

REPOSITIONING UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Six years after the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme was launched by the President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in Sokoto, the programme is yet to establish its footings on the educational landscape of Nigeria. This paper examines the historical background of free and compulsory primary school education in Nigeria. It x-rays the position so far of the Universal Basic Education and some of the challenges faced by the UBE programme in Nigeria. In the light of these challenges, the paper recommends some measures that would help to reposition the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria.

Introduction

Education has become so important today for both developed and developing nations and has far-reaching functions that in almost every nation, educational policy is a matter of national concern. (Chendo, 2001).

Universal Basic Education was introduced and launched on 30th September, 1999 in Sokoto by the Head of State of Nigeria President Olusegun Obasanjo. Unlike the Universal Primary Education (UPE) that was meant to provide free and compulsory education for pupils in the primary school, which failed, the Universal Basic Education is expected to provide free and compulsory Universal Basic Education for every child between the ages of six to fourteen in Nigeria. Also, dropouts and out of school children, adolescents, nomadic farmers and fishermen are also expected to acquire basic education through this programme (Odedele and Egotanwa1996).

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme of the Federal Government, is a policy reform measure aimed at rectifying the existing distortions in the basic education sub-sector of our educational system by ensuring quality of access and quality provision within the context of poverty alleviation in an emerging democracy (UBE Digest Progress Report 2004).

Unfortunately, since the introduction of the UBE programme in Nigeria, it has been facing a number of challenges that need to be addressed to ensure its complete success.

A brief historical Background of the Universal Basic Education (UBE)

Since the middle of the 1970s, when the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme was introduced, universal access to education has been the prime target for Nigeria.

The primary objective in introducing the Universal Primary Education was to enable all children from all social, cultural, educational and economic backgrounds to benefit unhindered from primary education. In theory, it was even proposed that Universal Primary Education should be free. In practice, that educational programme was not all that free. Some financial commitment was subtly imposed on parents, or guardians (Denga 2001).

Furthermore, according to Denga (2001), the laudable expectations of UPE Scheme was bedeviled by, lack of planning, lack of teachers, lack of technical-know-how and numerous other logistics. It became doubtful whether or not this Universal proposal was achieving the objectives for which it was established. Its incubation period or transition became rather long.

According to Chendo (2001), the political expediency of implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme overwhelmed the rationality of proper planning and, though the healthy economic situation was there to provide the necessary funds, the human resources need were not available. Of the estimated 600,000 teachers required to implement the Scheme only about 48,000 were available (Chendo, 2001).

The government had to make up from emergency recruits, retired teachers, school certificate drop-outs and even market women. This situation not only lowered standards but contributed immensely to the lowering of the morale of well-trained teachers whose ranks were polluted (Chendo,

While most Nigerians were mourning the apparent demise of a well-fashioned-out programme, the Federal Government under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo launched a new education programme known as Universal Basic Education (UBE).

The universalization of access to Basic Education was influenced by a World Conference on Education for All (WCFF) held at Jomtien, Thailand in March, 1990. It was organized under the auspices of UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank to examine the possibility of achieving education for all by the year 2000, (Ibe-Basse 2001). The conference was based on the Universal Declaration of Human Right on Education adopted by the United Nations in 1950, which asserts that "everyone has a right to education."

The brief historical background has been given to clarify the world's position on Basic Education and how Nigeria, working in partnership with world development agencies, is taking the right step in the right direction.

In Nigeria, Basic Education was equated with six years of primary schooling. Now, the concept is expected to

cover the three years of Junior Secondary School (JSS) as well.

UBE, the Position so Far

According to Ali (2004), the Federal Government through the UBE programme has made a lot of financial input in the following area;

- (i) Construction of classrooms, offices, stores and toilets: These are all embedded in the UBE building project in primary schools. They are visible in almost all the states and local government areas of the federation.
- (ii) Provision of Instructional Material and Teaching aids: Instructional materials and Teaching aids have been procured by the Federal Government with the help of foreign assistants like the World Bank and the United State Agency for International Development (USAID). These items have been distributed by UBE to states. Other items procured and distributed to states on the basis of equity for distribution to LGEAs and Schools also include; Biro pens, Drawing books, Education charts, Exercise books, Rulers, pencils, Admission and Attendance Registers, Balloon World globes etc.
- (iii) Training And Retraining of Teachers: The exercise of training of teachers was contracted to the National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna, the project was called Pivotal Teacher Training Programme (PTTP). UBE Technical Assistance Team under the auspices of the British Council has also retrained staff of National Project Co-ordination Unit (NPCU) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) programmes.

Other areas, which the Federal Government, through the UBE programme, has made financial input, are curriculum review, provision of vehicles and boats for monitoring purposes etc. The passing of the Universal Basic Education Bill and the subsequent Presidential assent to the Bill on the 28th of May, 2004 was another landmark achievement by the Federal Government to give the programme a legal status.

The Challenges

In spite of some success stories highlighted above the UBE Programme still faces some obstacles and challenges. Some of these obstacles and challenges were also faced by the defunct Universal Primary Education (UPC) Scheme. Therefore, to reposition the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria, these challenges and obstacles must be addressed.

- (a) Problem of Integration and Partnership. The federal government has not done enough to involve other stakeholders as partners in the effective implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme. This situation has created some form of mistrust and suspicion among the stakeholders especially the other tiers of government. For example, the roles of states and local government areas in the UBE programme has not been properly addressed.
- (b) Inadequate Publicity: The image of the UBE programme has not been adequately projected because of inadequate publicity. Some communities and members of the public are yet to understand the relationship between the UBE and the existing primary school education.
- (c) Poor Funding: The UBE programme is not adequately funded by the Federal Government. This has affected the completion of some building projects undertaken by the UBE. At present the commission is relying on the World Bank to finance most of its projects. The states of the Federation are not helping matters because of their lukewarm attitude to the UBE programme. Some states are yet to establish their State UBE Board.
- (d) Operational Issues: Issues about who manages JSS i.e Junior Secondary School in line with the nine-year provision for UBE has not been properly addressed and thus, adding to the confusion.
- (e) Shortage of Teachers; The UBE programme is still plagued with the problem of shortage of teachers. Some of the graduates of the Pivotal Teachers' Training Programme have not been employed. The teacher-pupil ratio is still on the high side considering the influx of pupils to school in some states. According to the Ebonyi State, Primary Education Board (SPED), statistics reveal that since the introduction of the free education programme in the state, - pupils' enrolment has increased from 302,299 in 1999, to 440,211 as at November, 2003, and number of primary schools increased from 629 in 1999, to 813 as at November, 2003, (Ebonyi SPED 2004).
- (f) Inadequate Infrastructure: The Universal Basic Education Programme is still suffering from inadequate infrastructural facilities such as classroom blocks and other building projects to cater for the teeming number of pupils and staff. Shortage of funds has compounded the situation.
- (g) Irregular Payment of Salaries to Teachers; One of the major challenges of the UBE programme is irregular payment of Teachers Salaries. The situation is even made worse because of the fact that state, local government and even the federal government are dragging their feet over this

responsibility.

Recommendations on the Way Forward

Considering the challenges enumerated above, the following recommendations have been made to reposition the UBE Programme in Nigeria.

- (1) The Federal Government should evolve a comprehensive integration and partnership policy among the other tiers of government. A well defined implementation strategy that would involve all stakeholders - states, local government, communities, civil societies, international agencies and the private sectors such that mistrust and confusion would be completely removed. For example, communities should be encouraged to engage in building projects for UBE Programme in their areas. States should also be encouraged to pay counterpart funds. Private sectors could also liaise with the Parent/Teacher Association in the various schools in terms of infrastructural development.
- (2) There should be an effective and adequate publicity, especially at the grass root. Stakeholders should also be properly enlightened about the importance of the UBE programme, the role they are expected to play and why it should not fail like the Universal Primary Education Scheme (UPE). Using town criers, and Host communities' language in jingles, TV and radio talks are recommended.
- (3) Funding is one key factor that is very important to the success of the programme. For the UBE programme to succeed the issue of funding should be properly addressed by the Federal Government. For example funds allocated for the UBE programmes should be released 100% without delay. It is the view of this writer that instead of trying to dominate the UBE programme, more funds should rather be released to states and Local Government Education Authorities while the management of primary education should remain with the local government because it is their constitutional responsibility.
- (4) Operational issues like who controls primary education and who manages JSS in line with the nine-year provision for the Universal Basic Education (UBE), should be addressed to guard against possible conflict between State Primary Education Boards (SPED) and State Secondary Education Boards (SSED).
- (5) Shortage of teachers should be tackled to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio. Recruiting more teachers and employing graduates from Pivotal Teacher Training Programme (**PTTP**) should be encouraged by states in addition to graduates from State Colleges of Education to supplement teachers in those schools with inadequate teachers, as shown by statistics.
- (6) Infrastructural Development should be massively pursued. Classroom construction should be increased and funds for completion of all uncompleted structures relevant to the UBE programme should be made available. Other materials like equipment needed for practical and other educational aids should be provided.
- (7) Teachers' salary should be given proper attention so as to improve their morale. They should not only be paid, but as at when due.

Enough grants should be given to the State and Local Government so that they can assume greater responsibility in this regard since it is their constitutional responsibility to take care of primary education.

Other issues that need be addressed include the UBE curriculum, which should take care of both formal and non-formal aspects of the programme. The federal Government should however continue to monitor and provide policy guideline for effective implementation of the UBE programme in the States, Local Government and by other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Since the inception of government intervention in Primary School Education in Nigeria, the education system nationwide has suffered many setbacks. These setbacks include; poor funding, infrastructural inadequacy, irregular payment of teachers' salaries, and a host of other problems.

Most of these challenges have also resurfaced in the Universal Basic Education Programme of the Federal Government as highlighted above. For the UBE to be repositioned to meet its cardinal objectives of free and compulsory basic education for all, the suggested recommendations should be effectively addressed.

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