Poverty Issues Among Youths: Challenges for Higher Education in Africa

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Abstract
The study looked at the poverty situation amongst African youths in relation to what higher education can do to help in finding solution to the nagging youth problems of poverty, illiteracy, semi-illiteracy, etc. Studies (Ebrahimian 2003, World Youth Report 2003, UNDP Human Development Report 2002 and Wadri 2004, Preece 2006) revealed that poverty breeds illiteracy, restricts access and opportunity to education. Majority of African youths (60million) because of their poverty situation are illiterates, lack access and opportunity to proper or higher level of education and so are ill-prepared to fit into society. (Okoli 2008, Ezeilo 2002, Preece 2006 UN 2010 Report) noted that proper education wipes out illiteracy and poverty and empowers the youths. The challenges are for higher education to provide and promote proper education that would adequately prepare the youths for living in the society. The paper recommends reforms in curricula (technical, entrepreneurial and vocational education etc).

Introduction
Youths constitute a formidable force in every society and so must not be neglected. They are blessing not curse or burden. They are the hope of any society because today’s youths are the leaders of tomorrow and must be properly and carefully handled. This study looks at the youth situation in Africa. It looks at the fact that a
greater proportion of youths in Africa suffer poverty, neglect, discrimination etc. They do not have access to schooling and to higher levels or proper education. Some are drop-outs as a result of inability of parents to fund their education and as a result of social, political and economic factors. Some youths graduate in areas where the job demand is not acute or needed. Some are half-baked graduates and so have problems of unemployment and underemployment. The paper looks at the perception of ‘youth’ and ‘poverty’, effects of poverty on youths, lack of access to proper and higher levels of education and the challenges the youths’ situation pose to higher education in Africa.

Perception of Youth and Poverty

The word youth could be perceived or interpreted in different ways depending on the context. Youth could be seen as that period of transition state between childhood and adulthood or from adolescence to adulthood. Statistics show that those in the age bracket 15-24 are reckoned as youths. World Bank Nigerian Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report (2005) adopted 13-25 age bracket as youths while World Youth Report (2003) adopted 15-24. As for poverty, there are different perceptions by various people of the word. Poverty Prevention Strategy (PRS) Report (2002) pointed out that many people perceive poverty as dependence. Others see it as marginalization, want, scarcity, limitations, restriction on freedom etc. This paper adopts 15-24 age bracket for youth and the transition from adolescent to adulthood, while poverty has to do with those who lack basic human capacities - the illiterates, those without access to education/proper education, the unemployed and those that lack access to means of acquiring knowledge in this technological age, those who live below the U.S $2 per capita per day. There is also categorization of youths as those in the higher middle and low income bracket.

Effects of Poverty on Youths

A number of youths today enjoy the benefits of 21st century technological advancements. They have access, facilities and conducive atmosphere to education and schooling. They are exposed to Information Communication Technology (ICT), the internet and other modern facilities that enable them cope with the demands of education/schooling. These youths go to school with the sponsorship of parents or governments. They emerge well prepared to fit into society. These youths are in the developed countries and are in the minority (15%) globally. UN Report (2003:1) showed that young people make up almost a fifth of world’s population. About 85% of the 1.061 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24 live in developing countries. For instance, Asia has the majority with 60% of the total, 15% are located in Africa while about 10% live in Latin America and the Caribbean. This majority of youths are clad in poverty and the effects on them are terrible.

Ebrahimian (2003:11) stated that Africa, (the poorest continent in the world in terms of social welfare), has more than half of its population below the age of 18,
compared with about one-quarter in Europe. These youths she lamented, will be unable to survive unless serious deficiencies in the health-care, employment, and education sectors are addressed. Thus an estimated 24 million (19.5%) young people aged 15-24 years live in a more certified group of low and middle income countries classified by World Bank (2003) as severely indebted. Additional, 148 million in same age group live in countries classified as moderately indebted. There are yet countries classified by World Bank IMF as heavily indebted poor countries (HIPCS) and therefore, eligible for comprehensive debt relief. These have a youth population estimated at 128 million, that is (19.8%) of their total population. World Bank (2002) Report showed that among some Third World countries the largest concentration of youths aged 15-24 years are in the Asian-Pacific region (17% of all youths), India (19 million), Indonesia (42 million), Pakistan (30 million), Vietnam (16 million) and Myanmar (10 million). The other important regional concentration of young people in low income countries is in Africa. (19.8% of all youth) with Nigeria ranking the highest (24 million), Ethiopia (12 million), Democratic Republic of Congo (10 million), Kenya (7 million), Tanzania (7 million), Zimbabwe (7 million) and Sudan (6 million). The number of illiterate youths, excluding those who do not have access to education or means of acquiring knowledge, the drop-outs who do not have access to proper/higher education and the unemployed and underemployed is staggering. The UNDP Human Development Report (2002) gave statistics of youths living on less than U.S. $2 per day at 462 million (37.5%). World Youth Report (2003) showed that in Malawi out of 300,000 graduates from formal education, only 30,000 get employment while 270,000 enter the job market every year to seek for means of livelihood. High levels of unemployment constitute source of concern because of the profound impact it has on the youths.

Research (Farley 2010) on the psychological consequences of unemployment are extensive. Studies (World Youth Report 2003) on the youths show that unemployment leads to a reduction of self-esteem, diminishes levels of well-being and often causes isolation from peers. Heikkinen in World Youth Report (2003) pointed out that unemployment leads to social exclusion. Many of the school leavers without wage employment have the problem of lack of skills development as a result of inappropriate educational curriculum at all levels and restricted access intake into technical, entrepreneurial and vocational training institutions. UNESCO (1999) pointed out that nations of the world made commitments at the Jomtien Declaration on Education For All (EFA) to have all barriers (social, cultural, economic, legal etc) that hinder children, youth and adults from having access to quality education and attainment of goals removed, yet the EFA has been implemented only up to 56% in Africa and 34% in Ethiopia compared to 90% globally.

After the Jomtien EFA Declaration (1990-2000), the decade of World Summit, Obanya (2002:1) declared that nineteen world conferences have been held towards EFA. He further pointed out that in one of the summits, it was acknowledged that Africa was at the bottom of the world’s educational league. By 2002 Africa was below
the EFA mark. Wadri (2004:1) lamented that the future of Uganda was in a vicious cycle. Economic under-development of the government caused more youths to remain uneducated. School uniforms and supplies often took a full month of parents’ pay in order for a child to attend school even though enrollment was free in the public schools. He further lamented that sponsoring a child in school could create hardship how much more sending four or five? He pointed out that the uneducated youths in Uganda join the ranks and file of unskilled unemployed, thereby causing economic problems. Schools have traditionally been underfunded, teachers making less than $100 U.S. dollar per month. According to the Human Development Report (2004:xi) poverty is legendary in Nigeria. Despite the huge crude oil sales, Nigeria as a member of the E-9 countries has so far the largest proportion of illiterates. National Planning Commission (2005:14) affirmed that 7 out of every 10 Nigerians live on less than $1 per day, thus 70% of Nigerians live below poverty line. They suffer poverty, underdevelopment, marginalisation, social exclusion, economic disparities, instability and insecurity. Nigeria has gone from Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the 1950s, 1970s to Universal Basic Education (UBE) from 1999 to date yet out of the 24million youths that should be in school only 6.5million (17.1%) are, while 17.5million (72.9%) are not. The 6-3-3-4/9-3-3 educational system as planned in the National Policy on Education (NPE) has it that every Junior Secondary School (JSS) graduate should have a vocation. Yet not a single individual has actually graduated and been equipped for self employment. Moreover, in Nigeria and many African nations, youths suffer unemployment and underemployment, many are drop-outs while some are illiterates.

In Rwanda, much unemployment and underemployment are found among young men who are not yet married. This is a cause for great anxiety on the part of the youths who would be concerned about the means of getting settled in life. In Nicaragua, there is high rate of school drop-outs, abuse of female and limited options in the job markets. Socially, there is violence in the family life. The rest of the E-9 countries, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Pakistan, experience poor quality teaching and learning conditions and are not sure that a completion certificate will improve job chances. Sub-Saharan Africa faces the greatest difficulty in all respects with regard to the education of youths. Various factors have contributed to this situation - declining per capita income and rising foreign debt, high population growth, natural disasters and armed conflicts compound the educational situation in this region. There is refugee problem to the tone of 5.1 million, while 3.5million (14-25) year olds are not involved in educational training and are unemployed and a quarter of them are not able to continue their education to the level that they had wanted. The negative effects of poverty on the youths are glaring. For instance the youths are restive, they bow to peer group influence, promote cultism and terrorise the common people through shooting and kidnapping. A classic example is the situation in Nigeria where youths form militant groups, kidnap people at will and hold them hostage until a handsome ransom is paid. In recent times, they resort to killing any persons who would
intercept them. These youths are reacting to the poverty situation (unemployment, underemployment, illiteracy, etc) they have found themselves in.

Lack of Access to Proper or Higher Level of Education Access

Webster’s Dictionary of the American Language defines access as the right or opportunity to reach or use or visit; admittance. It is the right of admission, the right of entry and the right of usage. Although developing nations saw expanding access to education as an important issue, they viewed it in relation to enrolment but access is more than that. Bhola (2006) pointed out that access additionally has to do with where schools were located, and what classes, genders and the public they were to serve. It also mattered what levels of education were offered in particular locations and how they are interfaced with higher education and what were the contents and quality of the curriculum. In the U.S., access to education is anchored in their constitution so that those in authority cannot impose their personal beliefs on national policy. To make sure that the goal to widening access to quality education is not blurred, the U.S. has established the office for civil rights. U.K. has introduced foundation degrees as intermediate level qualifications that aim to enhance access to higher education. It has gone further to ensure that there is no discrimination against any one on grounds of race, colour nationality etc. In Nigeria as in many developing countries widening of access to primary education has not been fully implemented. Nigeria is unable to guarantee access to university education to nearly 65% of its citizens who are qualified for admission into existing universities. Many African nations may never meet the dead line of 2015 for Education For All (EFA) Some of these aspects of access were touched in the on-going discussion.

The goal of education in any society is to produce self reliant and self actualised individuals who would fit into society and contribute to sustainable development. It is to produce a strong work force that would promote political, economic and social developments. A major factor that has contributed to the poverty situation of youths has do with education. World Youth Report (2003:59) showed that education enhances opportunities in the labour market, as those with the best qualifications enjoy superior job prospects. In developed countries the youths have access to proper education as have been highlighted in the U.S. and U.K. experience. Tarrou and Holmesland (2002) in Oduaran and Bhola (2006) pointed out that Scandinavia focused on making higher education available to all. In a number of developing countries, however, many youths do not have access to education at all and so are illiterates. Others are drop-outs and so unemployable in the labour market. Still, some highly educated young people remain unemployed. The reason is that many are desperate for degrees (certificates) and there is an over-abundance of students graduating with degrees in areas with insufficient number of jobs every year. Many of the students who are admitted into higher institutions are not the best given the admission criteria. Students who perform better are dropped while those who scored lower grades are admitted as a result of quota which has to do with admitting
candidates based on their state of origin at the expense of merit. The consequence of this policy has been articulated by Abernethy (1967:12), a policy of expanding university enrolment as quickly as possible, if need be by lowering entrance requirements to the universities which results in “B.A. unemployment” and low productivity. Again (Akinkugbe 2001; Okoli 2003) pointed out that some universities have graduated students who are incompetent in their fields of study. They argued that in Nigeria for instance some universities have graduated engineers who cannot fix roads, who cannot provide regular electricity and water supplies, who cannot man refineries and computer scientists who cannot operate computers appropriately. This is because the youths are not exposed to quality education. The facilities are not just available for practicals. Where they are available, they are dilapidated and most often there is no steady electricity to operate them. So graduates are not appropriately trained for jobs. Moreover, graduates do not find jobs in the areas of their degrees because there is overall lack of jobs in the formal economy, that is the government sector does not provide jobs by opening factories and industries. Thus economic underdevelopment of government causes youths to remain uneducated. Oftentimes there is an inappropriate matching of university degrees with demand occupations. Anosike in Okoli (2007) lent voice to this point, that in Africa, schooling has trained students for the wrong kind of jobs and created a skilled workforce inappropriate to the demands of the labour market. This is buttressed by the issue of ‘credentialism’ sometimes called ‘diploma disease’ in Nigeria and Togo.

In Nigeria for instance, the question that is hotly debated, according to Dabalen, Oni, and Adekola (2000:14) by the general public and press is whether Nigerian university graduates are adequately educated. This question is of particular concern to graduates who seek employment. They further pointed out that employers complain that graduates are poorly prepared for work. They believe that academic standards have fallen considerably over the past decade, that university degree is no longer a guarantee of communication skills or technical competence. As a result, university graduates are commonly half-baked and not suitable for employment.

From the fore-going some issues have been raised in relation to education of the youths in preparation for living in the society. A group of youths lack access to any type of education (illiterates or drop-outs) because of the socio-economic status of their parents. These are found mainly in the rural areas. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) would have taken care of these if properly implemented. The political instability in many African nations contribute to educational policies not being fully implemented. Only 56% of African children of primary school age are in school. There is a category of students whose parents will not allow to attend schools (higher institutions) far away from home. These are mainly girls; their chances of securing jobs or paying jobs are slim. There is another group that is admitted through quota who by their capacity are not university materials, and some others who are not exposed to quality education. These graduate from the university half-baked. They may not perform well in any jobs because they were ill-prepared.
There are others who are not exposed to practical experience, and so cannot perform in the practical aspect. Many graduates today find jobs outside their discipline. Others who are working in private sectors go in for any type of jobs even outside their areas of specialisation. Many youths who work in banks have no degrees in accountancy, finance & banking etc. Thus, the aim and goals of education have not been fully realised. This is because there are serious deficiencies in the educational systems. Schools are grossly under-funded as a result of declining per capita, rising foreign debts, corrupt practices, political instability and economic underdevelopment of governments. Moreover, teachers are poorly motivated. There are deficient and narrow curricula, inadequate admission criteria and laissez-faire attitude on the part of government.

**Challenges to Higher Education**

Ensuring access to proper education for millions of youths living in poverty and disadvantaged by economic status of parents and special needs is a core challenge. The orientation and rehabilitation of numerous graduates roaming about the streets with certificates is another challenge. There is the challenge of evolving broad and all-embracing curricula that will cater for the interest of various categories of students at the same time. Any education that does not adequately empower the youths for fitting properly in the present society is not worth it.

**Recommendations**

Given the poverty situation of millions of youths (illiteracy, unemployment, underemployment, etc) it is hereby pointed out that higher educational institutions have serious responsibility towards the education of the youths. The paper therefore recommends that higher education institutions should

- ensure access to proper education for all youths whose parents are poor and so cannot send them to school. They should mount serious campaigns for full implementation of the UPE and or UBE as the case may be.
- intensify vocational, technical and entrepreneurial practices for the empowerment of the youths in basic skills, especially in the rural areas. This will go a long way to enable the youths set up small scale businesses on their own.
- embark on curricula reform(s) by making provision of course contents to produce professionally oriented work force that would fit into society. A widening of the curriculum is necessary for the incorporation of relevant courses.
- mount pressure on government to provide better conditions of service, provide infrastructure, replace of dilapidated facilities and provide new ones for teaching and research.

**Conclusion**

The problem of youths continues to pose serious challenges to institutions of higher learning in Africa. This is because the number of youths affected by poverty and unemployment keeps increasing on daily basis. The trauma and frustration
suffered by youths as a result of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy, unemployment and underemployment, marginalisation, social exclusion, etc trigger many social and educational vices that threaten the norms and peace of society. These trauma and vices if not addressed could mar the future of African nations in the scheme of things globally. The importance of educating the poor, the excluded and the disadvantaged - the rural poor in the teeming urban slums must receive special consideration, with unequivocal commitment to ensuring their access to education. The challenges posed by this situation demand concerted effort and brainstorming by the higher educational institutions and the governments to avert the restiveness of youths. Proper education and decent jobs are *sine qua non* for empowerment and resettling of the youths.

References


