

TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Being Text of a Paper Presented at the HERPNET-KIU Conference: University Research and Sustainable Development in Africa, August 17-20, 2009.

THEME: Research in African Higher Education: Mandate, Practice, Challenges and Opportunities for Reform and Sustainable Development

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## **TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

### **Abstract**

With the unacceptably large number of school age children not enrolled in school and products of Nigerian Universities and other tertiary institutions generally rated as ill-prepared for the labour market, it is obvious that all is not well with the nation's educational system. This state of education in Nigeria calls for reform and rejuvenation since we cannot hope to achieve development except all Nigerians have unrestricted access to education so as to appreciate the imperative of sustainable democracy. This becomes important particularly when quality education provision is core to the key object of NEEDS II and the Seven-point Agenda of the Yar'Adua administration, It is equally germane to the attainment of both the Millennium Development Goals and the Vision 20:20-20. This study obtains data through the literature, internet, interview, and focus group discussions. It is a descriptive survey of the higher educational system in Nigeria. The paper examines the policies, the reforms, the problems and the prospects for a virile as well as sustainable educational system in Nigeria. It would provide the opportunity for policy makers, educational professionals, key stakeholders and development partners to evaluate various options and mutually agree on the necessary strategies and actions to enhance the rejuvenation of the education sector.

**Key Words:** Educational System, Sustainable Development. NEEDS, Seven Point Agenda. Millennium Development Goals and Vision 20:2020.

### **Introduction**

The Educational system of Nigeria has failed to meet the yearnings of the citizenry over the years. This is as a result of inadequate resources provision, poor policy execution, poor quality learning, incessant closure of schools, indisciplined parents and students, harsh national economic situation, pressure from parents-teachers association and indisciplined society. The need, therefore, arises to transform the educational system in Nigeria so as to meet the goal of sustainable development. Today, teeming populations of candidates roam the street seeking university admission where there is none, while several of those in the system sit on windows and or stand on corridors to receive lectures due to inadequate lecture rooms. Yet researchers and research students who should bury themselves in their books or be engrossed with their work in the laboratories, can not do so because of lack of power supply. chemicals and reagents. It is expected that the government should be up and doing in making the system work and ensure that the wheel of the sector is properly oiled. Rather, it has been wasting so much of the nation's resources on political office holders at the expense of national development. Meanwhile, as things stand. Nigerian universities are at the bottom of both global and African ratings. Therefore, by the time the decade of military rule ended.

public schools - from primary, secondary and tertiary had become a mockery of the old standard attained during the first republic and the pre-independence era. The reason for the change is that public schools have reached a despicable low level of decadence that parents who want the best for their children would not touch public schools with a long pole. There has been serious struggle to free the higher institution system from gross underfunding, dearth of facilities, decayed infra-structure and unbarred brain drain, which if not arrested, could invariably dovetail to the imminent collapse of the sector.

Education is the core for the production of attitudes, skills, knowledge and personalities required for the development of modern technology and greater productivity. It is **an antidote** to poverty and ignorance and the key for unlocking natural resources (Akingbola 2007). Nigeria's educational philosophy(FRN 2004) is based on:

Development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and;

Full integration of the individual into the community.

To achieve these goals, the development of human resources through education is vital. Staff development gives the opportunity to improve performance of the workforce which translates to the quality of product (Egwuyega 2000). Transforming Nigeria's Educational system would, therefore, lead to a reorientation of the entire gamut of educational philosophy and administration. This will lead to creating educated Nigerians who are job creators and not job seekers in the first place. Secondly, it will ensure a partnering, involving the stakeholders that would lift the system from the abyss of indiscipline, poor financing and lack lustre performance. It would equally assure graduate empowerment for future leadership and eliminate poverty that would lead to sustainable development.

### **Research Methodology**

In the course of undertaking this study, a battery of methods was employed in the gathering of data. Foremost among these is the use of literature combined with archival governmental records and internet exploration and documentation. Aside from this, the utilization of interview and focus group discussion were employed. This subject, being at the core of the development process, requires that only those who are knowledgeable about the subject can successfully contribute to highlighting the problems, solutions and the prospects of transforming higher education in Nigeria. This is why the study purposefully concentrated on picking its respondents from seven higher institutions in southwestern Nigeria-three

universities, two polytechnics and two colleges of education. In all 21 respondents were picked, (3 from each institution).The respondents so chosen include lecturers, administrators, students and parents. It is believed that true stakeholders can be obtained within the environment so chosen. The focus group discussions equally were concentrated in these higher institutions with at least one focus group discussion and maximum of three in each of the institution so selected.

Many questions relating to the current state of higher institutions in Nigeria-

Following Smith (1998) Human Capital theory experienced an unprecedented popular application to the field of education at the time when Nigeria was struggling to acquire political independence with concurrent goal of achieving socio-economic development. It is posited that it simply is not possible to have the fruits of modern agriculture and the abundance of modern industry without making large investments in human beings (Schultz 1977;322). This theory provides an explanation for the relationship between formal education and the economy by articulating formal education as an investment of development. It stipulates that at the individual level, the greater the number of years of education, the more productive a person becomes as he or she acquires the knowledge that the process of education enables.

As a result of the individual higher productivity induced by more education, those who have higher level training and thus are assumed to be more productive, receive higher income. At the societal/ national level, the argument goes, the higher the aggregate level of education of the population, the higher the general economic output and growth. Since education was considered a process of increasing economic productivity and growth, it was thus conceived as a tool for development (Assie-Lumumba 2006:44). Furthermore, private and social rates of return and the coefficients of correlation between education and earnings were calculated to support the theory.

Education is an invaluable instrument for nation building by exposing the enrolled youth to the same curriculum, formal learning, and common values acquired in the classroom and also informally in school compounds, boarding schools and university campuses. This theory calls for direct investment for future socio-economic development through education. One major problem that African universities still encounter and that must be addressed is precisely how to (philosophically and practically) cut the socio-historical link between European society and African institutions and how to root them in their own social structures. Kuper (1977) argues that the university should be grounded in local development. Through a process of decentralisation, it would be possible to reach the desired goal of locating and linking academic teaching and research to the real society that is expected to serve.

### **Development explained**

Development requires the mobilization of surplus labour to generate both urban and rural capital in the form of economic and social infrastructure. Todaro (1985 :108) is of the view that development is a multi-dimensional process, involving the organization and

reorientation of the entire economic and social system; an improvement of income and output, radical changes in institutional, social and administrative structures as in popular attitudes, customs and beliefs. Everett (1989:841) cited in Olowe (1995:4) asserts that development can be assumed to be: progressive and multi-dimensional in nature; societal and individualistic; and generic in approach, encompassing a whole class of elements of change. In his analysis Goulet (1971) submits that the objectives of development includes life sustenance, self esteem/ respect; and freedom.

Maclean and Wood (2001:67) explain that development is a concept that embraces not only the provision of basic needs and the expansion of economic activity, but also health, individual freedoms, education and human longevity. It relates to a widely participatory process (democracy as against autocracy) of directed social changes in a society intended to bring about both social and material advancement for the majority of the people through gaining greater control over their environment. Development is a sort of progressive transformation of the economic, social and political structure of a society from relatively less complex, less efficient and less desirable forms, to more complex, more efficient and more desirable forms.

Much attention in recent years has focused on the notion of sustainable developments term implying a modernisation and enrichment of life that is neutral in its effects on the environment, or as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987); development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Johnston 2002). The sustainability of development is thus hinged on good education without which there could be no development at all.

### **The State of Education in Nigeria**

Babalola (2003:40) p ( t ) T j 1 0 0 1 5 7 T c ( i ) T j 0 T c ( s ) T j 0 0 1 0 1 5 7 .

Education is a key to development. It is a human right, that is, basic education should be accorded to all human beings. Several human right instruments provide education as a fundamental human right, for example Universal Declaration of Human Right (1948) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), (Igbuzor 2006:1). The most basic right of all Nigerian children is basic education. The tenets of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme of the Federal government hold that all Nigerian Children of school age should acquire at least basic education. The most suitable way of meeting national objectives for youth empowerment is to invest in Nigeria through higher education.

The major problem of the educational system include poor infrastructure, low enrolment, poor quality of learning, incessant closure of schools due to strike by teachers, cultism and undisciplined parents and students. Added to these difficulties were such factors as the lack of materials, no incentives for research and equipment (Today, 2008:4). Others are the harsh economic situation of the country, pressure or interference from Parents Teachers Association and undisciplined society, non- prioritization of goals, objectives and strategies at all levels of government and lack of coordination in planning, management and monitoring of education information and dissemination of data (ibid:26).

The Nigerian Constitution 1999 clearly stipulates that primary education is compulsory and free. Akingbola (2007:2), contraposing a world-class university environment, citing quality facilities, curriculum access, funding, competition, infrastructure, faculty, and diversity as critical components of a world-class university system. He contends that some problems degraded the quality of higher education in Nigeria; these barriers include: Inadequate facilities to support educational excellence. The impoverishment of Nigeria's primary and secondary systems which has resulted in many undergraduates arriving at university without basic technical writing and scientific skills needed for undergraduate study. State control of the university system has dictated massification of higher education without allowing for filtering of learners coming into the university system, setting faculty wages at a level that will attract qualified instructors and researchers and restructuring to attract new resources through tuition and fee.

Consequently, the above listed problems have led to the falling standard of education in Nigeria. Because of constant strikes either by the lecturers or students, Afe Babalola (cited Babalola2 Tj0.73 T

have the disastrous effect of lowering the quality of education and the degrees that are awarded. In view of the prevailing problem, the question arises as to whether it will be possible for Nigeria to meet the Millennium Development Goals on education. There are two goals devoted to education in the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Declaration. These are the goal number (2) (to achieve universal primary education), and goal number (3) (to promote gender equality and empower women). (MDGs 2005; Report).

Orabuchi (2007:2) complains that our attitude towards education, coupled with lack of government's sustainable education policy, has led the education system into shambles. A government that decides to make several sectors its priorities in a given time can never develop. The focus of education reform must therefore incorporate, among other sectors in which education is one, develop them in order to leave a durable legacy at the end of its tenure.

### **Relationship of Higher Education to Development**

It is universally accepted that education is a leading instrument for promoting economic development. Nigeria-the most populous black Nation in the world cannot be an exception if it is to move out of poverty. In the past Nigeria and its development partners have placed great emphasis on primary and more recently, on secondary education while tertiary education as a means to improve development and mitigate poverty has been neglected. While the international development community has begun to realise the importance of advanced schooling, the progress in Sub-Saharan Africa and particularly in Nigeria is small. This may be attributed to insufficient understanding of the positive effects that higher education can have on economic development.

In DE Bloom and Rosovsky (2004a) study, it has been seen that higher education is both a result and a determinant of income and can produce public and private benefit. Higher education may create greater tax revenue, increase saving and investment, and lead to a more entrepreneurial and civic society. It can also improve a nation's health, contribute to reduce population growth, improve technology and strengthen governance. With regard to the benefits of higher education for a country's economy, many observers attribute India's leap into the world economic stage as stemming from its decade-long successful efforts to provide high-quality, technically oriented tertiary education to a significant number of its citizens (Bloom; Canning and Chan 2005:3).

Bloom et al (ibid) further contend that attitude in Africa toward higher education may be changing. In 2003, the Africa Regional Training Conference on Tertiary Education highlighted the problems that Africa was facing on higher education and documented some innovative solution (World Bank 2004). In the opinion of Kofi Annan (2000):

The university must become a primary tool for Africa's development in the new century. Universities can help develop African expertise; they can enhance the analysis of African problems; strengthen domestic institutions; serve as a model environment for the practice of good governance, conflict resolution and respect for human rights and enable African academics to play an active part in the global community of scholars.

### **The Essence of Transforming Nigeria's Education System**

In meeting the Millennium Development Goals on education, which as observed elsewhere in this paper, is all-encompassing in itself, there is the need for total overhaul in Nigeria's educational system. Moreover, it also does not take much to realize that the much orchestrated Seven-Point Agenda of the Yar Adua's administration will surely crash in the absence of a vibrant educational system. The government should place importance on education particularly funding. Policy makers should change their Eurocentric view of education to an Afrocentric view that would reorient both teachers and students to the needs and aspiration of their environment. Education should be geared towards job creation and self reliance. The Universities must be free to choose their syllabuses and award their degrees without interference from the government. University autonomy must be truly guaranteed in order to ensure policy sustainability.

Otive Igbuzor (2006) argues that the importance of education to human beings cannot be over emphasized. Education is a human right that should be accorded to all human beings solely by reason of being human. There are a lot of international human right instruments that provide for education as a fundamental human right. These include the universal Declaration of Human Rights (1981). International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (1981). The relationship between education and development is well established such that education is a key index of development. It has been documented that schooling improves productivity, health and reduces negative features of life such as child labour as well as bringing about employment. This is why there has been a lot of emphasis particularly in recent times for all citizens of the world to have access to basic education.

The importance of education to the development of any society is well known. It is in recognition of this importance that the international community and governments all over the world have made commitments for citizens to have access to education. Meanwhile, it has been documented that across the globe, there are inequalities in educational access and achievement as well as

Similarly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Declaration as pointed out earlier, has two of the eight goals devote to education. They are goals 2 (to achieve universal primary education) and goal 3 (to promote gender equality and empower women). Over the years, Nigeria has expressed a commitment to education, in the belief that overcoming literacy and ignorance will form a basis for accelerated national development. However, regardless of the incontrovertible evidence that education is crucial to the development of the community and nation, there remain inequalities in access to education. Despite its potential for leaving opportunities, education in many countries is used to perpetrate inequalities. Millions of poor people and their children are excluded from the processes and outcomes of education.

### **Conclusion**

Education, both formal and informal, has been an integral part of sustainable development; and this is applicable to both developing and developed countries. It is a notable fact that the university, for example, has been a veritable and dependable source of drawing ideas for political and economic development, particularly for those countries that, as a matter of national policy, maximally explore this avenue. The challenge, however, has been more acute in many of the developing countries. Many of these countries have, due to corrupt leadership, economic mismanagement and lack of political will, been unable to meet the UNESCO's stipulated 26 percent budgetary allocation for education. This, for instance, has a debilitating effect on the educational system in Nigeria. It becomes imperative that the Nigerian government- both central and other federating units- should continually seek partnership with the private sector and international agencies with a view to repositioning the educational system in the country. School curriculum should, as a matter of priority, incorporate issues of peace building, conflict prevention and skill acquisition which are germane to sustainable national development.

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