

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION AND THE SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Throughout the world education is recognized and accepted as a fundamental element in human development. Apart from being a major instrument in the enhancement of (he individual, education has remained a vital factor in the attainment and sustenance of national development and democracy throughout (he world- H is this position that has informed the ennoblement of the institution of education today. This presentation is intended to discuss the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria as a factor in the sustenance of national development and democracy. In doing this, the paper seeks to examine the concept and scope of Universal Basic Education as adopted in Nigeria as well as the roles of education in general and Universal Basic Education in particular in the enhancement of democracy and national development in the country

Introduction

Education generally is accepted as a major factor in the development of modern man.' Apart from being a major instrument of socialization and the enhancement of the well being of the individual, education has remained a vital factor in the attainment and sustenance of national development and democracy. Alfred North Whitehead as quoted by Okafor (1988) observed that "in the conditons of modern life, the rule is absolute the race that does not value trained intelligence is doomed." For any nation lo make appreciable effort in the attainment of development, it has to commit a substantial proportion of her resources to the provision of education. Okafor (1988) opined that "To be sure among the factors necessary for the solution of modem equations and for ushering in and consolidation of contemporary development, the factor of education stands in a class by itself.

The focus of this presentation is general education and the Universal Basic Education programme as adopted in Nigeria. Basic education is an integral part of genera! education. For proper comprehension and avoidance of contradiction and unnecessary dissipation of precious energy and time, education as used here refers to the ways in which people learn skills and gain knowledge and understanding about the world and about themselves. According to the World Book Encyclopedia there are three major ways through which general education is carried out. These include formal education or school system which is the arrangement through which instructions are given in the regular school; informal education which involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills outside the regular school system. The informal approach involves people working on their own without teachers. Here people gain knowledge and skills by watching television and listening to radio programmes all by themselves. Finally, there is nominal education which is a mid way arrangement between formal and informal education. It is formal because it is planned and informal because it lacks the strict control of formal education system.

The general aim of education no matter the type is to produce intelligent, responsible and well-informed citizens who are capable of making positive contributions to the development and well being of themselves and their society. Universal Basic Education is education generally designed to transmit a common cultural heritage rather than to develop trained specialists. It is largely elementary education and targeted towards the provision of universal literacy and enlightenment.

The successful realization of the aim of education is vital to the sustenance of national development and democracy. This is particularly true in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

The Universal Basic Education Programme in Nigeria

The Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria is almost the same as the old Universal Primary Education programme. The concept of Universal Basic Education has been widely explained by scholars and educators of diverse shades. For the purpose of this presentation it is adopted as basic or elementary education

targeted at a substantial proportion of the population. It is an education effort deliberately designed to facilitate the access of the masses to the acquisition of such basic skills as reading, writing and the manipulation of their immediate environment. One may go further to admit that it is an educational effort targeted at the complete elimination of illiteracy and all its attendant effects through the provision of elementary education for the masses. This may not be the exact definition adopted by the United Nations or some other organization. However, for this presentation this may suffice.

The Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria provides a nine-year universal, free and compulsory education. It has been designed to cover primary and junior secondary school. It also provides for the education of the rural population, nomadic population, people in physically isolated settlements, urban slums, adult illiterates as well as other people who may be considered as learners that have special needs. As pointed out in the guide lines for the implementation of the programme, basic education is not a static term but a process that should be determined by every nation according to its evolutionary development needs' (FME 2000). The programme is intended to be free and compulsory. It is an ambitious programme, which requires a considerable amount of human and material resources to make it succeed.

As Obanya (2000) noted, the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria has both international and national antecedents. Prominent among the international antecedents is the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which embodies the right of every world citizen to education. This declaration to which every member of the United Nations is a signatory has very strong emphasis on the right to compulsory and free basic education. More recently there was the world conference on Education for all (EFA) in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990. The main thrust of this conference among others is that Basic Education should emphasize literacy, numeracy and life skills, and particularly the skills of learning how to learn.

Other international education conventions which serve as antecedents to the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria include:

- (a) The Durban (1998) statement of commitment to promotion of Education for all (EFA).
- (b) The New Delhi (1992) declaration of the E-9 countries (the nine countries with the largest concentration of illiterates in the world).
- (c) The (January 2000) Recife - Brazil convention aimed at massive reduction of illiteracy in the developing countries.
- (d) The Ouagadougou (1992) Pan-African declaration on the education of girls and women.
- (e) The Amman - Affirmation of 1996 which advocated the forceful pursuit of the Jomtien recommendations on Basic Education for all.

Collectively, all these conventions to which Nigeria is signatory constitute the major international antecedents to the adoption of the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria. All the declarations touch on such issues as access, quality and efficiency in education which are central to the success of our education programme.

At the national level the final launching of the Universal Basic Education programme followed various stakeholder policy dialogues and micro planning at various levels. There were also informal action-research-oriented activities. All these have been done to pave way for the smooth take off of the Universal Basic Education programme. On the 30th September, 1999, the Head of State launched what is supposed to be the Universal Basic Education vision. From this stage it has been left to education technocrats to translate the vision into reality and mobilize all the nation's creative energies towards the realization of the objectives. Between September 1999 and May 2000 several consultations of stakeholders were held. These consultations form the main planning stages for the final take off and execution of the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria.

It may be necessary at this point to briefly examine the objectives of the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria. The main Universal Basic Education programme as outlined by the Head of State in April 2000 include the following:

- (i) To develop full awareness of the cardinal importance of education in nation building,
- (ii) The provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school going age.
- (iii) To reduce drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system (through improved relevance, quality and efficiency),
- (iv) To cater for children who due to unfortunate circumstances may have interrupted their

schooling,

- (v) To inculcate ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a social foundation for life-long learning.
- (vi) To encourage the development and use of all the faculties of the man through the acquisition-of appropriate vocation and technical skills. The paradigm here is that the Universal Basic Education programme among other things has the objectives of unity on Nigerians the necessary skills and knowledge that will ensure their maximum participation in the task-of moving the country forward fast enough to be a forceful member of the global village of the 21st century. This is where the scheme finds relevance.

Education and National Development

In the opinion of Ranson (1994), education is the method by which a society transmits from one generation to the next, its knowledge, culture and values. He further observed that for the individual, education is the process by which a person learns facts, acquire skills and develops abilities and attitudes necessary for the life. For the larger society education is an essential factor in the accumulation of human capital, which is essential for economic and social development and by encouraging responsible citizenship helps to prepare the way gradually for a robust democracy. Education generally and basic education in particular is a vital factor in the attainment and sustenance of national development. This is why Nigeria must make greater investment in the provision of education (especially at the Primary and Junior Secondary School levels). The provision of education generally and basic education in particular is essential for the eradication of illiteracy which is put at about 60% in the country and the reduction of poverty. Both poverty reeducation and the eradication of illiteracy are "critical" in the implementation of sound economic and social policies (World Bank, 1995).

Alfred North Whitehead as quoted by Okafor (1988) observed that, in the conditions of modern life, the rule is absolute the race that does not value trained intelligence is doomed". Okafor (1988), further observed that "... the wealth and power of a nation depend on the successful education of its citizens..." The factor of education stands in a class of itself among the factors necessary for the ushering in and sustenance of contemporary development. Education as noted by Okafor (1988) is the wheel-base around which all the other factors of development revolve. "It serves as a catalyst both for individual actualization, national development and international relations" (Okafor, 1988). Let it be observed further that there can be no long range plan for a lasting, ordered and coordinated development without adequate plans for mass education (Basic Education) for the citizenry. This is because without education the attainment of any meaningful development remains a mirage. As Okafor (1988) rightly observed, there is hardly any development project more vital than the education of the citizens. Basic education is the surest means by which the vicious cycle of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and disease can be broken. The current situation of deprivation, ignorance and want that is the bane of the Nigerian nation can be effectively checked through the provision of mass education in the form of the Universal Basic Education programme. Okafor (1988) noted correctly that..... the modern man is not truly modern if he cannot read and sign his name in contemporary societies, illiteracy has remained a major source of frustration and humiliation.

For Nigeria and indeed any emergent nation of the world to make any meaningful impact in development, illiteracy must be removed root and branch through the provision of Universal Basic Education for the citizens. The harnessing of the nations natural resources and the diffusion of technical know-how, there is the dire need for mass education. This is equally important if Nigeria and Nigerians must fit in freely into the ongoing symphony of change.

Education and Democracy in Nigeria

There are two major ways that education and democracy relate. Firstly, the provision of Basic Education for the entire citizenry is a fundamental right in a true democratic society. Secondly, the provision of education generally is a fundamental element in the attainment and sustenance of true democracy. Education as a system has some inherent features such as equity, tolerance and a sense of critical judgement among others, which are vital to the sustenance of the democratic culture in any given society. At this point it may be necessary to briefly examine the concept of democracy. According to the American Political Dictionary the term is derived from the Greek words 'demos' (which means the people) and 'kratos' (which

means authority). In ancient Athens it was practiced as a direct system (government of the people by the people). Modern democracy however, is indirect and representative. As much as possible and for the interest of the generality of the people it is participatory. The creed of democracy as a modern system of government include the following :-

- (i) Individualism which holds that primary task of government to ensure that each individual attains the highest potential of development.
- (ii) Liberty which holds that every member of the society has the greatest amount of freedom consistent with order.
- (iv) Equality which postulates that all men are created equal and have equal rights and opportunity.
- (iv) Fraternity which holds that individuals will not misuse their freedom but will co-operate in creating a wholesome society.

As a political system democracy presupposes that man should control his destiny and make moral judgements and practical decisions in his daily life.

For the creed of democracy to take root in any society education generally and basic education in particular has to have a firm root. The objectives of education as already articulated tally perfectly with the realization of the creed of democracy. This is particularly true for a pluralistic society like Nigeria where ethnicity and tribalism are still a common feature of national life. Here too it may be necessary to highlight the intrinsic nexus between education and leadership. As Okafor (1988) observed, "A leader cannot be better than his education". Leadership at every level in the democratic dispensation is important. Today one of the major obstacles to the realization of true democracy and indeed nationhood in Nigeria is bad leadership. It is the opinion of this presentation that it is only when the leadership at the grass root is adequately informed the process of education that the democratic culture can be firmly put on ground. No leadership can be better than the follower-ship. In democracy it is from the followership that leadership and leaders emerge. For true democratic leaders to emerge therefore the followers must inform well enough to be able to separate true leaders from bad leaders. In Nigeria, people of all shades aspire to leadership. It is true that majority of these people are those who should not have anything to do with leadership. Such people often attain leadership positions at the expense of genuine leaders as a result of widespread ignorance and abject poverty occasioned by the high rate of illiteracy in the country.

The major threats to entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria today are illiteracy and poverty. Illiteracy and poverty do not allow for the critical judgement and sound/rational decisions among the majority of Nigerians. As a result it has remained a mere dream for true democracy to take root in the country.

Conclusion

Okafor (1988) noted that "...An educated citizenry is the only means whereby a democratic slate can survive." It is the responsibility of the state to ensure the provision of such education that will develop human resources and promote, preserve and perpetuate the knowledge and skills as well as attitudes considered necessary for the survival of the nation and the well being *of its citizenry*. For Nigeria as a country of diverse ethnic and cultural interests, there is hardly any alternative to a robust Universal Basic Education programme for the sustenance of national development and democracy.' Education has objectives, which if properly harnessed can propel the country into the giant it seeks to be in the world. Our quests for the effective harnessing of natural and human resources, the cry for unity in diversity, the desire for the attainment of a lasting and enduring democratic culture can all be achieved through (he Universal Basic Education programme if it is made to work.

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