

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES FACING NIGERIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

By

Alice Egbedeyi

Developed countries have discovered the *secret* to socioeconomic development and transformation: the investment in human capital through a well-structured education system. They not only place a premium on education, as evidenced by the robustness with which it is funded, but they have also taken steps to legislate education as a fundamental right of every child.

These societies have discovered that a commitment to quality education is critical to accelerating national development. They have realized that education is crucial in achieving sustainable development and providing people with better livelihood possibilities. On the other hand, some countries continue to face enormous challenges due to the severe underdevelopment of their education systems, with Nigeria being one of them.

Nigeria is a signatory to the most widely ratified international instrument, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)¹. In 2003, they also ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)². In addition, the country has pledged in its constitution to uphold and defend the rights of the child, especially the right to be educated³. Through the ratification of these international instruments and the historical development of national policies on education, it is evident that the Nigerian government understands the importance of education in bringing about social reformation.

After the British colonial era, the national educational policy inherited from Britain at independence underwent a lot of changes and improvements to meet the dynamic needs of the growing society⁴.

¹ United Nations Treaty Collections available at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en. Consulted on 15th December, 2019

² African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) webpage available at <https://www.acerwc.africa/about-the-charter/>. Consulted on 15th December 2019

³ The Nigerian Constitution Chapter II Section 18

⁴ Hauwa Imam. *Educational policy in Nigeria from the Colonial Era to the Post-Independence Period*. IJSE 2012

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, developed in 1976, underwent four revisions after encountering numerous difficulties in its implementation. It was criticized for having an irrelevant curriculum that did not meet the nation's developmental needs. This failure in the curriculum is evidenced by the high dropout and repetition rates.

The revised National Policy on Education was modeled after the American system of six years of elementary school, three years of junior secondary school, three years of senior secondary school, and four years of tertiary education (6-3-3-4). The policy provides free and compulsory education up until junior secondary school. Though the federal government promoted the UBE program as mandatory and a means to eliminate illiteracy, it did not implement it in all states. The outcomes have been minimal, and Nigeria's educational system continues to rank low in most international rankings. According to UNICEF statistics, Nigeria has the world's highest number of out-of-school children, with only 61 percent of primary school-aged children enrolled⁵. The future is even bleaker for children in northern Nigeria, where the gender gap is even more pronounced. More than half of the girls in the northeast and northwest are not inschool⁶. The Nigerian education system continues to suffer impediments due to some of the factors discussed below.

The inadequacy and ambiguity of policies in Nigeria's national documents are one of the challenges confronting the education system. Despite ratifying the CRC and ACRWC, Nigeria has yet to fully implement and domesticate the Child Rights Act across its thirty-six states⁷. Evidence indicates that countries that have constitutionally guaranteed and implemented free and compulsory primary and secondary education have seen a significant increase in child enrollment⁸. Furthermore, the National Policy on Education, developed by experts to serve as guidelines for educational goals, is primarily illustrative and not legally binding. Though the policy proposed compulsory and free primary education for children ages 6 to 12 through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, the government did not implement it. As a result, the policy has received varying degrees of acceptance across states⁹.

⁵ UNICEF Nigeria Fact available at <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ The Child's Rights Act available at <https://www.accesstojustice-ng.org/Child%20Right%20Act%202003.pdf>

⁸ International Journal of Educational Development, Vol. 39

⁹ Idem no 7

Due to failed and weak monitoring mechanisms, the UBE program could not achieve its universal education goals. In the scheme to make education universal, children from marginalized and underserved communities are 'left behind.' Many of these communities' primary school-aged children are frequently seen hawking or engaging in some form of labour during school hours, and there appears to be no law to prevent this from happening. The drop in attendance in those communities is increasing daily, and many of these children do not continue to senior secondary school because they cannot afford the fees.

Inadequate funding, caused by a lack of political commitment, is another impediment to educational development in Nigeria. According to UNESCO, a minimum of 20% of the national budget should be allocated to education in developing countries to eliminate inequalities in this sector and achieve the targeted global development goals. Nigeria, on the other hand, has consistently fallen short. The budget estimate for 2020 was presented to the National Assembly on December 19, 2019. Education received only 6.7 percent of the total national budget¹⁰. Smaller African countries such as Uganda (27%) and Botswana (20%) are far ahead of Nigeria in education funding¹¹. This low budget implies that the Nigerian government does not believe the educational sector is worth investing in. Inadequate funding causes many other issues, including low teacher salaries in public schools, dwindling motivation to teach, and insufficient resources for teaching and learning.

Socio-cultural differences and religious conflicts also pose significant challenges to developing Nigeria's education system. Nigeria is culturally diverse, with over 250 ethnic groups and 400 languages spoken. These conflicts can be traced back to colonialism when the British masters merged the Northern and Southern protectorates (people with vast differences in culture, race, beliefs, and traditions) in 1914. Before this period, the northern region had its Quranic education policy, whereas the southern part had its education based on the people's beliefs and traditions. When Christian missionaries introduced western education to Nigeria, Muslim leaders in the northern regions were vehemently opposed, limiting the spread of western education to the south only.

¹⁰ <https://educeleb.com/nigerian-2020-budget-education-ministry/>

¹¹ UNESCO- UIS. *Financing Education in Sub-Saharan Africa. 2011*

As a result, Quranic schools provide education in the northern area. The Almajiris, children in Quranic schools, are taught Islamic values and education systems while being denied a normal and decent upbringing. Their girls receive little or no education and are forced into child marriage - 57 percent of the 10.5 million out-of-school children recorded by UNICEF are girls, with a disproportionately high proportion coming from the northern geopolitical zone¹². This has resulted in a significant educational gap between the northern and southern regions. The rise of the terrorist group Boko Haram bolsters northerners' opposition to western education. Boko Haram, which translates as "Western Education is Forbidden," openly opposes all forms of western education. The Boko Haram sect abducted approximately 250 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno state, in 2014 and destroyed many schools and infrastructures. Almost 1400 schools have been destroyed because of the insurgency in the north, and approximately 2.8 million children require education-in-emergency assistance¹³. As a result of these differences, there are huge disparities in the number of children attending school in these regions. Northern Nigeria continues to lag behind southern Nigeria in terms of pupil enrolment and school attendance. The disparity in education across regions continues to jeopardize the nation's development efforts.

Furthermore, from the perspective of human rights, the privatization of primary and secondary education in Nigeria further sets the country back in its quest to become self-sufficient, causing a major setback to the education system. International legal framework instruments consider education to be a public good and a fundamental human right, and it is the primary responsibility of the state to fund and manage education¹⁴. However, as a result of the increased demands on the public system and the strain on public funds, a portion of the responsibility has been transferred to private actors such as religious institutions, parents, nongovernmental organizations, individual proprietors, and businesses with an interest in education.

Proponents of education privatization argue that private participation in education increases availability and accessibility. Although privatization of education has solved many problems, it has also created many new ones, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria.

¹² UNICEF Nigeria Fact available at <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>

¹³ <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/more-half-all-schools-remain-closed-borno-state-epicentre-boko-haram-crisis> Consulted 20th December, 2019.

¹⁴ UNESCO. Investments in Private Education: Undermining or Contributing to the Full Development of the Human Right Education. 2015.

Education privatization has resulted in the commodification of what should be a public good, resulting in socioeconomic stratification. This entails students being marginalized based on their social class and economic background. This not only contradicts social justice principles but also undermines social cohesion and inclusion. Many of these private schools are designed to attract a specific demographic of students based on religion, gender, ethnicity, academic ability, or socioeconomic status. Privatization of education may give the impression that the government has absolved itself of the social responsibility of providing quality education, which has resulted in a decline in education delivery in Nigerian public schools. As a result, access to high-quality education has devolved into a luxury rather than a right.

There is no doubt that Nigeria's privatization of education policy has increased the number of children enrolled in schools and provided options for parents and students. However, it has also resulted in a violation of children's rights to a high-quality education, regardless of their socioeconomic status. It has exacerbated segregation between the rich and the poor, as well as inequality in educational opportunities and outcomes. As a result of privatization, the government has neglected its responsibility to protect and fulfill every child's right to free and high-quality education.

Therefore, how can the Nigerian government overcome these challenges and bring its education system up to par with that of developed countries? How can they increase child enrolment, reduce dropout rates in primary schools, improve educational quality, and ultimately put the country on a path of sustainable development?

One solution is to effectively monitor the implementation of education policies and to incorporate the CRC into domestic laws in all states. Because implementation is the most important aspect of planning, strict and autonomous mechanisms for monitoring the proper implementation of national and international instruments on education and children's rights must be put in place. Education should be a non-negotiable right of every citizen and should be clearly stated as such in the constitution, not as provided in the 1999 constitution, which states that “Government shall *as and when practicable* provide free education at different levels” (emphasis mine)¹⁵. This statement provides an opportunity for political leaders to be uncommitted to education provision.

¹⁵ The Nigerian Constitution 1999 Chapter II Section 18 available at http://www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm#Chapter_2

Policies should also be dynamic and adaptable to meet the nation's changing needs and new socioeconomic demands. Policymaking should be interdisciplinary, involving people from various disciplines. All stakeholders, including children themselves, should be involved in policy-making processes involving education. Not only should their opinions be sought when developing these policies, but they should also be involved in the development and implementation of these policies. To increase the north's participation in western education, traditional and religious leaders must also be involved in policy-making processes, and an alternative primary education curriculum for the integrated Qur'anic school in the north must be provided. The involvement of these leaders can increase student enrollment in those areas and incorporating indigenous knowledge into development plans can result in faster visible results.

In addition, the government should increase budget allocation for public education, as recommended by UNESCO. Funds should be managed properly, and the government should be held accountable for how the money is spent. While the government is primarily responsible for funding education, funding can also come from other sources. Aid from international organizations such as UNICEF, ILO, and UNESCO, community participation, grants from states and local governments in areas where the schools are located, and internal revenue generated by the schools are all possible sources of funding.

Finally, privatization, which leads to the commodification of education primarily for profit, does not solve the problems in developing countries' education systems; rather, it exacerbates them. This is because transferring education management or funding to private participants does not automatically result in social or economic gains in developing countries where the public education system is dysfunctional, and poverty is severe.

As a result, before Nigeria can reap the benefits of education privatization, the government must establish preconditions and a more effective regulatory system to effectively monitor the activities of both publicly and privately managed schools. By increasing monitoring, the government can put a stop to the proliferation of unregistered private schools. To accommodate diverse classes of students, school admissions criteria, particularly for higher education, should be fair and equitable. Furthermore, to promote the right to an education, the government must improve the quality of public schools through increased funding and the hiring of qualified teachers.

Nigeria has made a concerted effort since its independence to develop a functional education policy to achieve accelerated national development. Despite these efforts, they have been unable to address the goals of the Nigerian educational system due to abrupt policy changes that have not been implemented logically, a dichotomy in policy implementation patterns between the North and South, and the constitution's ambiguity on education delivery.

The challenges to achieving universal basic education in a country as vast and diverse as Nigeria are numerous and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation. These multifaceted challenges necessitate multidisciplinary solutions. To achieve sustainability, the government and stakeholders must make genuine commitments to invest in the education system, as well as collaborate with other countries to begin comparing educational policies and strategies for effective implementation. The provision of high-quality, universal education is an investment that will yield enormous dividends in terms of national and socioeconomic development, propelling Nigeria closer to its goal of becoming a self-sufficient nation.