

Extent of Implementation of Universal Basic Education Scheme in Nigeria: A Sina-Qua-Non for National Development

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme which is a nine year programme being implemented by the Federal Government of Nigeria, to among other things: eradicate illiteracy, ignorance, reduce the incidence of drop-out-from formal school system; and create the basis for the acquisition of skills and knowledge required for life-long learning. The paper notes that the effective implementation of UBE scheme is bedeviled by myriads of constraints viz: (i) poverty, (ii) lack of commitment by some state governments, (iii) inadequate funding, (iv) ignorance, (v) unqualified teachers, and (vi) inadequate infrastructure. The author has discussed and analysed these constraints and makes some recommendations which when effectively implemented will help in the overall development of the nation. Such implementation is necessary and should be seen as a matter of urgency. This is in view of the fact that basic education is a catalyst for national development.

Keywords: Development, national development, education, Universal Basic Education, implementation

Introduction

Prior to the introduction of Universal Basic Education (UBE) by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999, some efforts had been made in the past towards eliminating illiteracy and ignorance in the country. In 1955, 1957 and 1962, the then Western, Eastern and Northern regions respectively had introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) in their respective regions. The schemes failed basically because of ineffective implementations. Recall also that in September 1976 the then Military President of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo, launched the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme in Sokoto. This bold attempt to introduce the UPE on a national scale for the first time could not last long; reason being that the scheme was improperly planned, hurriedly executed and politicized (Adesina, 1977; Uche, 1984).

On 30th September, 1999, the Universal Primary Education (UPE) resurrected in the form of Universal Basic Education (UBE). The scheme which was formally launched by the same President Olusegun Obasanjo (as a civilian president) is a nine-year programme being implemented by the

Federal Government to eradicate illiteracy, reduce the incidence of drop-out from formal school system, make education accessible to every Nigerian child; and create the basis for the acquisition of skills and knowledge required for life-long learning. According to Section 12 of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2003), “basic education, to be provided by Government shall be free, compulsory, universal and qualitative”. It comprises three stages of education viz: (i) 1-year of kindergarten (ii) 6 years of primary, and (iii) 3 years of junior secondary education.

The above 9-year UBE scheme was considered by policy-makers to be an end in itself as well as foundation for higher levels of education. For many stakeholders, academic commentators, scholars, administrators, etc., the scheme is laudable but the problems of the past remain. For them, there is no difference in content and form; the only change is the nomenclature. The main issue, therefore, is how to effectively implement the objectives of the new scheme to achieve the desired result. This is because basic education is more than an end in itself. It is the foundation for life-long learning and human development on which any nation may build further levels and other types of education. Again, it is only when the objectives are achieved that basic education can act as a catalyst for national development. What then is to be done? What shall we do to ensure that what bedeviled the UPE and occasioned its scraping will not affect the eventual fate of the UBE?

Conceptual Framework

Development

According to Nnoli (1981) “development: is a dialectical phenomenon in which the individual and society interact with political and biological change and in transforming them for their own betterments and that of humanity at large and being, transformed in the process”. Rodney (1972) on his own part identified development “as a many-sided process, implying for the individual increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material wellbeing”. To Mclean and Mcmillan (2003) development “is a normative concept referring to a multidimensional process that involves reorganization and re-orientation of the entire socio-economic cum political and cultural systems”.

National Development

According to Modupe (2015) national development is a process of socio-cultural, economic, environmental, as well as political change which a nation experiences from time to time. It is people oriented and its success is evaluated in terms of the impact it has had in improving the lot of the masses. Edeh and Ogbu (2002) posit that “national development encompasses the acts and processes of developing a nation”. The point therefore is that national development deals with all round development of a nation and all aspects of national development are essential and inter-related. Consequently, where one aspect of national development is dysfunctional other aspects will be affected (Aggarwal, 2014).

Education

For our purpose here, we define education as a process. Here, emphasis is on the means and procedures through which one thing is transformed into something else. It results to change in behavior. To Dewey in Ravi, (2015) "Education is the process of living through a continuous reconstruction of experiences. It is the development of all those capacities in the individual which will enable him to control his environment and fulfill his possibilities". According to Ukeje (1986), "education viewed as a process "is the means men acquire the civilization of the present and make the civilization of the future". It is a process of initiation into the society and also a process of inculcating a way of life in the mind of a newly born child which is like a blank-tablet (tabula rasa) on which experience writes ideas. To Tribble (2012) "education is the process of development which involves the passage of a human being from infancy to maturity; the process whereby individual gradually adapts himself in various ways to his physical, social and spiritual environment".

From the above definitions we can conclude that: (a) Education is a life-long process of acquisition of experiences which starts from the cradle and ends in the grave (b) It must adjust its aims and programmes to changing conditions to prepare the learners for life's problems and responsibilities (c) It concerns itself with the cultivation of the whole person.

Implementation

According to Hornby (2005), implementation means "to make something that has been officially decided to start to happen or to carry out a policy". To Ogbonnaya (2013) "it is the process of carrying out objectives or a plan. It is the process of performing a task, an activity or programme". Egonmwan (1991) describes implementation "as the stage where the preparations made earlier, the plans, designs and analysis are tested to see whether they are really what they are".

Universal Basic Education (UBE): Meaning, Objectives and Scope

The word 'basic' is derived from the word 'base' which means the bottom or foundation of a thing upon which the whole thing rests or is made. According to Anyebe (2007), 'basic education forms the foundations framework upon which all other forms of education are built upon'. It is basic because it comes first in time, i.e., it is the primary period of one's education (Aggarwal, 2014). Ocho (2005) "posits that basic education is that education that makes one a properly adapted member of society". This means that the concept is dynamic being relative to both time and place. Put differently the requirements of basic education will differ from society to society and from one period to the other in the same society. It is that education which meets the needs of a given society at any given time and within a given social context. According to UNESCO cited in Obanya, Okoye, Ezewu and Adejumo (1985) "basic education is a life-long education; conceived as the first stage of the process of life-long learning aimed at inculcating the basic skills of language, numeracy, inquisitiveness, reasoning and of course, learning how to learn".

On 30th September, 1999, in Kano, President Olusegun Obasanjo launched another Education scheme with another universal tag called the Universal Basic Education (UBE). Section II of the National Policy on Education (NPE) (2013) made provision for two important objectives (among others) of Basic Education as follows:

- (i) Provision of free, universal and basic education for every Nigerian child of school age from primary to junior secondary school;
- (ii) The second objective was aimed at reducing the incidence of drop-out from formal school system through improved relevance, quality and efficiency.

Again section 12 of NPE (2013) is to the effect that basic education, to be provided by government shall be free, compulsory, universal and qualitative. It comprises:

- a) 1 year of kindergarten;
- b) 6 years of primary;
- c) 3 years of Junior Secondary Education.

Mr. President's pronouncement at Sokoto at the launching of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) as well as the NPE provisions above is no doubt in conformity with the 1999 Constitution. The President was therefore acting within the provision of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended), the grundnorm, which in its section 18(a) provide for "free, compulsory and universal education". This is important in view of the ever increasing number of out-of-school children in Nigeria and the desire of the Federal Government to eliminate illiteracy in the country. To note also is that the President's pronouncement was predicated on the 1991 Jomtien Declaration (in Thailand) on Education for All (EFA) which was popularized by UNESCO with the slogan that "Education for All is the Responsibility of All". Related to the foregoing is that both the UNESCO slogan as well as the clarion-call by the President were all wake-up campaign slogan for the UBE orientation and implementation (Ivowi and Ogunleye, 2011).

From the above objectives, it is very clear that the UBE is more ambitious, inclusive, with an elaborate scope than the former scheme (i.e. Universal Primary Education) (NPE). For one, the expanded Basic Education portfolio should start from early childhood care and socialization and go through a variety of out-of-school possibilities for basic education. For instance, it includes adult and non-formal education programmes at primary and junior secondary levels for the adults and out-of-school youths. Related to this is that Basic Education (BE) is programmed to forge a meaningful link between formal, non-formal and informal education. If well implemented, it will build bridges and ladders to enable the beneficiaries of one form of education to cross to another. Equally, it is an avenue where a person who for one reason or the other abandons formal education at one stage should be able to climb on another stage later in life (Obanya, Okoye, Ezewu and Adejumo 1985).

In the Jomtian Declaration of 1991 vis-a-viz basic education, emphasis was on laying a solid foundation for literacy, numeracy, and life skills (adapted to the rapidly changing demand of the learner's ever changing environment). Years of schooling (formal education) was de-emphasized. The ultimate goal was how to bring learners to the level at which they have learnt how to learn (Obanya, 2014). Applauding dynamism and inclusiveness of the expanded basic education portfolio Draper III (in Rao 2007) posits that "Basic education should be pursued not merely as a sectoral target, but as integral part of a human development plan".

Theoretical Framework

The importance of a free, universal and compulsory education in the life of any nation's socio-political and economic development cannot be disputed. It has for a long time been recognized by philosophers and world agencies. For instance, as early as the 4th Century B.C. Plato (427-374BC) had emphasized the importance of education in the Republic (380-370B.C.); hence his plan for a compulsory state directed scheme of education (Sabine and Thorson, 2011). He was of the view that for a just state to exist all its citizens must be educated.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) equally regards illiteracy to be a very big curse which hinders the progress of any country. He, therefore, advocated for mass education as a way to tackle the menace of illiteracy. According to him, mass education can be achieved in two ways, which are, providing free and compulsory primary education to all children up to the age of 14 years and providing adult education. The responsibilities for education of the illiterates rest on the state and the entire society (Ravi, 2015). Equally, Dewey (1859-1952) considered mass education as indispensable factor for democracy to thrive in any society. According to him, "education which aims at the development of the individual personality should not be restricted to only a particular class or section of the society". Consequently, education should be universalized and made available to all.

The above postulations by early philosophers have also been supported by other relevant documents. For instance, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, in its Article 26 provides as follows:-

- a) Everyone has the right to education and this should be free at least in the elementary and primary stages.
- b) Elementary education should be compulsory while technical and professional education shall be made generally available.

Again, section 18(3) of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria (as amended) is to the effect that primary education shall be free, compulsory and universal.

Implementation of Free, Compulsory and Universal Education in Nigeria

In Nigeria the late Obafemi Awolowo was among the first Nigerians to embrace mass and free education. Awolowo cited in Ezeocha (1999) posits that 'if Nigerians wanted to modernize and live

in peace, free education at all levels must be provided for all the citizens” Fawehimi (1974) notes that, “free education at all levels in Nigeria would save the country from slow, lopsided economic development and other socio-economic ills that plague the illiterate society”.

The growth of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Nigeria could be attributed to the efforts made by leaders of three major political parties in pre-independence Nigeria. The three political parties were: the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (N.C.N.C.) led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe; Action Group (AG) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Nigerian Peoples Congress (NPC) led by Sarduna of Sokoto.

The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 came into operation barely five years after the introduction of the ineffective Richard Constitution that introduced active tribal politics in Nigeria. This constitution among other provisions made it possible that Regional Houses of Assembly could enact laws on education and also fund education (Uche, 1984). With this legal backing coupled with the Action Group victory at the first election to the Western House of Assembly in 1952 Chief Obafemi Awolowo came up with the idea of introducing Universal Primary Education in Western Region. The scheme which was later introduced in 1955 had some problems that bedeviled its implementation. They include the following:

- (a) Under-estimation of the figures required vis-a-viz the actual number of pupils to be enrolled.
- (b) Lowering of educational standards
- (c) Preponderance of untrained and uncommitted teachers
- (d) Inadequate supervision, etc.

In February 1957, the Universal Education was launched by the Eastern Regional government without proper planning. On this, Adesina (1977) agrees that the UPE scheme in the West and Eastern Regions failed because they were improperly planned and hurriedly executed. The Northern Region leaders at the time never considered Universal Primary Education (UPE) a priority. Many reasons accounted for this unfavourable attitude, including: (i) Western education was considered to be evil (Boko); (ii) The financial burden of the project would be very high; and (iii) Making Western education available to all and sundry would threaten the power status-quo of the feudal ruling class (Ejogu, 2001). Feeling uneasy about the development of free Universal Primary Education in the Southern Nigeria, between 1955 and 1960, the Northern Nigerian Government reviewed her educational system under Oldman Commission Education law and created Local Education Authorities (LEAS) in 1961 (Egwu, 2004). The truth therefore is that the government of the North then was concerned more with development of education in the rural areas as well as promotion of adult literacy all of which were financed freely with government funds.

In September 1976 President Obasanjo launched the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme at Sokoto. This bold attempt to introduce the UPE on a national scale could not last long, reason being

that the scheme was ineffectively implemented. This was followed by the politicization of education under Buhari's military regime which then led to the scrapping of the scheme. Consequently, both the federal and state governments reverted to fee paying education policy (Uche, 1984).

In 1999 President Obasanjo as a civilian President launched another education scheme with the same universal tag at Sokoto. The Scheme he named the Universal Basic Education (UBE). To some commentators there is nothing new in content and form. The only new thing there is the nomenclature since the problems of the past have not been solved. What then is to be done?

Constraints to Effective Implementation of UBE Scheme

The 1999 Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme in Nigeria is beset by several challenges. The constraints if not urgently addressed shall jeopardize national development. The constraints are listed and analysed below.

1. Poverty

Of recent, Nigeria has acquired a new status as the world's poverty capital which finds expression in the number of children who cannot go to school. According to World Poverty clock, about 44.2% of the country's population lives in extreme poverty (Nwamu, 2019). It means that parents who fall within this stratum cannot afford good education for their children. This, by implication, means that basic education which by right should be free for the poor is not so in Nigeria. This probably explains why Success Adebor of Okotie Eboh Primary School in Delta State protested when she was sent home because her parents failed to pay her examination fees. It is really unbelievable and shameful that a country which is very rich in oil reserves cannot effectively implement the UBE scheme that was put in place since 1999, due to stupendous corruption and mediocrity.

2. Lack of Commitment to Act by State Governments

The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) enabling law made provision for counterpart fund via a clause. In the clause, matching grants were imposed on the states to increase the amount available annually for investment into the basic education of the Nigerian child. Unfortunately, due to lack of political will and poor prioritization of education by many states, many states' UBE funds have remained unclaimed. This is because many states deviate from the guidelines required to access fund in the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) funding system. For instance, findings show that between 2005 when the Commission formally began operation and October 31 2017 the total statutory release by the Federal Government as FGN-UBE Matching Grant was N380,052,313,491.76, while a total of N303,933,462,013.90 amounting to 80 percent has been disbursed to 36 states and the Federal capital Territory, "leaving a balance of N76,119,051,481.86 representing 20 percent of the sum yet to be accessed by the states" (Olanrewaju & Alabi, 2019).

To note also is that while several states refuse to pay their counterpart fund, others divert funds from the Federal Government for other purposes. A case in point is the sum of N1.56billion UBEC fund misappropriated by a former administration in Kwara State in 2013; that criminal act not only denied Kwara State N5.4billion UBEC money but led to the official blacklisting of the state by UBEC (Uwerunonye, 2019). At present, some states like Ekiti and Edo have failed to meet this condition for some years due to the alleged mismanagement of funds meant for that purpose by successive regimes.

3. Inadequate Funding

For the government to effectively implement the UBE scheme, it must significantly increase its budgetary allocation to the education sector. By implication, it has to move closer to the UNESCO recommended average annual budgetary provision of about 26 percent to education. This has not been the case usually. This is because, whereas the United Nation (UN) recommends that 26 percent of national budget be allocated to education to enable nations adequately cater for the needs of the sector, the country allocates less than 10 percent. In 2017 for instance, only 7.04 percent budgetary allocation was given to education totaling N605.8billion, with N435.1billion for recurrent expenditure, N61.73billion for capital expenditure and N109.06billion for UBEC (Obinna, 2019). This issue of underfunding is not encouraging. It hinders effective implementation of the scheme and also gives rise to generation of under-qualified, under equipped graduates which further undermines achievement of our national goals and objectives.

4. Unqualified Teachers

Here, our concern should be on the quality and quantity of teachers recruited. The question is, were teachers recruited through the normal recruitment process or through political considerations? Were teachers recruited in such a way that they are placed where they are not fitted, a case of a square peg in a round hole or what Okorie (1997) refers to as “placing people in the jobs which they lack the necessary competence”? The teacher dimension of the primary education problems ranges from teacher quality, quantity, incentive and self-image to the societal image of the teacher (Adesina, Akinyemi, & Ajayi, 1983). With regard to teachers’ quality, incentive and self-image, it is obvious that Nigeria’s basic education sub-sector is unhealthy and being threatened. This could be seen from the fact that in Kaduna State alone about 22,000 unqualified teachers are at the risk of being sacked by Kaduna State government, while more than 19 states of the federation owed their teachers several months of unpaid salary (Olanrewaju & Alabi, 2019).

5. Inadequate Infrastructure

The infrastructure in most of the primary schools especially in the rural areas is far from being adequate. A visit to most of the schools across the nation shows that most of the infrastructure has

gone bad without replacement. In many of the schools, pupils are forced to sit on the floor under the trees to learn. At times these children are taught inside uncompleted buildings, dilapidated thatched houses or under leaky roofs. It should be emphasized here that provision of adequate infrastructure is necessary for the effective implementation of UBE objectives.

6. Ignorance and the Almajiri System

Many families in Northern Nigeria have no clear knowledge of western education and its usefulness. Again, they have issues with Western education even in states where education is free and available. These families prefer Quranic education and view western education as being evil, forbidden and meant for Christians only (Ugwuoke, 2015). There is no doubt that this kind of attitude undermines the implementation of the UBE scheme as well as the delivery of qualitative education required to transform the region and develop the nation.

Related to the above problem is the challenge posed by the Almajiri system of education in Northern Nigeria. This is a system of education that allows a young child to be sent to another village or town to learn about Islam. They seek Islamic knowledge outside their environment; and also undergo a period of tutelage under Islamic teachers (Mallams) (Babagana, Idris, Danjuma and Abdullahi 2018). Initially during the pre-colonial era, when they had support from government they were good. Later, during the colonial and post-colonial era, the Almajiri system changed. Today, the northern version of Almajiri is a corrupted, perverted and politicized religious practice that has bred industrial scale illiteracy in the region, which is directly linked to insecurity and the region's state of arrested development. This no doubt affects national development.

7. The Fate of the Girl Child

According to UNICEF, girls account for over 60.9 percent of out-of-school children in Nigeria, majority of whom are also from the northern regions and traceable to the negative impact of socio-economic barriers such as early marriages, child labour, insecurity as well as sexual harassment by male teachers (Obinna, 2019). Other constraints to effective implementation in the UBE scheme are: Corruption, poor curriculum supervision, inadequate instructional materials, haphazard school inspection by the appropriate agency, general lack of systematic planning of UBE activities, lack of educational facilities in the rural areas; parental irresponsibility, classroom explosion or congestion; low teacher morale etc.

Conclusion

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme was launched by President Obasanjo in 1999. It is a laudable programme that can lift Nigeria to another level if the objectives are well implemented. Its focus is on education for all. Its most important feature is its ability to forge a meaningful link

between formal, non-formal and informal education. The constraints to the effective implementation of the UBE scheme were discussed above. In view of the fact that basic education is more than an end in itself as well as the launch pad to national development, we call on government at all levels to effectively implement the objectives of the schemes by finding solutions to the constraints. This no doubt will go a long way in solving our security and other anti-social problems. Again, it will show that truly basic education is a catalyst to any meaningful transformation in individuals and nations.

Recommendation

In our discussion above, we noted that the effective implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme is bedeviled by myriads of constraints. In order to proffer solutions to these constraints we recommend as follows:

1. That the budgetary allocation to education in general and basic education in particular should be increased to reflect the 26% UNESCO benchmark.
2. The Federal Government must enforce extant laws and policies of the Universal Basic Education. Consequently, state governments that fail to pay matching grants to access the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) funds must be prosecuted and sanctioned accordingly.
3. Stakeholders that include the media should ensure accountability through monitoring of projects and activities within the Basic Education Sector.
4. Government at all levels should ensure that appropriate agencies of government required to implement the UBE programmes are prevailed to do so.
5. Former Governors found to have diverted their states' UBEC funds or engaged on any corrupt practice vis-a-viz UBEC funds should be brought to account for them once they complete their tenures and exit their immunity mode.
6. The Federal Government should assist the states access the counterpart funds provided by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and also extend the school feeding programme to all the states. Such assistance will help the UBEC implement their basic education objectives.
7. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) shall urgently put in place a policy that is aimed at commencing a distance and open schooling programme across the thirty six (36) states. Such measure will no doubt help reduce the number of out-of-school children in the country.

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