

Local Government Autonomy and the Burden of Providing Quality Basic Education in Nigeria

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Abstract.

Education as a socialization process is used by all Nations to prepare her citizens for sustenance and transformation of the entire facets of the society. Nigeria is not an exception, though with different methods of operation in the provision, funding and management. The foundation of any setup determines the level of durability and quality. Basic education constitutes the foundation of the educational process in Nigeria which is provided and funded by the third tier of government, Local Government. This paper examines the concept of basic education, its importance, characteristic and the problems plaguing its provision and management, bothering on funding. This stage is not properly funded thus affecting the provision of basic infrastructure and facilities needed for its smooth operation, due to poor leadership, misplacement of priority and politicization leading to mismanagement. The state government gives a reasonable support due to its constitutional authority that is been queried culminating into agitations of Local Government autonomy. But caution is the watch word, for if autonomy is to be granted then the constitutional role of provision of basic education should be withdrawn with the federal and state government taking over fully.

Keywords: Basic Education, Local Government, Management, Funding, Autonomy.

Introduction

Education has remained a social process in capacity building, maintenance, improvement and advancement of society. It is a weapon for acquiring skills, relevant knowledge and habits for surviving in a continuous changing world. It is all efforts, conscious and direct, incidental and indirect, made by a given society to accomplish certain objectives that are considered desirable in terms of the individual's own needs as well as the needs of the society where that education is based. It is an obligation for government, stakeholders and parents to provide basic education for its younger generation as part of the socialization process to make them functional. Education in Nigeria is the shared responsibility of the federal, state and local governments. The Federal Ministry of Education plays a dominant role in regulating the education sector, engaging in policy formulation and ensuring quality control. However, the federal government is more directly involved with tertiary education than it is with basic/primary school education, which is largely the responsibility of state (secondary) and local (primary) governments. The education sector is divided into three main sub-sectors: basic (nine years), post-basic/senior secondary (three years), and tertiary (four to seven years,

depending on the major or course of study). Education in Nigeria is majorly provided by public and private institutions. While all efforts are been made to ensure that the average Nigeria child gets quality basic education, the game play of which controls what remains a management problem that has constitute a cog in the wheel of efforts to provide quality basic education.

Basic Education

Basic education is the earliest program of education for children, beginning generally at the age of five or six and lasting from six to eight years. In most countries elementary education is compulsory for all children. It is the whole range of educational activities taking place in various settings (formal, non-formal and informal) that is aimed to meet basic learning needs. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), sees basic education as consisting of two major stages, namely primary education (1st stage) and lower secondary (2nd stage). But for the developing countries, it includes pre-primary education that is operated under the Universal Basic Education scheme (UBE). As a priority, the focus of the Education for All (EFA) movement led by UNESCO and included as the second goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Basic Education is the type of education, (quality and content), that is given in the first level of education. In Nigeria, basic education refers to six years of primary schooling and three years of Junior Secondary School. This concept is operated in Nigeria under the Universal Basic Education (UBE), which is conceived to embrace formal education up to age 15, as well as adult and non-formal education including education of the marginalized groups within the Nigerian society. Primary education is free and compulsory, and offered to children aged 6-12. The curriculum is geared toward providing permanent literacy, laying a sound basis for scientific, critical and reflective thinking, and also in equipping children with the core life skills to function effectively in society. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004), basic education covers education given to children 3-15 years of age, which includes pre-primary programs (ages three to five), and nine years of formal (compulsory) schooling consisting of six years of primary and three years of junior secondary.

Basic education as conceived by EFA is not limited to schooling, but involving both in-school and out-of-school learning and not dependent on years of schooling. It is concerned with satisfying basic learning needs and laying the foundation for lifelong and life-wide learning through a solid base in literacy, numeracy, life skills and learning-to-learn skills (Obanya, 2013). The core of the EFA goals is focused on successful learning consisting of cognitive learning, life-coping skills, life-long learning skills; these three dimensions combine to enhance a person's potentials for positive contribution to society.

Universal Basic Education in Nigeria

Nigeria has made efforts in the past to provide broad-based education through various programmes. These programmes include:

- i. Introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Western Region on 17th January 1955.
- ii. Introduction of Universal Primary Education in the Eastern Region in February 1957.
- iii. Introduction of UPE in Lagos (then Federal Territory) in January 1957.

- iv. The publication of the National Policy on Education in 1977, which insist on the provision of functional, universal and qualitative education for Nigerians showing Governments intention to use a variety of strategies for the provision of Universal Basic Education for all citizens.
- v. Launching of Universal Free Primary Education on 6th September 1976 and.
- vi. The launching of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in September 1999.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme as an educational programme aimed at eradicating illiteracy, ignorance and poverty is in compliance with the Declaration of the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, that resolved and stated clearly in Article 1 'that every person - child, Youth or Adult - shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic needs'. This declaration was later reaffirmed at the World Summit for Children also held in 1990, which stated that 'all children should have access to basic education by the year 2000'.

The World Summit for Children emphasizes on raising the levels of female literacy. In a bid to achieve education goals, the Dakar World Education Forum was held as a follow-up meeting to the WCEFA where new goals were set to be attained by the year 2015. They are:

- i. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- ii. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, with special emphasis on girls, children in difficult circumstances and from ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- iii. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;
- iv. Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
- v. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2015, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
- vi. Improving all aspects of the quality of education, and ensuring excellence for all, so that recognized and reasonable learning outcomes are achieved, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Similarly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Declaration, has two of the eight goals devoted to education. They are goal 2 (to achieve universal primary education) and goal 3 (to promote gender equality and empower women).

As a follow up of the EFA goals, UBE was launched in Nigeria with the following objectives as specified in the implementation guideline by government in 1999 are as follows:

- Developing in the entire citizenry, a strong conscientiousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
- Provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school going age.
- Reducing drastically the incidence of drop out from the formal school system.
- Catering for young persons, their schooling as well as other out of school children or adolescent through appropriate form of complementary approaches to the provision of UBE.

- Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for lifelong living.

Basic Education as Rights of Children

Education is a right that should be accorded to all human beings solely by reason of being human, especially children as the best legacy that can be left for them. The international human rights instruments that provide for education as a fundamental human right of children include *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*, *the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)*, *the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981)* and *the Child Rights Act*.

To enforce this right, the Nigeria government enacted the compulsory, free universal basic education act which state in part 1, section 2 as follows :-

(1) Every Government in Nigeria shall provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age.

(2) Every parent shall ensure that his child or ward attends and completes his

(a) Primary school education; and

(b) Junior secondary school education,

by endeavoring to send the child to primary and junior secondary schools.

(3) The stakeholders in education in a Local Government Area, shall ensure that every parent or person who has the care and custody of a child performs the duty imposed on him under section 2 (2) of this Act.

The non-provision of opportunity for the average Nigeria child to access education is an abuse of his/her right and deliberate deprivation and impoverishment. Therefore the enforcement of this right requires the provision of the privilege with the right environment and facilities for the child to be trained and provided with the necessary skills for them to be functional at adulthood, continuing from where the present adults stopped, sustaining and contributing to the foundation that has been laid. The responsibility of providing basic education is the government, with the states and Local Governments having more responsibilities while the federal government ensuring quality by providing the framework and intervention. As part of the functions of Local Governments in Nigeria, the constitution states in the fourth schedule, part I, section 2(a) that the provision of primary, adult and vocational education is the responsibility of local government.(FRN, 2001) The federal government role is to assist the states and local government in terms of intervention, in the provision of basic education. The provision of primary education as a responsibility includes, the school plant (classrooms and other physical infrastructures), recruitment, training and staff welfare (salaries and other welfare), provision of consumables (biros, writing boards, chalks & markers, biros, notebook, textbooks, dusters etc). But all these seem to be more than the capacity of the various LGA's with large underemployed staff. This has led to LGA's deliberately relinquishing its responsibility to the state and federal government that bears the cost of providing primary (basic) education with the LGA been forced to co-fund salaries of primary school staff. This is reluctantly done, as the state has to deduct at source before salaries can be paid.

Local Governments and Basic Education

Local government as the third tier of government in Nigeria is a political subdivision (in a federal system of a state) which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local

affairs. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected. The 1976 local government reforms in Nigeria were based on three visions, the principles of locality, autonomy and viability as the criteria for creating a local government.(Isaac;2013). Local governments are saddled with enormous responsibilities with the provision of basic education as one. This is still a mirage owing to a myriad of problems linked to poor funding and mismanagement leading to non-provision of appropriate infrastructures and materials and/or provision of substandard/poor quality materials (consumables).

Off these three, that of locality alone has been realized as a criterion for creating Local Governments Areas in Nigeria, while that of autonomy and viability is yet to be achieved. The present struggle and agitation is autonomy of Local Government Administrations, myopically seen as wanting to be free from state control of funds accruing to Local Government Area's from the federation account. Autonomy to advocates is the total withdrawal of State government control (policy formulation) and monitoring/evaluation. But if with the present setup where the state government controls, monitor and evaluates, yet quality is not maintained, then granting autonomy as been proposed may lead to total collapse. The present structure of our Local Government Area's (LGA) is not strong financially to provide basic education owing to lean resources, poor management of resources and underemployment. Education is a vital tool of development in society and is costly requiring prudent management of available resources for its provision. A society without quality education is doomed and our present local government cannot provide basic education as envisaged in the EFA goals and to meet the MDG's target. While the world is thinking of post MDG, Nigeria is still struggling with who and how to provide and manage basic education. This is a hurdle that will certainly hinder the nation in meeting the set goals. Basic education constitutes the most important foundation in the life of any people. It lays the foundation of learning how to learn as individuals learn basic life coping skills all through life. This stage therefore should be handled with utmost care and seriousness as mistakes made at this level last through life with a multiplier effect on the nation for producing prospective leaders without a good background.

There has been a lot of debate about the quality of education in Nigeria. Using most of the known indicators, scholars are in agreement that the quality of education is falling while the standard still remains. The growing problem of poor academic performance is of serious concern with the conclusion that cognitive achievement is low in Nigerian students by international standard and that the recent further decline in supplies of the key inputs at all levels, such as books and other learning materials has had deleterious consequences in terms of quality of performance by both teachers and students alike. This has affected the quality of instruction (input) with a direct effect on output which is the academic performance of students.

The state of education in Nigeria is precarious. The Millennium Development Goals Report acknowledges that quality assurance in education is yet to be adequately addressed in terms of teachers, curricula, teachers support, teaching learning materials etc. (UNESCO, 2011). Some of the indicators pointing to the poor quality of basic education in Nigeria consist of characteristics of learners (healthy, motivated students), processes (competent teachers using active pedagogies), content (relevant curricula) and systems (good governance and equitable resource allocation).

Recommendations

It is quite clear that education for all cannot be achieved without improving quality. There is therefore the need for policies that ensure decent learning conditions and opportunities that can be achieved through:-

- *More funding from Government:* Education is a costly. There is the need for massive increase of public spending in education at all levels of government.
- *Relief of LGA's from primary school funding.* The federal and state government should take over totally all issues concerning basic education.
- *Better utilization of fund and tracking of resources:* There is a great need for better budgeting process with participation of stakeholders and tracking of the use of the resources for education. Civil Society organizations and Schools Management Committee have a big role to play in this regard.
- *More and better trained teachers:* It has been established that countries that have achieved high learning standards have invested steadily in the teaching profession. There is the need to improve teachers' salaries and implement a sound pre-service and in-service training programme. This is important because how well a teacher is trained and the resultant mastery of the curriculum and the level of the teacher's verbal skills, all contribute to quality input and output (teaching and learning). The teacher pupil ratio is one of the indicators of quality.
- *Better remuneration and working conditions for teachers:* Optimal working conditions for teachers will directly contribute to the good quality of public education. Every effort should be made to provide teachers who possess the necessary moral and intellectual qualities and who have the requisite professional knowledge and skills with good working conditions.
- *Emphasis on core subjects:* There is the need for renewed focus on some core subjects such as mathematics, science and language. Reading must be considered a priority area in efforts to improve the quality of basic education.
- *Change in Pedagogy:* There is the need for change in teaching style from the rigid rote learning procedure to a structured teaching procedure with a combination of direct instruction, guided practice and independent learning in a child friendly environment. For improved and quality pedagogical activity, subject teachers should be replaced with the normal old practice of class teachers.
- *Make Learning materials including textbooks available:* This is the key because; the quality and availability of learning materials affect what teachers can do. There is selective provision of textbooks to few schools influenced by political and ethnic reasons instead of need.
- *Provision of facilities:* There is the need to refurbish classrooms and build new ones according to the present trend and standard as well as provide clean water and sanitation. In the provision of these facilities, consideration should be given to pupils with disability.
- *Co-operative teaching,* where a teacher consults others with better knowledge to assist in teaching a particular topic.

Conclusion

Basic education has been acknowledge by all as important and is been provided, but quality education is of more importance, tailored towards the needs of the country citizens to develop

as patriotic, participatory and contributory members of the society. Transformation education should be encouraged. This, the local government cannot provide and therefore, if autonomy is to be granted to Local Government Area's, this responsibility (provision of basic primary education) should be withdrawn from them to enable us built the Nigeria of our dream that lies in the present primary beneficiaries of the UBE scheme. While the standard as stipulated remains the same, students' performance falls below this standard. We should therefore be careful not to build a house that will collapse on our children. The provision of quality basic education is needed for the real transformation of Nigeria.

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