

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION: PANACEA FOR ILLITERACY AND POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Acute poverty and low literacy level in Nigeria are major impediments to development as vast majority of the people in the country do not have access to literacy, to acquire necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them to tackle their socio-economic problems. This study aimed at reviewing the relationship between illiteracy, poverty and Universal Basic Education in Nigeria. Basic achievement of Universal Basic Education and the associated problems were identified. The paper also analyzed the strategies for eradicating illiteracy and poverty in Nigeria through basic education, and was of the opinion that the government should prioritize basic education as the foundation on which illiteracy and poverty can be eliminated.

Keywords: *poverty, low literacy, Universal Basic Education, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

The low literacy level in Nigeria can be said to be responsible for the many problems that daily confront us in the country today. This is because the inability of the vast majority of the people in the country to have access to literacy and acquire necessary skills that will help them to tackle their socio-economic problems and have access to information, knowledge and competencies that are useful for development are lagging. This is why poverty and other social vices are prevalent in the Nigerian society of today (Kolawole and Synder, 2008). Edukugho (2006) reveals that about 82% of Nigerian adults are illiterate while about 5 million children of school-age do not have access to primary education.

According to Kolawole and Arikpo (2001), the problems of literacy and reading ranged from low access to education, low quality and inadequate number of teachers, low morale of teachers, absence of basic infrastructure, inappropriate methods of teaching and lack of literacy teachers. As a result of these, most students of primary education in the country are poorly prepared to meet the challenges of secondary education for those who go there and societal demands for those who would not go beyond the level. This problem has to be solved if the much-touted universal basic education programme is to be meaningful. As Akinwumi (2008) emphasizes that teaching children how to read and write can boost economic growth, arrest the spread of AIDS, and break the cycle of poverty.

It is an axiom that the provision of education and training in any nation is a tool for escaping from poverty to prosperity. This statement implies that the greater the access to education and training, the less the poverty experienced in a nation. In Nigeria, a lot of resources have been committed to the education of her citizens but little has been achieved. This, according to the World Bank (2001), is as a result of corruption, uneven distribution of resources, poor implementation of programmes, and planning of school curriculum that does not reflect the development of the child for self-reliance. Although there have been some indications of an increasing number of education and training institutions, and substantial improvement also recorded in students' enrolment and graduate turnout from these institutions, yet poverty still persists. According to Smith and Todaro (2002), about 38% of Nigerians are illiterate and that stands as one of the extreme factors of poverty and hunger in Nigeria.

Literacy in the words of Asiedu and Oyedeji (1985), as cited in Agbionu (2007), is the acquisition of the skills of reading, writing and computing. However, to be literate nowadays is not just to have mastered the skills of reading and writing, and computing with numbers, but more than that, it is to be able to use those skills effectively for communication in all aspects of one's life in social, cultural, economic and political. In short, literacy is perceived as lifelong learning, it is for the literacy skills to be acquired permanently and functionally. Okemakinde S., Okemakinde T. and Gbenro (2007) believe that lifelong learning is not a new idea to the Africans (Nigeria inclusive) before its introduction by the EU and OECD. This is because African traditions encourage continued learning. Sometimes, it was thought that the equivalent of five and six years of primary schooling was sufficient; but worldwide experience with the fast relapse of neo-literates into illiteracy has pushed up the level required for permanence and functionality to the level of Junior School Certificate, or the equivalent of nine years of school education.

Thus, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is designed not just for children in or out of school, but also for youths and adults, as well as for the usually neglected or marginalized groups and migrant youths and adults. From this universal standard of literacy, we can see that Nigeria still faces a massive task of making her illiterates permanently and functionally literate; in addition to the raising of those with only basic reading and writing skills to the level of nine years school education required. The problem is even compounded by the fact that before we gear up to this task, we are already overtaken by new ideas and conceptions. For example, the developed world is already going computer-literate, even before we have mastered the basic alphabetic literacy. The only consolation here is that alphabetic literacy is so vital and indispensable to whatever new definition of literacy that may emerge. In this 21st century, the need for literacy will even be so ubiquitous that the very survival will be dependent on it. Hence, the upgrading of literacy into a fundamental human right that each citizen should enjoy, as a matter of right, by the very fact of being a free citizen of a country called Nigeria. This is to say that literacy is now a requirement to enable one realize and actualize one's potential and achieve one's full humanity. Whoever is

not so equipped is the illiterate. The concept of poverty is a slippery one, in the sense that the boundary of its meanings shifts with time and culture. However, there are certain universal indices that enable us to describe a nation, people or country as poor or rich. For example, it was recently revealed that Nigeria is one of the ten most populous countries in the world that contribute so insignificantly (0.22%) to global Gross Domestic Production (GDP). It was also revealed that it ranks 187th in purchasing power parity (PPP) and that over fifty-eight percent (58%) of Nigerians fall below the poverty line or live in abject poverty. That is, more than half of the Nigerian population cannot afford three square or round meals a day, do not have access to quality health care, shelter, education and transportation, and suffer all the deprivation and indignities that poverty brings on the poor (UNESCO, 2006).

Poverty is a serious issue in Nigeria, because many people are struggling daily for survival without assistance from the State. Worse still, the nation does not have any guideline to measure the construct, which are available in some countries. However, no precise definition is really needed in Nigeria to understand what poverty is, as poverty is indelible on those afflicted by it. The poor are those who cannot afford decent food, medical care, recreation, decent shelter and cloth; meet family and community obligations, and other necessities of life. With this, it is not surprising that poverty is regarded as a form of oppression (UNDP, 2004).

Poverty is a problem with faces. One face may show the material conditions, which involve the absence or lack of goods and services for the people, which involve certain situations where a person or a group of persons have low income with limited resources. The other face of poverty, which is social, affects the poor through exclusion, lack of entitlement, and being too dependent on others in order to live. It is usually a complex multi-dimensional problem, which has to do with lack of control over resources, including land, skills, knowledge, capital and social connections. It deprives the individuals of essential productive assets and opportunities to which every human being should be entitled to. This situation is likely to neglect the affected people. In addition, such people are likely to have limited access to institutions, markets, employment and public services.

CAUSES AND THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA

The causes of poverty are myriad and complex; and they vary according to their settings. In most cases, the poverty of the Africans is caused by those elected to protect them. This is the case with Nigeria where the political leaders with access to the national treasury convert the public funds to their private use. Reports also show that HIV/AIDS contribute to the worsening poverty situation at household level in many countries in Africa. For instance, the United Nations ranked Nigeria as the forth-worst affected country in 1999 based on the number of HIV infections. With life expectancy of 55 years, illiteracy rate of 50%, and under-five mortality of 143 per 1,000 live births, HIV/AIDS affects over 2.7 million people in Nigeria (UNESCO, 2006).

One cannot over-emphasize the effects of bad social policy, cultural values

and attitudes as obstacles to or facilitators of progress of nations. Thus, cultural values which are fundamental obstacles to progress help to explain the intractability of the problems of poverty and injustice in parts of the Third World. For instance, the culture of polygamy in Nigeria, Africa and some other Third World Nations is one of the major factors for poverty, corruption, illiteracy and even diseases in this part of the world. Poverty destroys aspirations, hope, and happiness. It affects tolerance of others, support of civil liberties and openness towards foreigners. It affects positive relationships with subordinates, self-esteem and sense of personal competence. It also affects ones disposition to participate in community affairs, interpersonal trust and self-satisfaction

Smith, Brooks-Gunn and Klebanov (1997) have found that children living in families with incomes less than half the poverty threshold (deep poverty) scored nine to ten points lower on cognitive ability than children in near-poor families at age three to four. Persistently, poor children, who spend all of their childhood years in poverty, experience more negative cognitive and educational outcomes than their peers who encountered only short-term or transient poverty. Children who lived in persistent poverty scored six to nine points lower on measures of cognitive ability and school readiness than children who were never in poverty. It should be noted that deprivation of elementary capabilities can be reflected on premature mortality, significant undernourishment (especially on children), persistent morbidity and illiteracy, among other problems. Life expectancy and literacy are correlated with the productivity and prosperity of a nation. As it relates to Nigeria and other poverty-ridden African and Asian societies, high level poverty could lead to brain drain (the emigration of many of the most highly educated workers to rich countries, where they can enjoy a higher standard of living). The poverty of a nation can also lead to human trafficking, prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS, child labour and abuse of human and civil rights. In addition, poverty leads to corruption, disruption of family relations and social life, causes rising crime rate, among other vices.

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Basic education refers to early childhood and pre-primary education, primary education, the first three years of secondary education and basic functional literacy for out-of-school children, youth and adults. It is an organized multi-sectional, community-based education, which consists of the acquisition of skills of reasoning, writing and numerals, as well as functional knowledge and generative skills determined by the environment. The basic education comprises both the range of formal schooling as well as a wide variety of non-formal and formal public and private educational activities offered to meet the learning needs of groups of people of all ages in Nigeria. Universal Basic Education means that access to education is open to all, irrespective of gender, social, physical or economic condition. Access is not all, remaining in school for successful completion of quality basic education cycle is the ultimate goal (Obanya, 2009). Obanya (2000) states that basic education as a universal phenomenon

has expression in the Jomtien Declaration and framework of action on Education for All (EFA). Universal Basic Education in Nigeria according to him would require the following:

- a A re-conceptualization of UBE or a return to its original concept, which tallies with the requirements of both Jomtien and Dakar Declarations and which emphasizes the expanded vision of basic education.
- b A streamlining of the management and policy structure of UBE, to make for greater harmonization at the three tiers of government.
- c A cleaning up of the politics of UBE, to allow true federalism to take root in its planning and delivery.
- d Strategic planning that builds UBE into a broader sector-wide education sector plan, which in itself draws inspiration from the nations overall development agenda.
- e Greater emphasis on beyond physical access issues to focus more on equity, relevance, quality and efficiency challenges.
- f Far-reaching re-tooling and possible re-direction of UBE implementing agencies at all levels.
- g Sustainable funding.
- h The political will to move from UBE as "Universal Basic Education" to UBE as 'Universalizing basic education'.
- i Social will- readiness of the populace to be carried along in the UBE process- as a result of governments' readiness to carry the people along.

PROBLEMS IN UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

There are some major impediments to Universal Basic Education in Nigeria, which according to Obanya (2009) are:

A general misconception of the requirements of UBE: There seems to be a general lack of awareness (both in government and public circles) of the expanded vision of education envisioned by both Jomtien and Dakar Declarations, and enunciated in the original vision of Nigeria's UBE as simply formal schooling, six years of primary and three years of junior secondary seems to prevail, and this perception has affected the implementation of the programme. Comprehensive UBE cannot be promoted in a context dominated by a narrow conception of the programme.

Structural defects in implementation mechanism: The trend to create a parastatal for every manifested development challenge has caught up strongly with the UBE programme in Nigeria, and this has been further worsened by the non-recognition of UBE as synonymous with EFA.

The true federalism challenge: The constitutional requirements for the governance of education in Nigeria confer the control of primary education to local governments. With UBE coming largely as a federally led intervention, there has been a good deal of 'do-not-dictate-to-us' response from state governments. The challenge is further compounded at the state level, where state governments' stranglehold on local

governments is total. It is a problem of interpreting constitutional requirements correctly and of striving to reach consensus on federal interventions, preferably before such interventions become operational.

An over-emphasis on money and funding: It would be foolhardy to expect that a huge national enterprise like UBE would also not have huge financial implications. It is therefore to be expected that UBE should be correctly cost, resource, and funded. Reports emphasizing funds voted and funds released have not spelt out what is being achieved and how. It would be instructive to compute the money reported to have been released for UBE over the years and to correlate this with specific concrete achievements of the programme.

Haphazardization: This is a tendency to drum down initiatives in an un-coordinated manner. A good example was the home-bred school feeding programme, drummed down by the federal government, tried out in a number of states, with the unfulfilled expectation that states would then take over. The same drumming down characterized attempts to develop strategic education plans an initial effort by the federal ministry of education that was expected to be copied down the education line. Such drumming down efforts also served to compound the true federalism challenge.

Absence of structured or systematic reporting: Reports on UBE abound in the Nigerian setting, but what is needed and is seriously lacking, is a series of achievement to purpose reporting.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF UBE IN NIGERIA

UBE in Nigeria has been both in the air and on the ground since its formal launch in September 2000 and the initiative has recorded the following notable achievement:

- i There is an enabling legislation in place, giving a legal backing to the initiative.
- ii Management structures for ensuring that UBE really happens are also in place, right to the local government level.
- iii Nigeria has, as a direct impact of UBE, recorded modest increase in primary and secondary school enrolment between 2000 and 2005.
- iv Related to the pursuit of UBE is a noticeable improvement in the country's education data situation, particularly with the intensification and refining of annual school censuses and the move towards the emergence of an EMIS [Education Management Information System].
- v Another related achievement is the increased awareness of the need for the development of education sector strategic plans both at federal and state levels.

EDUCATION AS PANACEA TO POVERTY

It is important to note that no country has succeeded in eradicating poverty if it has not educated its people. Not only is education important in reducing poverty, it is also a key to wealth creation. In any situation of an extreme poverty, poor children tend to have numerous disadvantages more than their better-off counterparts. They

are usually less healthy, have less developed language skill (a factor that has negative influence on school achievement), and are generally less well equipped socially, emotionally and physical to undertake a school programme. If no one takes into account their disadvantaged position, it is very likely that they will be unable to benefit fully from the school system (UNESCO, 2003). Nigeria is plagued with many problems which developing countries battle with, among which include, budget deficit, low standard of living, and over dependence on foreign aids. Looking at it, one can say that these problems are caused by poverty or they cause poverty. It is an axiom that the provision of education and training in a nation is a tool for escaping from poverty to prosperity. This suggests that the greater the access to qualitative education and training, the lesser the poverty experienced in that nation (Fasokun, 2008).

Ojebiyi (2007) has submitted that education impacts specific knowledge and develops general reasoning skills. It induces changes in beliefs and values and in attitude toward work and society. Education makes man more receptive to new ideas, competitiveness and willingness to accept discipline. It reduces inflation by the provision of more skilled workers to alleviate shortages. Education benefits to society include greater earning power, enrichment of quality of life, maintenance of free market economy, promotion of equal opportunity, enhancing personal fulfillment etc. A cursory look at the numerous benefits derived from education shows that poverty can be eliminated if education is made a priority.

Adedeji and Bamidele (2003) asserted that education has many characteristics of a public good, which make it to generate considerable externalities. Though the benefits that accrue to the individual are private, but some other benefits also accrue to the whole country in terms of the addition to human capital stock. Education remains the only instrument through which the society can be transformed from abject poverty to affluence.

STRATEGIES FOR ERADICATING POVERTY THROUGH BASIC EDUCATION

Education remains the only instrument through which the society can be transformed. Therefore, for Nigeria to get rid of poverty through education, the following preconditions have to be taken into consideration:

Access to Education: Illiteracy is one of the contributory factors to incidence of poverty. The extent which a country opens the opportunity of education to the citizens determines the level of development. Education is a fundamental right for all, including girls and women. But regardless of the significant process of making the goal of education for all a reality, most girls and women are still less educated and more likely to be illiterate than men, implying that education is still in crisis in many countries in the developing world including Nigeria (Akinwande, 2004). Adedeji and Bamidele (2003) opined that if vast majority of the population have access to education, there will be a quicker economic growth because the human capital resource will be larger.

Commitment of Required Resources to Education: Over the last decades, the funds

available for education have reduced considerably. These resources are human and materials resources. Adedeji, Okemakinde, and Ssempebwa (2008) affirmed that inadequate finance is one of the problems confronting education sector owing to a drastic reduction in both the actual and proportion of government fund allocated to the education sector, despite the UNESCO's recommendations of allocation of 26% of a nation's national income to the sector. Poverty can be alleviated through qualitative education and to provide citizens with worthwhile education, funds, human and materials resources have to be adequately catered for.

Development of Sound National Policy on Education: As part of measures to sustain quality in educational system, Jaiyeoba and Atanda (2008) have mentioned the development of sound national policy on education among others. They stress that, Nigeria is sound of white elephant policies, which enjoy little or no support when it comes to the implementation stage.

Provision of Entrepreneurial and Value Added Oriented Education: The kind of education that can bring poverty eradication will be education that teaches the recipients to be self reliant, job creators and innovative. Akinboye (2005) asserts that the existing curriculum does not make our students to be creative. The curriculum is more of acquisitions of theory on skills and knowledge while they are defiant of application of those skills. He therefore called for value-added education which can be linked to inject values of creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, character needed skills, competence, knowledge and attitude.

Encouraging Public-Private Partnership in Education Provision: It is believed that the poor are denied of essential service because of their powerlessness. While encouraging public-private partnership, government should play the expected role of ensuring qualitative education. They may impose little tax or give tax-free holiday to private institutions. There is need for meritocracy when registering the private institutions, and emphasis should be placed on minimum qualification for both teaching and non-teaching staff.

UBE, LITERACY AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

It is a basic assumption that education can alleviate poverty, only when the productive sectors of the economy function at the normal momentum, thereby enhancing job elasticity in both the formal and informal sector of the labour market. The decay of education in Nigerian society is closely related to the overall social decay which the country has witnessed over the past decades. Cleaning up the education sector is in fact an integral part of overall societal cleansing. Quality education increases the productivity and potentials of individuals and by extension, the societies of which they are part. Enhancing access to education is an important strategy for confronting many challenges facing Nigeria today as a result of decline in the economic activities since the early 1980s. Education in Nigeria faces enormous problems in such a way that there are significant deficits in affordable access to the staggering educational system in place. Even with the efforts of government and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) to achieve universal coverage in basic education, the quality of instruction and learning is relatively low. Government spending is often insufficient and inefficiently allocated among the schools across the country (World Bank, 2000).

However, the target of universal basic education with regard to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is that before the year 2015, every Nigerian under the programme whatever the age, sex, location, and disability will be able to read, write, count and think, and the poor will have been educated out of their poverty. The decision to extend the programme beyond the primary school level to the junior secondary school was seen by many Nigerians as a well-intended programme. This is in line with international standards as primary education is no longer an adequate foundation in a fast changing high information technology world. Moreover, poverty still haunts many Nigerian homes, if about 70% of Nigerian population is poor and live below one dollar per day, how would they meet up with providing their children with basic educational needs where government has failed in its responsibilities? In South East Nigeria, over 3 million male children have left primary education for business, while over 2 million females in Northern Nigeria do not have, at least, primary education before going into marriage (World Bank, 2004).

It will be justified from the aforementioned factors that education in Nigeria has suffered tremendously, ranging from poor finance, low enrolment rate, poor quality staff, and a host of other problems. Although the UBE programme intends to improve education infrastructure and expand institutional capacity to produce quality manpower before 2015, considering the high rate of corruption, poor funding of education, uneven distribution of educational resources, poverty, and their prevailing situations, it will be difficult to record progress toward meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target by 2015.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education has placed education and training in pivotal position in the development of the developing nations and as a solution to poverty and hunger. In the face of poverty, the hope of any country including Nigeria lies in education. However, education in Nigeria has been poorly funded. The deficiency has played a vital role with regard to the poor state of the Nigerian child. It is, however, generally believed that a quality education is the major hub to national development and transformation from poverty to prosperity. For this reason, the government of Nigeria should massively fund education and come up with good educational policies and training that will raise the citizenry above the poverty line. The following are therefore recommended:

- i The federal government should increase the budget allocation to education to about 25% of her annual budget just as it is obtaining in Ghana where the annual education budget is 22%. In Ghana, the huge investment in education has improved her education as well as the life standard of her citizens (World

- Bank, 2001).
- ii Good and life enhancing programmes should be put into place, such as education for self-reliance as was done in Tanzania to make her citizens more productive and self-dependents.
 - iii The rate of corruption in Nigeria should be given much attention to track down corrupt leaders and subordinates. Such an initiative will go a long way to help manage the resources set aside for the improvement of education and its programmes.
 - iv Vocational and technical institutions should be equipped and upgraded to a national standard to attract massive enrolment.
 - v Massive control measures on poverty and hunger should be put in place by the government to reduce the scourge.
 - vi Government should create enabling environment such as good roads, access to hospital, potable water, and access to electricity for her citizens to thrive.
 - vii For education to successfully do this, access has to be given to nearly all members in the country required resources have to be committed. Government have to ensure sound national policy in education. Education should be entrepreneurial and value added oriented and finally, public-private partnership in the provision of education is recommended.

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