decisions are made. Public policy therefore could be viewed as "programme of action that government has set and the framework or guide it has designed to direct actions and practices in certain problem areas". (Obiajulu and Obi, 2004 : 94).

It is from the above perspective that governments of the World always set clear-cut policies geared towards solving societal problems. It must however be stated that, Nigeria is not an exception, especially, with policies enacted by successive governments with the purpose of enhancing socio-economic and political development after the attainment of political independence in 1960. Such recently enacted policies include, the National Policy on Women, approved by the present administration after four attempts by former Heads of Nigeria's government. There is also the fiscal policy, and the *National Policy on Education* to mention a few. However, the *National Policies on Women and Education* respectively, constitutes the focus of this paper with the view of understanding policy orientation and outcome of public policy in the Nigerian state.

Theoretical Perceptions of Public Policy

For the purpose of this paper, our major focus is on two perceptions of public policy - the Elitist and the Liberal perceptions.

The Elitist Perception

The elitist perception of public policy sees public policies as a function of elitist input, and as policies whose outcome is geared towards enhancing the interests of the elites in the society. According to Olaniyi (1977:90). "every society is ruled by a minority that possesses the qualities necessary for its accessing of full social and political power". It therefore, follows that inputs that get transformed into outputs by the political system are mainly inputs that emanates from the elite class. Although Omodia (2004:52-53), stated that elites could be differentiated based on the functions they perform which could snowball into elitist contradiction. However, it is important to state that the elites are most united in principle and effectively organized for reaping the gains of public policies at the expense of the unorganized masses.

From the above perspective therefore, it follows that governmental outputs in form of policy outcomes are intentionally designed to favour the elites. This often leads to a situation where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It must also be stated that in cases where policies are people-oriented, this is mainly due to the fact that the interests of the elites are well accommodated.

The Liberal Perception

The liberal perception of public policy is based on the orientation that governmental policies are non discriminatory, or sectionalized to favour specific or particular interests. The purpose of liberal public policy is to enable for equity and egalitarianism, in terms of individual accessibility to the outcome of public policy (Eccleshall, 1994:30). That is, the targets of liberal policies are quite embracing and non-discriminatory against any person or group of persons on the basis of wealth, age, sex, religion, etc. As a matter of fact, the input mechanism for the emergence of public policy is quite open for interest articulation by the people of the State. However, it must be stated that this seems to be the orientation of most public policies in Nigeria. E.g. Housing, Education and Health. But a vivid evaluation of the policies will indicate a sharp divergence between policy target and outcome.

The Liberal Perception and the National Policy on Women

According to the document on the National Policy on Women (2003:8-9), the need for the policy is based on the following:

- i. Women make up to 49.6% of the nations total population. They are responsible for the reproduction of the labour force and for producing over 70% of the nations food supply,
- ii. About 13.3% of Women were employed in the formal sector until the 1980's. This proportion declined rapidly in the process of economic reconstruction, as a result of revitalization of public and private sector workers and cuts in production capacity in industry,
- iii. Majority of the females are in the lower cadre occupations. Those in professional and marginal occupations constitute only 18% of that grade of employment,
- iv. Most Nigerian Women are informal sector workers who predominate in micro-enterprise, with little or no access to credit, technology and other supports required to build up capital,
- v. The need to restructure the economy and our political and social institutions to ensure social equity and economic growth.

The policy thrusts of the *National Policy on Women* are broadly classified into:

- (a) Resource allocation.
- (b) Equity, social order and social well being.
- (c) Economic Growth and Efficiency.
- (d) Patriarchal ideology and legal framework.
- (e) Culture.

These can be summarized into the following:

- i. In the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, Nigeria affirms its support for the alleviation of the numerous constraints to Women's full integration into its development process;
- ii. programmes should be designed to remove social malaise associated with gender inequality, which is destroying social cohesiveness and eroding social order at national, community and family levels. In fact, society will be re-oriented to accept equity, complementarily of roles and respect for family values;
- iii. full participation of women in the country's economic programmes can become more meaningful when they have the resources to back up their aspirations and newly acquired self-consciousness/image. Government should ensure the removal of all constraints posed by customary laws and practices to women's rights to land, either by acquisition or inheritance;
- iv. government should ensure that women are provided with the opportunity to compete effectively and fairly in the economic system;
- v. structures that prop-up patriarchy (inheritance through the male, high value of male children, strict adherence to division of labour along gender lines) should be discouraged through education, enlightenment and national awareness;
- vi. this means that existing legislation institutionalizing gender equality should be enforced and, where necessary, appropriate one be enacted. Women should be incorporated into the legislature and the judiciary to ensure the protection of their rights.

The Liberal and Elitist Perceptions of Public Policies in Nigeria: A Focus on the national Policy on Women and Education in the Nigerian Fourth Republic

From the above stated needs and thrust of the *National Policy on Women*, one could vividly justify the policy based on liberal perception. The justification of this perception is based on the mechanisms to be utilized for empowering the women which, as stated above, is by creating conducive and equal opportunities for women to compete effectively and fairly in the economic system. The second factor or justification is based on what is termed to be the policy target. The policy target is geared towards egalitarianism and equity in terms of both women and men, having access to contribute positively to the socio-economic and political development of the Nigerian State through Constitutional amendments and attitudinal change against factors that have been discriminating against women. In this regard, the purpose of the policy is therefore to create openness and flexibility in the input and output functions of the political system.

As a result, one could vividly distinguish the liberal perception from the social democratic perception, in that even when the policy stresses the indispensable role of the government/state in bunging about equality, such equality is not defined vertically or horizontally. Rather, equality in the context of the *National Policy on Women* is defined from the understanding of fairness in contributing to national development. However, it is important to emphasize that the system is still very far from being fair in terms of socio-economic and political role of women in national development.

The Elitist Perception and the National Policy on Education

The basic thrusts of the *National Policy on Education* can be identified as:

- i. The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- ii. The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society;
- iii. The training of the mind in the understanding of the World around, and;
- iv. The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competences both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society (*National Policy on Education*, 1988:8).

To be able to achieve the above stated objectives, and in order for education to serve as a tool for the socio-economic, political, as well as the technological development of the Nigerian State, the Nigerian educational system is operationally patterned into a 6-3-3-4 system. The first six years is for primary education, the other six is classified into three years of junior secondary school and three years of senior secondary school. The four years on the other hand, is for a Post Secondary School Education which should be focused on the developmental needs of the Nigerian society through teaching, research and the dissemination of existing and new information.

As regards primary education, it is expected to be the bedrock of Nigeria's educational system. As a result, it is to function as free and compulsory education for the Nigerian child who is of school age. The objectives could however be identified as:

- (a) the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively;
- (b) the laying of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- (c) citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contributing to the life of the society;
- (d) character and moral training and the development of sound attitudes;
- (e) developing in the child the ability to adapt to this changing environment;
- (f) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capacity; (v.) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality. (*National Policy on Education*, 1998:13).

The secondary education on the other hand as a subsystem of achieving the overall objectives of the *National Policy on Education* is expected to:

- (a) provide an increasing number of primary pupils with the opportunity for education of a higher quality, irrespective of sex, or social, religious and ethnic background;
- (b) offer diversified curriculum to cater for the differences in talents, opportunities and future roles;

Omodia, S. M

- (c) provide trained manpower in ' the applied sciences, technology and commerce at sub-professional grades;
- (d) develop and promote Nigerian language, art and culture in the context of the World cultural heritage;
- (e) inspire its students with a desire for self improvement and achievement of excellence;
- (f) foster National unity with an emphasis on the common ties that unite us in our diversity;
- (g) 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;
- (h) provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development. (*National Policy on Education*, 1998:17). To achieve the above objectives, the junior secondary school with the introduction of the *Universal Basic Education* (UBE) scheme is to be free and compulsory and should focus on both pre-vocational and academic schooling. The senior secondary school is to prepare students for Post-secondary School education.

The Post Secondary Education on the other Hand is Aimed at

- (a) the acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
 - (b) the development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environment;
 - (c) the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community;
 - (d) the acquisition of an objective view of the local and external environment.
- (*National Policy on Education*, 1981:22).

As stated earlier, while the *National Policy on Education* could be said to be liberal in orientation in the sense that the focus was to provide educational opportunities to Nigerians irrespective of religion, social class, ethnic affiliation etc, and in the sense that the instrument encompasses both government and private involvement in the running of Schools. It is important to emphasize that this policy target though non-discriminatory, has however snow-balled into elitist policy in outcome considering the exorbitant fees charged by privately owned educational institutions, which has created a status symbol, differentiating children of the rich from children of the poor. The implication is that because of the poor state of public educational institutions, it is only children of the elites that can afford services of qualitative education provided by privately owned institutions. In addition, the poor state of Nigeria's economy no doubt has hampered the vision of the policy under the present democratic dispensation of providing free and compulsory education in the primary and junior secondary school level. The fact is that the poor state of the economy has help in breeding street boys and girls in the name of hawking to assist parents meet the economic needs of their families. Those that are matured for secondary and post-secondary schools are however, incapacitated because of limited space in public owned institutions coupled with the exorbitant fees charged by privately owned higher institutions. According to Baikie (2002:61), the scenario is quite daunting in that:

First there are about 7 million school-age children out of school; this is followed by another 5 million who are unable to complete primary school and, finally another 5 million who could not go into the junior secondary school. This brings the total out of schoolchildren to well over 17 million.

The above analysis indicates that children of the elites are most guaranteed of educational opportunities than children of the poor. The argument can further be buttressed with the Federal Government initiated UBE scheme. For instance, the operation of the scheme shows noticeable structural difference between projects cited in the rural areas with the one's cited in the urban areas. As a matter of fact, observational evidences has shown that there arc more concentration of projects at

The urban centers when compared to the rural ones. This no doubt is an indication of elitist policy outcome in policy implementation as differentiated from liberal policy target in formulation.

Conclusion

While the focus of this paper is not to look at the ill-defined focus of the National Policy on Education in Nigeria, especially as regards the Post-secondary education which was fixed for four years with special attention on University education at the expense of other tertiary institutions such as the Colleges of Education and the Polytechnics. As stated earlier, the focus of this paper is to basically unfold the divergence between policy statements and policy outcomes which in the Nigerian context turn-out to be mostly elitist as discussed in the case of the *National Policy on Education*. It must also be stated that although the *National Policy on Women* could be said to be more liberal in orientation than the *National Policy on Education*, there is no doubt that the outcome of the policy would be more favourable to the elitist women than creating equal opportunities for women irrespective of social status or class.

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