EDUCATION, CREATIVITY, AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN AFRICA

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CHAPTER 2

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND PROGRESS TOWARD ACHIEVING EDUCATION FOR ALL BY 2015 IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

With only a few years until the 2015 deadline to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated in The Millennium Development Goal Report (2010), “Time is short. We must seize this historic moment to act responsibly and decisively for the common good.” These well-chosen words strongly urge governments to engage constructively and decisively in actions that can help actualize the goals. The Secretary-General also noted, “We have made important progress in this effort, and have many successes on which to build. But we have been moving too slowly to meet our goals.” This statement indicates that there are doubts as to whether the MDGs will be achieved in all the developing parts of the world.

The MDGs are a set of eight specific (in many instances quantitative) objectives for the betterment of the human condition, including goals of poverty reduction and improvement in education, gender equality, health, and environmental quality. The MDGs were adopted
by 192 United Nations (UN) member countries in 2000 to tackle poverty, hunger, disease, and early deaths in poor countries, with a series of targets set for 2015. With only a few months left to meet the targets of the MDGs, most countries in Africa lag behind. Several reports indicate that Sub-Saharan Africa will not reduce poverty and hunger and improve child and maternal healthcare to meet the goals set a decade ago by the United Nations unless African and Western leaders do much more. It was suggested that almost from the outset it was clear that countries and international organizations were not moving fast enough to meet the targets.

One of the key components of the MDGs is achieving universal primary education by 2015—that is, ensuring that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary school. The acknowledgment of the importance of this goal led the Federal Government of Nigeria to introduce the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program. The UBE scheme was put in place to improve on the limitations of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) plan of the 1970s. The scheme was flagged off on September 30, 1999 in Sokoto State by Nigeria’s former President Olusegun Obasanjo. The specific objectives of the UBE scheme, as stated by the Federal Ministry of Education (1999), include:

(i) Developing in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
(ii) The provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school age.
(iii) Reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system (through relevance, quality and efficiency).
(iv) Catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or another have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education, and
(v) Ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate level 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 learning.

This chapter examines the efforts of the Nigerian government to ensure education for all Nigerians through universal primary education before the end of 2015. In Nigeria this policy focus is popularly called Education for All (EFA). The chapter begins with a discussion of the
dimensions of socio-economic inequality in Nigeria. It further examines how the prevailing socio-economic inequality affects basic education in Nigeria as it encourages child labor, which effectively hinders many children from benefiting from government programs aimed at providing universal basic education.

Socio-Economic Dimension of Inequality in Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with its population of about 158 million, accounting for 47 percent of West Africa’s population and a nearly a fifth of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population. Nigeria’s population is diverse, made up of approximately 350 ethnic groups speaking five hundred distinct indigenous languages. The country is Africa’s largest oil-producing country; it is the eleventh largest producer and the eighth largest exporter of crude oil in the world. This has made oil the dominant factor in Nigeria’s economy for the past 50 years. In 2007 over 87 percent of government revenues, 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings, 96 percent of export revenues, and almost half of GDP was accounted for by oil. Despite its abundant natural resources, however, socio-economic inequality is a major problem in the country. Approximately 70 million people live on less than US$1.00 per day, 54 percent of Nigerians live below the poverty line with over one-third of this population living in extreme poverty (defined as those who cannot afford 2,900 calories per day). Poverty has increased in recent decades. For example, between 1970 and 2000, those living on less than US$1.00 per day increased from approximately 36 to 70 percent, translating into a real increase in the number of people living in poverty from an estimated 19 million in 1970 to 90 million in 2000. Human development indicators are also poor, as reflected in Nigeria’s Human Development Index (HDI) at a low of 0.448, giving the country a ranking of 159 out of 177 countries. This human development score indicates that Nigeria is among the countries with a high poverty rate where the majority of the citizens experience a low standard of living.

Nigeria has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. Commenting on the state of inequality in Nigeria, a recent UNDP report (2010) asserts:

Between 1985 and 2004, inequality in Nigeria worsened from 0.43 to 0.49, placing the country among those with the highest inequality levels in the world. Many studies have shown that despite its vast resources, Nigeria ranks among the most unequal countries in the world. The
poverty problem in the country is partly a feature of high inequality which manifests in highly unequal income distribution and differential access to basic infrastructure, education, training and job opportunities. Sustained high overall inequality reflects widening income gap and access to economic and social opportunities between genders, growing inequality between and within rural and urban populations, and widening gaps between the federating units/economies. Inequality between genders stands out as a key policy challenge. The female gender is generally disadvantaged in access to education and employment, agricultural wage and access to land, among other things. Gender inequality is fuelled by many factors, including socio-cultural practices, low economic status, patriarchy and low education. Conditions that prevent the girl-child from receiving early education or that totally undermine her right to education are still prevalent in Nigeria. These conditions include early marriage and the vulnerability of the girl child to mental jobs as a coping mechanism among poor households. Evidence abounds that gender inequality affects growth and perpetuates poverty among the disadvantaged groups. Clearly, inequality hurts the economy and women and girls in particular. High inequality points to corruption, the absence or failure of redistribution policies, significant institutional shortcomings in the provision of basic services as well as many years of mismanagement of public resources, among many other causes. Concern about inequality is strong in Nigeria, and has prompted a variety of past and ongoing redistribution programs woven around poverty reduction and women’s empowerment, but improvements have been slow in coming.  

This report shows that socio-economic inequality is a major problem that affects the ability of the poor to send their children to school. Also, this inequality regarding schooling has a gender dimension, since female children seem more vulnerable. This is very significant because it negatively affects the achievement of the government’s policy of basic education for all Nigerians.

**Socio-Economic Inequality and Basic Education**

Social and economic inequality is detrimental to educational advance-ment in any society. With the introduction of the UBE program, it is believed that development of Nigeria will be accelerated because of the inherent value in education. The EFA movement is a global charge to provide quality basic education for all children. The global commitment to EFA emerged as a reaction to the increasing phenomenon of child labor, child trafficking, child exploitation, and child-related abuses
that tend to deprive children of basic education and a secure future. Unfortunately, socio-economic inequality that contributes to child labor is still a major challenge to the attainment of the goal of EFA in Nigeria.

Child labor is defined as the participation of young children under the age of 15 years in the labor force in order to earn a living or supplement household income. In developing countries, one in five children work, with significant differences in economic activity rates across regions; in Africa, one in three children work, including in Nigeria. Child labor is widespread and is increasing in Nigeria, where 45 percent of over 140 million of the country’s total population are children under the age of 15 years. A staggering 15 million children under the age of 14 are engaged in one form of labor or the other in Nigeria. The majority of these children are exposed to long hours of work in very dangerous and unhealthy environments. Children in Nigeria are exploited in public places and markets as street vendors (64 percent), beggars and shoe shiners (four percent), car washers/watchers (six percent), scavengers (five percent) and foot washers (eight percent). In northern Nigeria, children who survive on the streets by begging are referred to as “almajiris”. Such children are often despised in society. The rise in the rate of child labor in the country may be viewed as a consequence of the demand for cheap labor and socioeconomic inequality.

Child labor leads to mass drop-out from primary and secondary schools, as well as increased involvement in crime and drug-related habits. This hampers both human capital development and the potential economic development of countries like Nigeria. There is widespread belief that employment is destructive to children’s intellectual and physical development, especially that of young children. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates in 1999 indicated that 24.2 percent of children work in Nigeria, between the ages of ten and 14. Commenting on the impact of socio-economic inequality on education of children, especially girls, UNICEF asserted:

Poverty and economic issues, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, inadequate school infrastructure and cultural and religious misinterpretation are the main issues that prevent girls from going to school. With almost 70 percent of the Nigerian population living below the poverty line, girls are often sent to work in the markets or hawk wares on the streets. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy also prevent girls from going to school. A lot of girls drop out of school before reaching primary class six. Most schools lack adequate classroom space, furniture and equipment, and are often too remotely located. Water, health and sanitation facilities are usually inadequate while pupil-teacher ratios could be as
high as 1:1.00 in urban slums. Many Nigerian parents, especially in large families with limited resources, enroll their boys in school rather than girls. Some parents also keep their daughters out of school due to misinterpretation of Islamic religion.21

Child labor affects both the ability to attend school and to benefit from schooling; hence it is a big challenge to the attainment of the goals of EFA. When children are employed in one form of labor or the other they tend to drop out of primary and secondary schools. Child domestic labor in third-party households represents a major barrier to accessing and completing basic, good-quality education in Nigeria. Working children neither have the time or money, nor the energy to go to school. Out of the 15 million working children in Nigeria referred to above, there are about six million working fulltime, equally divided between boys and girls. These children generally do not attend school at all. Another 1 million children are forced to drop out of school because of poverty or their parents’ demands to contribute to the family income. Over eight million children combine school and work. These children work in their spare time to pay education fees; in the process they often skip classes due to demands at their work place.22 Missing out on education makes it impossible to break the cycle of poverty and exploitation and prevents children from having a better life and a safer future. Though school enrollment rates are a sign of the level of commitment to education, in Nigeria they do not always reflect a child’s active participation in school.

It remains a daunting challenge, in spite of the efforts of the Nigeria government (federal, state, and local), to ensure EFA by 2015. That is why UNDP in its Human Development Report on Nigeria made the following conclusion:

In a major step forward, nearly nine out of ten children, 88.8 per cent, are now enrolled in school. Nevertheless, regional differences are stark. State primary completion rates range from 2 per cent to 99 per cent. In particular, progress needs to be accelerated in the north of the country if the target is to be met. Low completion rates reflect poor learning environments and point to the urgent need to raise teaching standards. The rapid improvement in youth literacy, from 64.1 per cent to 80 percent between 2000 and 2008, appears to have reached a plateau.

The Universal Basic Education Scheme is a promising initiative that needs to be reformed and strengthened. The Federal Teachers’ Scheme and in-service training by the National Teachers’ Institute have begun to address the urgent need to improve the quality of teaching. To accelerate progress and reduce regional disparities, these initiatives need to be rapidly expanded and improved.23
CASH TRANSFERS AND BASIC EDUCATION

One of the challenges associated with the attainment of the goal of EFA is the inability of those enrolled in primary school to complete their schooling. Several studies have shown how a cash transfer program can help ameliorate the situation. For example, Raymond and Sadoulet studied the cash transfer program called PROGRESA initiated by the Mexican government in 1997 and observed that it effectively retains children in school, leading to important gains. The program succeeded at lowering the drop-out rates by 30–45 percent for the eligible grades of primary and secondary school. On average, the program increased the schooling attainment of the poor by almost five months, from 6.9 years to 7.4 years.24

In spite of the relevance of cash transfer programs in facilitating basic education, it has been observed that the scale of such programs in Nigeria is very low.25 One of the major conditional cash transfer programs in Nigeria related to basic education is called “In Care of the People” (COPE). It was launched in 2007 to provide monthly cash transfers to extremely poor households on the condition that they keep their children of basic school-going age in school. COPE has reached just 0.001 percent of poor households in Nigeria.25

CONCLUSION

The ability of Nigeria to achieve education for all by 2015 seems to be an illusion. This is because of factors such as the present level of socio-economic inequality and economic mismanagement. The hope for making accelerated progress lies in factors such as: diversification of the economy of Nigeria, infrastructural development, and good governance. In order to ensure universal basic education in Nigeria, efforts should be made by the government to tackle poverty, especially in rural areas. The government can also introduce cash transfer programs that could encourage parents to send their children to school.

NOTES

2. Ibid.


12. UNDP, Nigeria.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.

Bibliography


