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## **COMPREHENSIVE BASIC EDUCATION: A MEANS FOR ENHANCING DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

**AMOSUN, Moses Dele**

### **Abstract**

*Education is a right for all, especially for children because through education, children acquire relevant knowledge, skills and increased capacity for work which are required for national development. It is the key with which the door of literacy is opened while simultaneously closing the gate of ignorance, poverty and diseases that could plague a nation. It will be disadvantageous therefore, if a category of children called disadvantaged children are deprived of their right to education which is capable to make them live happily among others in the society, earn their livelihood and contribute significantly to national advancement. This paper, therefore, looks at disadvantaged children, their right to basic education, the gains that could be derived in educating them as well as steps to enhancing their access to education.*

### **Introduction**

Basic education from time immemorial has caught the fancy of not only individual but of governments all over the world. Nigeria is not an exception; this assertion is attested to by a general increase in the share of national revenue devoted to education over the first five years after the Jomtien Conference of 1990. For instance, in Nigeria, the 1995 Federal Government budget for the first time in several years allocated the highest percentage to education (Martins & Anastasia, 2001). Education in Nigeria is an instrument "par excellence" for effecting national development. It is seen as crucial and very vital for development starting from pre-primary to secondary and tertiary institution.

For Nigeria to achieve this objective, basic education is the answer. This is because, it is the foundation on which other educational edifices rest. Government of Nigeria has been making efforts to make basic education compulsory, universal and free. The first attempt to universalise primary education throughout Nigeria dated back to 1976 during Obasanjo regime then it was referred to as Universal



Primary Education (UPE), later the second attempt was made in May 1999 when president Olusegun Obasanjo launched the scheme and referred to it as Universal Basic Education (UBE).

According to the blueprint on UBE, the ultimate goal of the entire UBE programme in Nigeria is to eradicate illiteracy in the country within the shortest possible time and make it a basis for meaningful social, economic and political development as well as scientific and technological advancement (FME, 2000).

However, till 2005, EFA report 2008 has it on record that Nigeria is far to eradicating illiteracy by the year 2015 the target year. The implication of this is that there are still many young children who are not in pre-school institution, and primary school in Nigeria. There are still many communities whose environmental, cultural, occupational and physical peculiarities impede their full participation in formal primary education in Nigeria. These consist of children who are poor and socially deprived such as children of pastoral nomads, migrant fishermen, unemployed labourers, ethnic minority groups; disabled children like, deaf, blind, dumb, idiot; children with undesirable behaviour, neglected children, and HIV/AIDS affected children. These groups of people and many others form part of the disadvantaged groups or children in Nigeria.

Thus, the paper is concerned with how comprehensive basic education especially early childhood education and primary education enhance the disadvantaged children access to education and sustain national development. This is because, if all the categories of the disadvantaged children gain access to education, it will lead to reduction of poverty and inequality and lay a sound basis for faster and sustained economic growth, sound governance and effective institutions among others.

### **Meaning of Basic Education**

Basic education is referred to as primary education (Okedara, 2001). It is described as the first pillar of formal education in the educational system of any nation on which all other levels of education both secondary and tertiary are built. This is the reason, this form of education is referred to as compulsory education. Basic education also include both formal and non-formal education. Within the formal sub-sector, basic education embraces all the forms of education given to individual from the six-year primary school up to the end of the three-year junior secondary school. In the non-formal sub-sector, it covers early childhood and primary education, basic functional literacy and post-literacy programmes given to children, youth and adult out of school, and continuing education for either secondary school drop-outs or those who for some reasons or other did not have access to formal secondary school (FME, 2000).



From the description given above basic education is defined by (FME, 2000) as early childhood and pre-primary education, primary education, the first three years of secondary education and basic and functional literacy for out-of-school children, youths and adults. It is an organised, multisectoral, community-based education, which consists of the acquisition of the skills of reading, writing and numeracy, as well as functional knowledge and generative skills determined by the environment. It is a kind of education offered to meet the learning needs of groups of people of all ages in Nigeria.

The definition of basic education, as we can see includes early childhood and pre-primary education. This level of education which was not part of the defunct Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme is now given a prominent and of course the first place in the scope of basic education. This is not unconnected with the benefits that are derivable from early childhood education. Moreover, pre-primary education has been given a prominent place in the National Policy on Education as far back as 1978. The government realize that if education in Nigeria will be an instrument "par excellence" for effecting national development, and primary level of education to achieve its laudable goals as well as curtail the wave of out-of-school children, youths and adults, it must start from pre-primary or early childhood education. This is evidenced by the priority given to early childhood education and pre-primary education in UBE programme.

According to Federal Ministry of Education (2000) blueprint on basic education, the target groups under early childhood and pre-primary education comprises of: (i) children in early childhood (ii) children in pre-primary schools (iii) children of migrant fishermen (iv) children of nomads (v) children in especially difficult circumstances such as street children (vi) children with special needs. Looking at these groups of children, almost all of them have been neglected in Nigeria educational programme for a long time. Although, pre-primary education is entrenched in our National Policy on Education as far back as 1978, age 0-3 were conspicuously neglected. Also, children of nomads, migrant fishermen and children in especially difficult circumstances such as street children were not included in the National Policy on Education. These groups of children could be regarded as disadvantaged children, because they were not provided for in NPE until recently when they were included in UBE programmes document.

### **Disadvantaged Children: A Challenge to Basic Education**

Disadvantaged children are described in UBE blueprint as children of communities whose environmental, cultural, occupational and physical peculiarities impede their full participation in formal primary education. Such children include children of pastoral nomads, migrant fishermen and the disabled; children in especially



difficult circumstance such as street children and of course children with special needs.

Going by the convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, the interpretations of who disadvantaged children are become flexible and could be adjusted at the discretion of the agencies concerned. In the context of educational provision, disadvantaged children are identified as those under the age of 18 (except in cases requiring special care, the age limit could be extended to 24) who are confronted, with problems or find themselves in difficult circumstance or in less favourable situations.

Types of disadvantaged children in specially difficult circumstance include the following groups:

1. Abandoned and neglected children i.e. street children, child beggars; orphans and slum children. Nigeria UBE blueprint specifically identified this group;
2. Children physically or sexually abused i.e. assaulted children, child prostitutes, sexually violated children and children involved in child labour;
3. Children with undesirable behaviour i.e. children who use drugs, children pregnant out of wedlock or before appropriate age; those involved in criminal action/criminal offence; those in remand homes and those socializing in brothels and night spots;
4. Children with physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and learning deficiencies;
5. socially deprived, poor children i.e. children without schooling, children of migratory construction workers and farmers, migratory fishermen, pastoral nomads, children of unemployed labourers, children of ethnic minority groups; children of those under absolute poverty line and those without Nigeria nationality birth registration certificates or household registration certificates; and
6. HIV/AIDS – affected children i.e. those infected with HIV/AIDS and orphans of parents with HIV/AIDS.

These groups of disadvantaged children consist of many young children and out of school youths who are being deprived of their education right. EFA report (2008), specifically identified poor children from poor household, marginalized children like girls and children who engage in labour, children in rural areas or particular ethnic and minorities group; children of migrant fishermen, nomads; orphans and the disabled or children with special needs as disadvantaged children. Thus, disadvantaged children are groups of children who for one reason or the other are not able to enroll or complete normally as ordinary children in pre-primary school and primary school. An Education For All assessment

conducted in 1999-2000 involving six regional conferences corroborated this report, which revealed that at the start of the millennium:

- (a) of the more 300 million children under 6 years of age, fewer than a third benefited from any form of early childhood education.
- (b) Some 113 million children, 60 percent of whom were girls had no access to primary schooling.

Considering the role that education plays through early childhood and pre-primary education and primary education, if such number of children have no access to early childhood, pre-primary and primary education, then the growth and development so desired might be a mirage. For example, in Nigeria, number of out-of-school children in 1999, 2002 and 2005 below as compared to Kenya, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire Senegal, Zambia and South Africa shows that there is still much ground to cover to meet Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target by 2015 as well as the first two goals of Education For All.

**Table 1: Number of Out-of-school Children in Selected Countries 1999, 2002 and 2005.**

	Number of Out-of-school Children (000)		
	1999	2002	2005
Nigeria	7,189	6,707	6,584
Kenya	1,834	1,866	1,123
Ghana	1,330	1,307	900
Cote d'Ivoire	1,254	1,144	1,223
Senegal	808	846	518
Zambia	760	737	228
South Africa	171	446	569

Source: EFA Report: 2008

Odelola (2007) noted that the provision of the UBE programme is presently on the segment of the Nigerian population that is in school, and that the out-of-school youths constitute a larger percentage of the total number of youths in the country and are capable of frustrating the efforts of any educational programme if they are not involved. He reiterated that most-out-of-school youths are disadvantaged in one way or the other; which comprise of children who are never enrolled in school, the abused and the street children, who he described as being illiterate and poor.

The above groups have contributed to low level of education in Nigeria. The low level of illiteracy according to Imhabekhai and Olomukuro (2007) is



estimated to be about 61% and it varies between male and female populations and among the various geopolitical regions.

In fact, the EFA report 2008, ranked Nigeria as the top on the list out of thirty one nations who has higher number of out-of-school children. The above table is just a figure of selected ones. The implication of these figures, based on the assessment carried out and reported by EFA on children under six years (early childhood or pre-primary level) and school age children i.e. primary school and out-of-school children, it means that there are at present a large number of disadvantaged children with no access to education. Basic education services therefore have not reached all children as targeted in Nigeria.

If the first two EFA goals which deal with comprehensive early childhood and care education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and quality education respectively are anything to go by; and if the 2nd and 3rd goals on MDGs which deal with universality and equality in education will be fulfilled in order to raise the quality of their lives and well being then a clear-cut policy on educational provision for disadvantaged children is needed in Nigeria.

### **Comprehensive Basic Education for National Development**

Without any doubt Nigerian government has spent a lot of money in the fight against poverty across the country. Notwithstanding, the World Bank, has advised Nigerian government to place her priority on basic education. The reason is that, basic education is the most significant factor in poverty alleviation (Omokayode in Adesoji, 2001). Moreover, it has been revealed that education increases peoples' capacity to work; economic productivity and financial and social stability (Ajayi in Oyekan 2000).

Also, UBE is expected to equip an individual with knowledge, skills and attitudes which would enable them to

- (a) live a meaningful and fulfilling life.
- (b) contribute to the development of the society.
- (c) derive maximum social economic and cultural benefits and discharge civic obligations completely (FME, 2000) among others.

Specifically, both early childhood and primary education provide opportunities that are beneficial to all stakeholders involved (NPE, 2004). For instance, it is believed that early childhood education is not only the most desirable societal investment for the country's future but as the right of every child to achieve his/her full development potential; ensure their survival, protection and development through effective implementation of policies and programmes in the area of health immunization, nutrition and education; and provides support to the national efforts for universalisation of primary education by releasing girls from the burden of sibling care.

Furthermore, Barbara, Alain and Ramahatra (2003) mentioned what a nation stands to gain that gives attention to primary education especially to its access, enrolment, retention, quality, universality and completion.

- (a) It is one of the most powerful instruments known for reduction of poverty and inequality and for laying the basis for faster and sustained economic growth, sound governance and effective institutions.
- (b) Primary education catalytic role: This is referred to as “the people’s asset”, for those individuals in society who are most likely to be poor: girls, ethnic minorities, orphans, people with disabilities and people living in rural areas. Extending adequate quality primary education to these vulnerable groups is crucial in order to contribute to and benefit from economic growth.
- (c) Education for girls is one of the strongest drivers of improvement in fertility, health of the infants and children, immunization rates, family nutrition and the next generation’s schooling attainment and that education for girls and boys may be the single most effective preventive weapons against HIV/AIDS especially in Africa.
- (d) Primary Education develops the capacity to learn, to read and use Maths to acquire information, and to think critically about that information. It is the gateway to all higher levels of education that train the scientists, teachers, doctors, and other highly skilled professionals that every country, no matter how small or poor requires.
- (e) The expansion of educational opportunities is one of the most powerful tools government have to simultaneously promote income equality and growth-a win-win strategy that in most societies is far easier to implement than the redistribution of other assets such as land and capital.
- (f) Education provides people with “human capabilities” – the essential and individual power to reflect, make better choices seek a voice in society and enjoy a better life.
- (g) When a large share of children do not complete primary education, the productivity of the labour force, the potential for knowledge-driven development and the reservoir of human potential from which society and the economy can draw are all fundamentally constrained.
- (h) Education and particularly primary education, also promotes achievement of all the other Millennium Development Goals: poverty reduction, gender equity, child health, maternal health, lower HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases and environmental sustainability.

### **Steps to Enhancing Disadvantaged Children Access to Education**

Nigeria is a signatory to the convention on the Right of the child which has led to the adoption of Education for all (EFA) goal at World Conference in Thailand



in 1990. This commits the world, Nigeria inclusive, to join efforts in ensuring equity and universality of education for all. The above legal mandate to provide equitable and universal access in education to all children necessitates the urgent need to plan for the education of the disadvantaged children in Nigeria. The following suggestions are hereby made.

Provision of different educational services suitable to the lifestyle of the various groups/types of disadvantaged children must be taken care of, e.g. mobile schools for the nomads and migrating fishermen children. The existing ones should be improved and expanded to areas where there is none.

Government should make their education free in order to encourage them and to support their parents.

Budgetary allocation from all tiers of government, supplemented by funding from other sources for educational services for the benefit of disadvantaged children.

Capacity building for organizations of the public and private sectors including local communities to enable them to participate in educational provision for disadvantaged children must be embarked upon.

Finally, a policy must be formulated that will specify the rights of the disadvantaged children, our vision and goals for the disadvantaged children; types and learning needs of the disadvantaged children; and strategies to practically carry out the policy.

### Conclusion

Education of the disadvantaged children is as important as that of normal and ordinary children. This is because all disadvantaged children are entitled to receive proper education enabling them to enjoy full development to their highest potential. They will thus be able to live with dignity among others in the society without being an undue burden on the nation but contributing to its development. These benefits may be difficult to achieve in a situation where disadvantaged children are neglected because they are not well planned for. In order to facilitate access to education to these neglected groups, live happily and contribute to the nations development, government and other stakeholders are encouraged to expedite measures mentioned above.

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