

Transforming communities: an analysis of the Nigerian educational landscape

Abstract

The paper addresses the disparities in the educational landscape of Nigeria through contrasting the current realities of funding against the needs of education from pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary needs of the educational sector in Nigeria. Building on existing studies, the paper contends that there are gaps that have led to the sad decline of quality in education. Issues such as adequate educational facilities, truncated policy implementation, funding, inadequate infrastructure, quality of teaching and research, pedagogy and current demands for up to date curriculum to meet the demands of the market, student attitudes and motivation, digitalization and other factors have affected the educational system in Nigeria. The paper concludes that there is a need for sustained funding, quality policy design and implementation and commitment to challenging the status quo in order to effectively deliver quality education.

Volume 4 Issue 6 - 2020

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Received: July 22, 2020 | **Published:** December 29, 2020

Introduction

The quality of education in any country is one of the major keys to national development. Many studies have brought to the fore the problems of quality education in Nigeria. Adeyinka (1975), Odia & Omofonwan,¹ Udey, Ebuara, Ekpa and Edet (2009). The purpose of the paper is to examine existing approaches and emergent trends to find ways of transforming our environment and bringing development closer to the people through unity of purpose and commitment to service. The topic transforming communities through education as a key to development highlights in a general way the role education played initially in the traditional society as the key facilitator of socialization within society and for the African experience in more recent times, as key factor in industrialization and development of modern society.

Every sector in modern society is seen as thriving only based on the sound education imparted to the members that drive the function and actions of these sectors. To understand education in Nigeria one must examine the demography and the impact it has on planning. The Nigerian population explosion has become a cause for concern as this affects education planning. Growing at around 2.7 percent per year, Nigeria's population is doubling every 26 years. This has serious implications for education of future generations: this means simply to keep at current levels, Nigeria must double the number of schools, teachers, facilities, and equipment every 26 years. Nigerians under the age of 25 are close to 110 million. In less than 40 years from now that number is expected to rise to about 200 million (United Nations Division 2011).² By 2050 Nigeria will be the third largest country in the world, population wise. There are implications for each stage of education development given the population explosion. For the early years of child education government services should include health and nutrition especially in the area of preventive health care. For the youth the education should be tailored towards formal socialization that prepares the youth to be a citizen of today's globalizing and competitive world.³

With the huge numbers being mentioned there is definitely a huge need for primary and secondary education that will prepare children for career choices. According to UNESCO (2012a,1) Nigeria has some of the worst education indicators globally. Instead of numbers decreasing, between 1999 and 2010, the number of out of school

children rose from 7.4 million to 10.5 million. The UNESCO report (2012, 61) states that out of the twelve countries with the highest number of affected children worldwide, only four experienced an increase in absolute terms since 1999. Nigeria is among these four countries and has experienced the highest increase of these four.

In Nigeria today, the glaring imbalance in the educational sector between northern Nigeria and the south have been the subject of much discussion. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) and other international donor agencies have stated that there two million additional out-of-school children due to the Boko Haram crisis in the Northeastern part of Nigeria. The continuing conflict in the North Eastern part has further worsened the case for out- of- school children and further widened the gulf in enrollment and completion rates. Benue State has also had its share of the conflicts with communities fleeing and living as refugees. This situation negatively affects children's education. On the other hand gender issues also are quite evident in the numbers of female and male enrollment in school and the challenges confronting education from early child education, through primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Education in traditional society was a way of socialization of the child transmitting knowledge of different forms of norms, traditions, skills as well as the whole gamut of knowledge of the various arts, crafts, religions as well as local technologies and agricultural practices of various communities. With the colonial experience and the development of western education, so much of the educational curriculum became tailored towards the needs of the emerging bureaucratic establishment, the Civil Service. As perspectives changed and education became more accessible the need for development necessitated more qualified personnel for the different sectors of the economy. Higher education therefore was not a priority for the colonial masters in respect of the natives. It is only recently that the Bret Woods institutions have begun to take cognizance of the research findings that see a correlation between poverty alleviation and higher statistics in Higher Education.⁴

This paper seeks to look at development of education in our nation and explore ways in which challenges can be better addressed to ensure a better coordinated approach that would ensure greater impact. The Independent Service Monitoring Group captures the issue of education and national development thus: ...illiteracy/lack of formal

education has prevented people from participating in and benefitting from development efforts. While countries that have raised the status of their citizens educationally, socially, politically and economically generally enjoy a high standard of living, a large number of citizens in the countries that are educationally disadvantaged have a low standard of living and are unable to benefit fully from people-centered sustainable development.

Education as a right

Education is a human right but I wonder how of many of us understand the ramifications of this statement. Education because it is a right like other rights means: while there is consensus that human rights encompasses a wide variety of rights⁵ such as the right to a fair trial, protection against enslavement, prohibition of genocide, free speech or a right to education, there is disagreement about which of these particular rights should be included within the general framework of human rights.

As a human right therefore, it cannot be taken for granted or ignored. The statistics on out- of- school children worldwide is staggering but the burden of the statistics lies in sub Saharan Africa, and Nigeria being the largest black nation bears the bulk of the numbers. Across the world about 59 million children and 65 million adults are out of school. What are implications of this lack of basic education to those deprived of their right? Soaring crime rates, low quality of life, inability to negotiate life choices, inability to contribute to personal, family and community engagements or development, low self-esteem, and lack of skills or capacity to change status and ensure self-development, and inability to access quality healthcare are just a few of the difficult terrains that deprivation of this right entails. In more recent times with the discussion on climate change heating up, lack of education is blamed as reason for those engaging in destructive habits harmful to environment have continued to create a negative situation that fuels climate change. The statistics further state that more than 120 million children do not complete their primary education. The significance of this is that young people who are denied education are denied opportunities to get a decent job, escape poverty, support their families and develop their communities. Once this deprivation occurs, it becomes a hurdle to move from one spectrum of life to a higher phase of life. The range of choices for the individual are limited and some though having attained some level of wealth in their lives remain stumped in some other areas that only a good education could have helped.

On a community and societal level, for development to take place, quality education needs to be taken seriously. All over the world, countries that have made great strides in development have taken education of their citizenry as a matter of top priority. Politicians can toy with anything but the education of the citizens of the country. We cannot afford to politicize the situation. Nigeria at present has some of the worst of numbers in relation to out-of-school-children. If we look at our budgets how much are budgeting for the sector? What are the strategies for addressing the glaring imbalances in provision of education, accessing and completing even basic education? What are the policies in place to address existing challenges and further strengthen existing policies or promulgate fresh policies to address emerging challenges? How active and competent are the bodies tasked with oversight functions over the education sector and how effective have these bodies been? If education is a right and every Nigerian child is entitled to some level of education how has this been affected. What do we see as the correlation between public and private education? When children are enrolled in public education what has

been their experience? The place of the teacher in the society is a direct pointer to our perception of the scale of priorities in governance and community affairs. There is an anecdote of students giving wrong answers to every question posted by the teacher who then retorts that the students learning of the correct answers will be possible only after he is paid his salary. But the issue of the rot and decay of the education sector goes beyond salary payments to the very quality of education offered. The quality of products, which refers to those we teach in our institutions from the very foundation of early child education to the highest levels, must be taken seriously. Half-baked education will only produce half-baked products until we seek aggressively to address the challenges confronting the very quality of the education offered in training of young people. The point I am making is that decision makers must make education a priority in order to address crosscutting issues with other sectors of the economy such as health, industry, economics, security and all developmental sectors. When one examines economies that are thriving, there are clear indicators that these economies are knowledge- driven and access to quality education is very high. Quality education can then be seen as a key factor in development of communities and the demand for good governance.

In most countries all over the world, education is seen as the number development challenge: Former United States President, Bill Clinton, was once asked to list the three most serious problems of his country (arguably the most powerful nation), and he was reported to have replied Education, Education, Education. This is a clear indication of the place of education in our strategic focus in changing our society to ensure communities are safe and conducive for all to live in harmony. The quality of the human resource in every society matters. Countries that today are referred to as advanced or developed attained the position due to the quality of their human resource which is direct results of quality-driven education systems.

Major issues confronting education

The quality of education in Nigeria is confronted by several problems. These problems include:⁶

- a. Poor governance and management
- b. Poor funding and neglect of the education sector
- c. Corruption which seems endemic in key sectors of the economy. Funds meant for education infrastructure, salary payments, maintenance and running of schools and institutions being diverted and mismanaged.
- d. Poor infrastructure and training facilities, inadequate classrooms, teaching aids (projectors, computers, laboratories and libraries),
- e. Paucity of quality teachers, lack of dedication and high performing staff,
- f. Politicization of education
- g. Poor/ polluted learning environment
- h. School system plagued with numerous social vices such as high level of exam malpractice, cultism, hooliganism and corruption.

In looking at the issue, I draw heavily from the assessment from the assessment of Association of African Universities (AAU) of the situation on the continent. I align my thoughts with the basic and fundamental issues confronting the sector. The whims-and caprices approach. Because education is a key driver for human, community and national development, we cannot allow education to just happen:

- a) There is a reliance on the whims-and-caprices approach to educational development, especially by political authorities. Either in response to educational development or to score some cheap political points, educational development decisions have often been made in a haphazard manner.
- b) This approach has led to expansion of education without educational development. This can be seen in the mere proliferation of educational facilities without corresponding understanding of the dynamics of the demand for education. There may in a few instances be increased funding but no genuine understanding of what is funded and whether it is making any difference at all.
- c) The wish-listing approach. This approach attempts to tackle headlong the overwhelming multiple challenges of the educational sector without any definite focus. This approach lacks an understanding of the critical issues at stake which are multi-faceted, some causes deep and some others shallow. A realization of this fact would drive decision makers to seek to address the root causes. Challenges to the education sector may be vertical in nature or horizontal. I use these terms from my perspective to drive home the fact that there vertical factors such as funding that may affect all levels of education and other horizontal factors that may affect specific levels and are common only to similar levels such as curriculum related factors.
- d) Approach to planning in education as a one directional, non-participatory affair. This system is non-coordinated, non-systematic and non-systemic. The system has government at the center as the sole originator, actor and evaluator of progress and impact. The problem with this approach is that once there is a change in government or officials involved, all the plans are jettisoned and the cycle begins all over again. According to AAU, the overall effect has always been movement without purposeful action.

Cross cutting issues

Education is a right and the right kind of education serves several useful purposes. Provision of basic skills for entry into the labor market is an obligation that cannot be ignored. There is a need therefore to understand what the actual obligations are in realizing the aims and goals of education of the citizenry. In order to do this we refer to three key terms: quality education, socio- economic development and quality of life. There is a link between access to quality education, socio-economic development and quality of life. The higher the quality of education the better access to life changing choices and socio-economic status.

Another cross-cutting issue which relates directly to education access and completion rates is gender parity which continues to worsen the statistics in relation to out-of-school-children. Communities and countries that succeed in achieving gender parity in education reap substantial benefits relating to health, equality and job creation. A discussion on this issue will naturally lead to a quick view of the critical skills needed as one looks at issues of curriculum development in the 21st century. The education terrain has changed and important skills needed by those in training for the world of work include: critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and digital literacy.

Other cross-cutting issues to be examined include the need for professionalism in teaching and welfare of teachers. While one can assert that for effective learning to take place, the teachers need to be qualified, professional, well trained, motivated and well supported.

A lot of attention needs to be given to programmes for re-training and updating of existing knowledge for teachers in various subjects. Government needs to work with parent-teacher associations, as well as private sector and civil society organizations to find the best and most constructive way to improve quality of education.

Strategic planning

Earlier I had listed three problems connected to handling of education and ways in which these approaches have hampered the development of education. Specifically I made mention of whims-and-caprices approach, wish-listing approach and the one directional, non-participatory approach. There is the need to examine a more positive approach that entails planning strategically and involves stakeholder consultations. Here I refer to strategic planning in education. This approach confers a lot of advantages on the development of education. One important benefit of a strategic planning process to education is the longer time frame and holistic view it adopts in looking at all the education related issues from early child education to tertiary levels. A strategic plan will look at the challenges confronting primary and secondary levels of education and address issues that may constitute future challenges at higher levels.

Other benefits include aligning education with other sectors of development, focusing on strategic challenge areas of education, giving priority to areas considered to be high impact areas, engaging stakeholders and ensuring collective ownership of education development initiatives, identifying and channeling resources where they are needed etc. Because the values of education are long term, the strategic plan has to operate within a time frame of three to ten years in order for the gains to be clearly seen.

Critical to educational development is the issue of funding. There must be commitment to financing education. This is a responsibility that rests with the government. Government needs to make the needed investment in educating her citizens. It is evident that government role in provision of education has changed over time. From sole provider government role has changed in some areas to facilitation and regulator. There are areas where educational institutions may belong solely to community or private providers. Government therefore needs to recognize the role of the private and civil society organizations and mission school owners in the consultative process of strategic planning which should be broad based and inclusive enough for stakeholders to have a buy-in.

Beyond the strategic planning there should be a framework in place that is agreed upon by all for cooperation and partnership. I believe a forum such as this summit calls for sober reflection of the current realities and a need for us to deliberate on issues that affect our collective existence. Earlier presentations dealt with issues that are important to KUF and our housekeeping issues. But as Kunav people in Tivland of Benue State, Nigeria, we understand that we are responsible to our community, state and nation and therefore the summit will also bring to the table critical issues that affect our development as a state and nation. The cry of this summit is a call for serious action to be taken to address the challenges in our educational development.

Building institutional capacity

In addressing educational challenges in teaching and learning, the institutions are at the heart of addressing contending issues that bestride the educational landscape. It is important that Nigerian schools incorporate digital learning at an early stage through all levels of education in order to compete nationally and globally. Investment

in ICT assisted learning will benefit both the teachers and pupils/students. Our traditional modes of learning have been the classroom and libraries. Technology as an added resource enriches and enlivens the learning process. It should be integrated in curriculum at all levels to ensure technology assisted delivery of education. Using technology to enhance and open vistas for digitalization of the various sectors will certainly revolutionize processes of governance and business. But the preparation for changing how we conduct business rests on how we prepare pupils and students to be open to new technology through provision and training in ICT competencies.

The basic challenge in developing skills rests with the contestation between acquiring a university education or following a vocational qualification. The non-recognition of competencies acquired in the non-formal sector has continued to reinforce paper qualification over industry manpower needs. Nigeria also has a near absence of the manufacturing /engineering sector and this has affected skills development. Furthermore there is poor planning and implementation as this relates to manpower needs. This has resulted in insufficient data on gaps in skills acquisition. Technical teachers/instructors are also in short supply as this relates to quantity and quality. A good number of tools and machines seen in schools are obsolete and nonfunctional. To compound the situation, the low or total lack of power infrastructure further complicates skills development.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) have been highly touted as the way to dealing with challenges in Technical and Vocational Education (TVE). The Round Table in 2012 highlighted the programme expectations as to (a) provide the needed skills for individuals to meet their ambitions for personal development (b) meet employer needs for a highly skilled work-force and (c) lastly for the nation to meet its needs for a more responsive and competitive economy. The question is how far have these lofty ideals been realized? Have the programme expectations and targets been met? It would be great if another Round Table could be convened based on results from implementation of the programme. Such a meeting would examine the level of implementation and based on a SWOT analysis explore ways of strengthening the programme. The above comment is not just about this programme but similar initiatives that traverse the educational landscape.

Conclusion and recommendations

The paper sees educational as vital to national development and key to transforming our communities. It is noted that the nation's education is in a sorry state and there is a need for all stakeholders to be involved in charting the way forward. Though several interventionist plans have been proposed the discordant handling due to a lack of strategic planning that commits the educational sector to chart its development irrespective of political changes remains a major obstacle to realizing the aims and goals of these interventions. Funding is a critical issue in educational development and government should not abdicate its responsibility to interventionist agencies.

Our educational curriculum falls short of the realities of the time and needs to be revamped continually to address existing and emerging issues and developments. Digitalization of the educational

sector should be a priority across all educational levels as well as urban and rural areas. As I conclude this paper, I call on government to address the ugly trend of drugs and cultism in our urban and rural communities. Our communities are totally ravaged by these gangs who terrorize innocent citizens. To avoid total breakdown of law and order, the trend needs to be reversed now. Let us keep our communities safe for us and generations yet unborn. It is only when education is seen as central to transformation of our societies for better and healthier living that the SDGs will be attained.

Government needs to readdress funding of education. Private education investors, teachers, parents, students and pupils need a reorientation towards achieving the goals of education. There is a need to restructure the educational sector. Government needs to commit to delivery of a competitive standard of education across the country and other countries. Along with adequate funding for education is the need for good management of the funding and institutions.

Social vices such as examination malpractice, cultism and other existing and emergent trends need to be curbed through effective and best management practices. This should be a joint effort between government and regulatory bodies. Parents and the entire society need to be part of the joint efforts to stem these vices not only in our institutions but within our communities. Government and private education partners need to review teachers' salaries and find ways to motivate teachers to do their jobs on a high quality level and attract qualified teachers. Training and re-training of teachers with current up-to-date materials and technology needs to be encouraged. It is important to put in place vetting measures to employ only qualified teachers.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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