Enhancing Quality Basic Education for the Attainment of Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria: Suggested Policy Interventions

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the different ways of enhancing quality basic education in order to achieve millennium development goals in Nigeria. Also the paper further examines the pertinent facts about Universal Basic Education (UBE) as well as vision and mission of the UBE, some key challenges facing the universal basic education in terms of resources such as finance, human, infrastructures, materials, time etc. in order to ensure quality basic education for the achievement of the millennium development goals in Nigeria. Therefore, some policies were suggested in the paper and among policies suggested are: provision of adequate funds, improvement of teachers quality and quantity, provision of adequate infrastructure, moderation of teachers-learners ratio per classroom and upward review of teachers remuneration as well as enabling environment among others.

Keywords: education, resources, infrastructure, UBE, Nigeria

Further reinforced by the launching of Universal Basic Education (UBE) by the former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in September 1999 and passed into law in 2004 as one of the strategies aimed at implementing the education components of the MDGs. The UBE programme is a reform measure by the Federal Government aimed at rectifying the existing distortions in the basic education subsector of Nigeria’s educational system. It is a second attempt by the Federal Government of Nigeria at providing access to basic education at the national level, the first being the Free Universal Education (UPE), which was effected in September, 1976, but could not be sustained due to inadequate planning and faulty estimation. Its major goal is to bring about positive changes by making programme implementation responsive to the needs of the people and ensuring that individual and communities become actively involved in the provision of basic education. (FGN, 2004)

Prior to the commencement of the UBE scheme, the Nigerian 6:3:3:4 educational system which means six years of primary, three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary and four years of tertiary education, the primary education was free but not compulsory and expanded the curricular to contain literacy and numeracy, study of science, study of social norms and values of the local community through civics and social studies, study of health and physical education, moral and religious education, encouragement of aesthetic creative and musical activities, the teaching of craft, domestic science and Agriculture. To achieve the above

Facts about Universal Basic Education and the MDGS in Nigeria

Nigeria’s commitment is the ideals of education for all (EFA) of 1990 to which she is a signatory, was

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mentioned effectively, junior libraries are provided for primary school children, science equipments were sent to primary schools, special teachers were trained to teach creative arts, crafts and music at all primary schools. Also at the primary school level, the new system de-emphasized memorization and regularization of facts but rather encourage practical exploratory and experimental methods. Although, it could be said that one of the characteristic feature of this system at the primary school level is its emphasis on the teacher pupil ratio of 1: 30, some factors like financial and scarcity of qualified teachers have made this very programme unrealistic. Although Universal Primary Education (UPE) was launched nationwide in 1976 by the military regime but failed without achieving many success as attendance was not made compulsory for pupils of school going age. But with the passage of the UBE Act, by the National Assembly in 2010 all tiers of government (Federal, State and Local Governments) in the country are mandated to provide free and compulsory nine years Universal Basic Education of primary and junior secondary school. Parents are required to ensure that they register their children/wards for and complete the basic education.

The UBE vision statement is as follows

‘At the end of the nine years of continuous education every child that passes through the system should acquire appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, communication, manipulative and life skills and be employable, useful to himself or herself and the society at large by possession of relevant ethical, moral and civic values’.

The UBE mission statement is also spelt out as follows:

‘To serve as prime energies of a national movement for the actualization of the nation’s UBE vision, working in concert with all stakeholders thus mobilizing the nation’s creative energies to ensure that education for all becomes the responsibility of all’.

To facilitate the achievement of the vision and mission statement of the UBE in 2002, the Federal Government took some steps which include the contract award of 300 classroom blocks to be constructed in different parts of the country, supply of furniture for both pupils and teachers in all the completed UBE classroom blocks throughout the country, and the appointment of new consultant to replace the university consultants to ensure adequate supervision of projects in the state. In addition about 200,000 exercise books, rulers, pencils, ball point pens, erasers, school bags and first aid kits were also procured and distributed to schools.

To further ensure effective implementation of UBE, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) set some short and medium-term objectives with appropriate performance indicators. Some of these objectives include:

- Widening of access to primary and junior secondary education.
- Periodic review and effective implementation of the curriculum.
- Improving gender equality.
- Reducing the spread of HIV and mitigating the impact of AIDS
- Mobilizing and developing partnerships with international agencies, private and local communities.

A cursory look at some of these objectives shows that they are targeted at achieving the basic components of the MDGs such as universal primary education, gender equality, combating HIV/AIDS and developing global partnerships for development. The formation of UBE therefore, was one of the approaches adopted by the Nigerian government to meet some of the MDGs and also fulfill its commitment to Education for All (EFA).

The Nigeria’s plan document entitled ‘National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies’ (NEEDS), recognize-education as a vital transformational tool and a formidable instrument for socio-economic empowerment. The document which was prepared by the government in its efforts to meet both the development challenges of Nigeria and the MDGs acknowledge that the delivery of education in the country has suffered from years of neglect especially during the military era.

In spite of its laudable objectives and foregoing modest efforts the UBE programme contended with a lot of problems since 2002 till date. The most worrisome were

i) Quite a number of activities designed could not be implemented due to difficult terrain, lack of cooperation from some of the contractors and under politicisation of the projects and partial implementation of the budget by the executive. As a result of this, most of the activities that were funded and fairly executed were those supported by the World Bank and UNDP before the Office of the Senior Special Adviser to the President on Millennium Development Goals (MDG) took it up

ii) Funds were not available to meet such personnel costs as promotion, annual increment and employment of new staff to address manpower shortages in such vital areas as research, planning and statistics, monitoring and evaluation.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGS)

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is the internationally adopted specific targets for poverty reduction globally but specifically in developing
countries by 2015. The development goals, which have been embraced by the World Bank, have not provided a focus for the Bank’s development programmes. The goals which are put in place to address specific poverty indices include the following:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and Hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
3. Promote gender equality and empowerment of women.
4. Reduce child mortality.
5. Improve maternal health.
7. Ensure Environmental sustainability.
8. Develop a Global Partnership for development.

The attainment of these goals has been a challenge to developing nations of the world. While overall significant progress has been recorded worldwide, the progress however has not been uniform across the world with respect to some specific goals. The federal government of Nigeria faces the challenge of meeting the MDGs and believes that the attainment of the goals will be at stake if human and material resources of the country remain untapped. One of the strategies adopted by the country in her multipronged approach towards attaining these goals is the empowerment of people through education. Early investment in the basic education is also endorsed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for its capacity to foster gender equality and sustained economic growth. National government and donor organisations have concentrated investment on increasing school participation at the primary level in the developing countries. Most of the poorest countries, including most Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries are increasing their efforts (resources) to improve access to and quality of primary education. This creates an increasing demand by parents and communities to let their children benefit from the next stage in the education circle, largely ignoring the need to simultaneously increase quality and capacity at the secondary level.

Bregman and Brymen (2005) found out in their work on quality of primary education in Africa, that most Sub Saharan African countries are at different stages of reforming their education system. Many have begun to address access issues, reform the curriculum or develop management capacity. They were of the opinion that as government moves towards establishing an egalitarian rather than elitist education system; they need to ask themselves and stakeholders of education ‘what is the purpose and intent of primary education system in general and junior secondary school specifically?’ Pitchard (2002a) introduced the idea of using lesson quality adjustment in the measurement of education output. According to him, government inspector in U.K make assessment regarding the quality of lessons, Powell and Pitchard (2002) noted that weight could be assigned to the three rating categories for lessons such as good, very good lessons, satisfactory lessons and unsatisfactory lessons, they concluded that if these assessments were used to form a lesson quality adjustment, the rate of growth of volume of indicators would be raised. The children of any nation are its greatest resource. In the future, the prosperity and quality of life of all nations will be determined by today’s children and their ability to solve problems that face them, their communities and their countries. Education unlocks this ability and investment in children’s learning is the most important contribution any nation can make to better the future of her citizens.

Thias and Carnoy (1972) carried out research work on the influence of school factors on the quality of school, output in Kenya. Their results show that quality of output is equated with student examination performance. Thus in measuring education output performances of students are always considered. This is measured in terms of the grades obtained by the students in a course or group of courses (Kemmis, 1994, Adeyemo 1998 and Akangbou 1985).

Rahman et al (2005) assessed the effectiveness of community intervention in improving the quality of basic education. They found out that child friendly community learning programme (SOPAN) school eliminate some of the constraints and students’ performance for both boys and girls has improved both in aggregate and individual subject scores compared to that of control schools where no such intervention exists.

Teacher as the Key Quality Factor in Education

Teachers’ knowledge, an intended outcome of preservice training, is strongly and consistently related to student performance (World Bank, 1995). As a result, teachers are the main medium through which students learn, especially during the foundation years, making school the important functional locus of efforts for improving quality requires therefore that teachers use their professional attitudes, energy, and motivation in combination with teaching skills in creating quality learning. Teacher quality is, therefore, the most important school – related factor influencing student achievement (Schon, 1983 and Rice, 2003)

While acknowledging this fact, the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report noted:

“What goes on in the classroom, and the input of the teacher and teaching, has been identified in numerous studies as the crucial variable for improving learning outcomes. The way teachers teach is of critical concern
In any reform designed to improve quality (UNESCO, 2004: 152).”

In defining educational achievements, most governments emphasize on years in school and not on knowledge and skills (World Bank, 1995). They fail to recognize that school attendance is only a means of acquiring skills and knowledge but it is not an end in itself. The numbers of pupils attending school for how many years is not as important as what they learn. What goes on in the classroom depends on a number of factors including teacher training and preparedness, which are not in return influenced by the school environment among many other factors (Riding, et al, 1995). The UNESCO report enumerates five areas critical to teacher quality: finding the right recruits; initial teacher education; on going professional support; teacher earnings; and teacher deployment and conditions of service.

Considering that teachers’ salaries constitute the largest public expenditure in budgets of less developed countries, the central dilemma facing many governments is paying them, expanding the teaching force to fulfill the demands of increasing enrolments, and devoting resources to improving the quality of teachers (UNESCO, 2004: 161). As with the provision of education, many countries need to address issues of teacher quality simultaneously. Innovative ways of meeting both demands are urgently being sought; ideas include shorter pre-service teacher education, recruitment of teachers with higher education qualifications intensified in-service professional development, and increased school-based support (Verspoor, 2004: 6).

Generally held perspectives on good teacher qualities include: sufficient knowledge of subject matter to teach with confidence; knowledge and skills in a range of appropriate and varied teaching methodologies; knowledge of the language of instruction; knowledge of sensitivity to, and interest in young learner; ability to reflect on teaching practice and children’s responses; ability to modify teaching/learning approaches as a result of reflection; ability to create and sustain an effective learning environment; understanding of the curriculum and its purposes, particularly when reform programmes and new paradigms of teaching and learning are introduced; general professionalism, good moral and dedication to the goals of teaching; ability to communicate effectively; ability to communicate enthusiasm for learning to students; interest in students as individuals, a sense of caring, compassion and responsibility to help them learn and become responsible people, good character, ethical, and personal discipline; and ability to work with others and to build good relationships within the school and community (Chesterfield and Rubio, 1997; Craig et al, 1998; Fenstermather and Richardson, 2000; Fredriksson, 2004; Heneveld and Craig, 1996; Jeu, 2004b; UNESCO, 2004) and Boyle, et al (2003).

Equipped with these qualities, a good teacher is supposed to be passionate and committed to doing the best for their students, love children in warm and caring relationship and know how to identify, present, and explain key concepts. A well-trained teacher will make use of variety of teaching and learning models encourage a collaborative working style with other teachers to plan, observe, and discuss each other’s work. With experience, effective teachers shall be involved in constant questioning of, reflecting on, and modifying their own practice (Hopkins and Stern, 1996, quoted in Nuthal, 2004: 282). However, where teachers are not adequately trained and qualified, these expectations will be far-fetched. To be effective in their work, teachers should be well trained, given an enabling environment for operationalising their skills in addition to a supportive policy framework for professional growth (Van der Bergh, (1995). There should be a mechanism of encouraging undertaking continuous research of the teaching-learning process and carefully monitoring the relationship between their expected roles and student learning. To do this, they have to conduct, independent, in-depth assessment of what students learn; collect data on individual student experience and classroom activities; and make analyses based on the continuous connections between classroom activities, students experience and learning processes (Nuthall, 2004; 296 – 297). Teachers in Nigeria lack appropriate training in research and are overwhelmed by increasing enrolments to be able to collect students’ data to enable them properly monitor their progress. In addition, professional growth is rare.

Suggested Policy Interventions

A number of national committees and commissions have influenced the development of policies in Nigeria’s education system, which has not yielded the required qualitative expansion. It is significant to note that although policy documents reflect on awareness of the critical importance of quality and positive learning outcomes, very often, the references have focused on deficits in quality and very uncertain outcomes (King, 2006). Owing to financial and other factors, challenges of access, equity, poor implementation of policies, poor budgetary allocation to education, manpower shortages, quality and relevance among others have characterised Nigeria’s educational system.( Boud, et al, 1985)

The reports of the National Committees on Educational Objectives and Policies focused mainly on redefining the country’s educational policies and objectives, giving consideration to national unity, economic, social and cultural aspirations of the
people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1972). It recommended Universal Primary Education (UPE) in September 1976 throughout the whole Federation. Under this scheme, duration in primary education throughout the whole Federation became uniform and stood at six years in order to teach civic, moral and practical skills that would physically mature the children. This is also aimed at reducing the level of illiteracy in Nigeria as well as attaining the target of the Millennium Development goals (MDGs) by the year 2015.

To ensure quality basic education in order to achieve millennium development goals in Nigeria, therefore the following among other policies should be put in place.

- **Provision of Adequate Funds**: The funds made available to schools in relatively small compared to the increase in demand for education. Government should realize that education is an investment in development but then, a capital-intensive venture of high priority. As such, increasing financial provisions must be made available to the basic schools by the government at all levels.

- **Improvement of Teachers Quality and Quantity**: The popular saying that “no educational system can rise above the quality of teachers in the system” is rather apt at this moment in the Nigerian education system. It is obvious that the attainment of universal primary education component of the MDGs depends largely on the availability of teachers in sufficient numbers and quality to perform the task. For UBE to have intended impact on the learners, their learners must be capable of imparting permanent literacy and numeracy and some useful communication skills to them. The government is therefore enjoined to provide adequate and qualitative staffing of schools.

- **Provision of Adequate Infrastructural Materials**: For basic education system to achieve its set goals, the need to put certain educational materials, equipment and facilities in place cannot be over-emphasized. Unfortunate, these facilities are in short supply at all levels of education. In some, cases, they are non-existence and where they are available at all, they are in deplorable condition. To enhance proper teaching-learning process in our basic schools facilities such as library and laboratory must be well-equipped and dilapidated buildings must be reconstructed. Also, teaching aids must be made available to teachers to facilitate learning. The school environment should be made conducive and attractive for proper administration.

- **Moderation of Teacher-Learners Ratio per Classroom**: Due to the ever-increasing quest for education and its attendant increase in students’ population, the number of pupils accrued to a teacher per class has unmanageably increased in not public schools in Nigeria. In fact, there are cases of over 100 pupils heaped up in a small classroom only to be taught and controlled by just a teacher. This menace can be traced back to non-availability of enough classrooms and inadequate staffing of schools. The government is therefore enjoined to moderate teacher-learners ratio to the normal 1:30 respectively by providing enough classroom accommodation and employing more effective teaching force in order to enhance effective learning in our basic schools. (Ani, 1999)

- **Improvement of the Basic Education Curricula**: Prior to civilization, traditional education emphasized the skills acquisition and self-reliant attitudes that made its products useful to themselves and the society. However, western education in Nigeria has often been criticized as elitist and non-functional as majority of its product have no marketable skills that would fit them into a world of employment. The mismatch between education and employment planning, in which education is fast expanding and complementary employment opportunities are not being created has led to the production of all-equipped graduates, majority of whom are roaming the street in search of jobs. There is therefore the dire need for government, academia, planners as well as society to critically re-examine the basic education curricula with a view of making it more functional, skills acquisitive, self-reliant in nature and politically-directed to the end that products from this educational level would be able to stand on their own after graduation especially for those that did not intend to further their education beyond this level.

- **Upward Review of Teachers’ Remuneration**: For effective discharge of duties, teachers should not be treated as the underdogs of the economy and the socio-political system. Their pay-package should be reviewed and incentives should be given to them as it is being given to their counterparts in the industries. If this is done, it will no small way enhance quality basic education

There is dire need for government and stakeholders to see basic education as a fundamental tool to attaining national development. Therefore more funds should be directed towards this level of education in order to
enhance its quality. If we can achieve quality basic education in Nigeria, then attaining the Millennium Development Goals is not far-fetched.

- Quality of education can be improved through developing national standards to be achieved, enforcing and monitoring the same to ensure effective instruction in school.

- Creation of opportunities for focused and sustained staff development will enhance student learning.

- Quality of education will improve where government and stakeholders focus on activities that will improve student learning and performance to address local needs and circumstances.

- Sensitization of all stakeholders about the implementation of the courses and encouraging visits to schools, sharing the progress made with teachers and students and giving them the support that is required.

**Enabling Education Inputs**

- A strong and effective training programme and enhanced teacher’s working conditions require special considerations to attain an education of quality.

- Retraining of teachers is essential to enable them to acquire new technologies for enhancing the teaching and learning processes.

- Attractive classroom environment attracts a lot of students and attendance and improves schools effectiveness. Students find a rich-reading environment attractive and as such will find something meaningful to do at school that will not get them bored.

- Training only the numbers of teachers require in schools is an efficient way of using scarce resources.

- Systematic and continuous learning assessment schemes are needed in all educational systems in order to understand the dynamics of teaching and learning context.

**CONCLUSION**

Nigeria UPE and UBE Programmes have enhanced access to basic education. However, owing to financial constraints and poor budgetary allocations and implementation, the programme has faced number of challenges, which must be redressed so as to make it a worthwhile investment.

According to Oni, (1999) and Akinwumi (2007), it is evident that the quality of the country’s Primary Education is threatened. Although the policy documents indicate government commitment to providing quality education, the country appears to be lagging behind in achieving the prospected quality of education. Gaps exist in terms of the quality of teacher training programmes, assessment procedures, setting of standards, monitoring performance, creating a favourable and enabling environment for primary education to ensure that all the students receive quality and education.

It is obvious that there is more focus on access and not on outcomes with serious implications on the country’s development goals.

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