

THE NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION AS A POTENT INSTRUMENT FOR ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Education can be described as the only important legacy a nation can bequeath its citizens. It can improve the national economy and holds the promise of social mobility for those who go through the system. With these in mind the government fashioned out a national policy to help it realize these lofty benefits. With the policy in use for over 2^{1/2} decades, not much can be said to have been achieved. With the talk of economic reconstruction and revitalization there is need to once again pay attention to our educational system through the national policy. The national policy document properly executed has the potentials of helping our ailing economy recover. This is why the paper discusses the national policy, its potential contribution to the economic recovery of the nation and offers suggestions.

Introduction

Nigeria is undergoing series of reconstruction under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's regime. These reconstruction and transaction are in the area of politics, economy, and education to mention but a few. One would agree that education deserves more serious attention considering the fact that education has tremendous role to play in all facets of human endeavour. Therefore, to begin this reconstruction process there is the need to revisit our educational policy. The educational policy of any nation is a document which spells out the yearning of the nation through education.

The question one may be confronted with now is do we have a good educational policy that can meet our yearnings as a nation? To this question one can answer in the affirmative. Nigeria has a well thought out national policy that can take us to the Promised Land. The Nigerian national policy is a unique document that can be described as one of the best in the world; especially with the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system. The system guarantees education for all in such a way that each person benefits at any level he drops out,. This will not only ensure education for all but also make benefactors self-reliant as a trade must have been learnt to keep the individual engaged and earn a living. However, this cannot be said to be the case as basic infrastructure needed to achieve this feat are lacking. Hence there is high level of unemployment and consequently high level of crime by youths who otherwise would have been creating wealth for the nation through self-employment.

It must be noted that the present National Policy on Education emanated when it was realized that the inherited educational system from our colonial masters no longer meet our needs as a nation. The colonial' system which was entirely art-related produced graduates, craving for white collar jobs. They were not equipped to be self-employed through job creation. As we entered the 70s it became obvious that something urgent has to be done as government alone can no longer meet graduates' job demands. This¹ was the genesis of the new national policy which gave birth to the 6 - 3 - 3 - 4 system. As earlier mentioned the Nigerian National Policy on Education has been adjudged one of the best which can be used to the nation's advantage for the purpose of economic rehabilitation.

What is the National Policy on Education?

Perhaps it will be necessary to start this discussion by knowing what a policy is. A policy according to Hornby (1991) is "a plan of action, statement of aims and ideals especially one made by a government...." From the above therefore, we can deduce that the National Policy on Education is a plan of action, statement of aims and ideals made by Nigerian Government in the area of education. It spells out what Nigeria as a nation intends to achieve through education. This is because education is very important in the life of any nation. It is the pivot on which developments in all its ramifications revolves. Based on this belief, "various governments in Nigeria give priority to education as indicated in their various policy statements, since independence in 1960" (Eze, 1983:2) Education Policy does not end at the government's table, political parties also make policy statements on education during electioneering campaign. One such party is the Unit Party of Nigeria

(UPN) which introduced free education policy in all the then five states it controlled namely, Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo and Bendel. (Eze, 1983:3) as part of its electioneering promise in 1979. The national policy therefore is a vital document that deserve serious attention from all stakeholders to make it meet our yearnings and aspirations for economic transformation.

The Nigerian National Policy on Education: A Historical Perspective

The Nigerian National Policy on Education is a child born out of necessity. This is because the colonial educational system as inherited at independence was too narrow to meet our developmental needs. Besides government noted that there were a lot of "... contradictions, ambiguities and lack of uniformity in educational practices in the different parts of the federation". (NPE, 1981). That needed to be removed. This is coupled with the benefits that all citizens of the country will derive. This according to the NPE (1981) "... led the government into summoning in 1973 a seminar of distinguished educational experts under the chairmanship of Chief S.O. Adebayo to deliberate on all aspects of a national policy on education". The outcome of this seminar after much tinkering culminated into the present National Policy on Education. It finally came into effect in 1977 under a military regime.

The National Policy on Education

In continuation of this discourse it is only fair and just to take a look at the national policy to see whether it meets our quest for economic reconstruction. Perhaps in doing this it is vital that we look at the objectives. The five objectives as stated in the NPE (1981) are:

- 1) A free and democratic society;
- 2) A just and egalitarian society;
- 3) A united, strong and self reliant nation;
- 4) A great and dynamic economy;
- 5) A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

The above are the five cardinal objectives upon which our educational system stands. In pursuance of these objectives, the Universal free Primary Education (UPE) was already in place as launched in 1976 by the then head of state General Olusegun Obasanjo. With this policy according to Eze (1983:4) "...no fees were payable for pupils in primary schools between the ages of 6 and 11".

Another innovation that made the policy a wonderful document is the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system and the broadening of the curriculum. This implies that a child will spend 6 years in the primary school; 6 years in the secondary school which is split in two, 3 years in the Junior Secondary School, and another 3 years in the Senior Secondary School. For those who have the capabilities they are to proceed to a tertiary institution for another 4 years to graduate. It is believed that under this system at any stage an individual drops out he should be able to earn a living and contribute to the national economy from the skills acquired. What a wonderful document. After almost 3 decades of operating this policy, can we say we have achieved these objectives'?

National Policy on Education and Economic Reconstruction

The question that easily comes to mind as one discusses this topic is: "has the National Policy on Education any contribution to make to economic reconstruction?" In response to this, it is pertinent to understand what education is. Education as a potent tool for social, economic and political transformation has been discussed severally by many scholars. Ismail (2002) talked of education as not only...the greatest force that can be used to bring about redress, it is also the greatest investment that the nation can make for quick development of its *economic*, political, sociological and human resources". Jega (2002) on the same subject sees education as "...one of the greatest investments nations make to assure their future in terms of *economic growth* and socio-cultural and political development". The federal government of Nigeria has also adopted education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development. According to Eze (1983) "...education plays a dominant role in the economic and social transformation of the country as well as the development of human resources"¹. From the foregoing therefore, it will not be out of place to say that any document that spelt out our goals, objectives and aspirations like the NPE has a pivotal role to play in the economic reconstruction effort of the nation.

"Education is power" (Jega, 2002). Be it economic power, political power, social power etc; education avails one with such power. The National Policy on Education is backed up to this transformation with UPE now USE. The easiest way to empower an individual is by giving him education

as tool to pursue his destiny. Based on this premise therefore, it can be argued that the national policy is vital in our bid to reconstruct economically. Based on this thinking the curriculum has been so designed to cater for all. The 6-3-3-4 is a step in this direction. So it is that anybody who goes through the programme will acquire a skill to fall back on as a means of earning a living. Such individual therefore, is also in a position to contribute to the national economy.

The national policy realizing that we are not all equally endowed intellectually provides opportunity for all by breaking the curriculum into core subjects, pre-vocational subjects and non-vocational subjects. The divergent population of our youths is guaranteed a place in this system as in the policy document. Those who read vocational education can become self-employed, create jobs and boost our economy. For instance an individual who specializes in woodwork, metal work, electronics mechanics, tailoring to mention but a few need not go in search of white collar job. Properly trained, he is adequately empowered to take his destiny in his hands and be a wealth creator for the nation. Having said this, one would agree that the national policy has created a lot of opportunities which Nigeria should harness for her economic reconstruction effort.

How to Use the National Policy for Economic Reconstruction

Abdul, (2003) argued that the National Policy on Education (NPE) has great potentials of translating Nigeria's dreams of economic prosperity except for poor implementation. He argued that it is one of the best documents produced on education anywhere in the world. Now that Nigeria is trying to pull itself out of the economic woods, through economic reconstruction, it is an opportunity to revisit the national policy so as to reactivate our educational system. This is because education which the policy is all about is said to "... play a dominant role in fostering economic growth and development" (Eze, 1983). He went further to state that America taking education as one of the parameters for economic growth; showed evidence in quantitative terms what percentage of rate of economic growth cover a period of time. Therefore, the following should be done, to reap the bountiful benefits of the National Policy on Education as we try to reconstruct our economy.

- 1) The nation should as a matter of urgency invest heavily in education if our educational goals and objectives are to be met. This should meet the 26% GDP recommended by UNESCO to which Nigeria is a signatory. Though there is evidently no official statistics on how much is spent on education it is evident that education is under-funded in Nigeria.
- 2) Nigeria as a nation should start fighting corruption at all levels so that what is allocated to education gets to it and it is used for it. Even though Nigeria is yet to achieve 26% budgetary allocation, education receives the lion share of the budget. We are yet to benefit from this lion share.
- 3) There should be massive investment in the training and retraining of teachers to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It is sad to note that in this 21st century more than 40% of the nation teachers are untrained. To attract the best brains teachers should also be adequately remunerated.
- 4) Having done this the machines, tools and the technical equipment needed for the training of pupils at school must be provided. This will enhance the proper implementation of the nation's National Policy on Education. We can then produce job creators and not job seekers.
- 5) Guidance and counselling which is hitherto neglected is a vital service in the implementation of the national policy. According to Adegoke et al (nd) "guidance should no longer be viewed as a side attraction, something to be tolerated and allowed in our schools if there is time and opportunity, it must now be viewed as the heart of the educational process". If the national policy must make any meaningful contribution to our economic reconstruction efforts, guidance must be assigned its unique role of guiding students to choose appropriate career. This is because the 6-3-3-4 system involves transitional stages which must be approached with wisdom. Adolescents in their young minds lack this wisdom. This is why the counsellor with the aid of other teachers is in an unassailable position to help them make wise choices as they transit. Guidance and counselling therefore need to be properly established in Nigerian schools to help the National policy meet the challenges of economic reconstruction.
- 6) Another important aspect that needs serious attention is planning as evidences abound that the failure of the UPE and the 6-3-3-4 system are due to poor or faulty planning. For instance, when the 6-3-3-4- system of education was introduced there was massive importation of machines and tools from the eastern bloc especially Bulgaria. The machines and tools were

expected to be used in the Junior and Senior Secondary Schools for the purpose of skill acquisition. The essence was to make graduands of the system self-reliant, be more of job creators instead of job seekers. But because of poor planning, the machines and tools were left to rot away under sheds while others were stolen thereby defeating the aim of the 6-3-3-4 system. We must therefore imbibe the culture of proper planning if the National Policy on Education is to achieve its aims and objectives of producing youths that are job creators for the healthy development of our economy.

Conclusion

Education is an important instrument for economic development and social mobility. As an important instrument needed for the healthy development of our economy governments at various levels over the years invested heavily on the sector. Despite the huge investment and laudable national policy in place the nation's economy is still in the woods. Youth unemployment is the order of the day resulting in violent crimes. The paper is therefore, of the position that the present national policy is capable of turning around our economy but this can only be possible if we re-visit the policy with a view of properly implementing it.

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