

Economic Hardship And The Right To Functional Education In Nigeria: The Role Of The Church

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Abstract

So many issues confront education in Nigeria today. Over the past few decades, issues of funding, standard, quality, affordability, etc have continued to top the chat of challenges faced in the educational sector. Today, the acquisition of functional and qualitative education has become a matter of serious concern, especially from the stand point of the harsh economic situation in the country. This paper therefore examines the right to education vis-a-vis the economic hardship in Nigeria. The work also identifies the crucial role of the church as a major stakeholder in the education sector and argues that all hands must be on deck for effective educational system. The paper adopts the analytical, descriptive and phenomenological methods and submits that with adequate funding and proper policies in place, the church as a major player in education sector remains in good position to provide qualitative functional and affordable education for desiring Nigerians.

Introduction

The claim that functional education is a decisive decimal in the determination of development in any society cannot be disputed. As a critical index to sustainable development, education should be given the right impetus by all stakeholders in the educational sector. Interestingly, the church has been actively involved in funding and provision of qualitative educational services in Nigeria before and after independence. Incontrovertibly, the history of education in Nigeria like other nations world is not complete without reference to the impact and contribution of the Christian church.

Today, apart from the fallen and deplorable state of education in Nigeria, other critical issues are evolving. Among the very crucial ones is that of affordability and accessibility of functional education by the average Nigerian.

Education is thought to be a human right, which should be accorded all persons for the simple reason of their being human (Isiramen *et al* eds. 2010:109). The truth of the matter however, is that many people in Nigeria because of financial incapability are denied this fundamental right.

The effect of the unfriendly and unfavourable economic situations in the country cuts across all spheres of life including education. It is not news that there is gross inequality in income distribution in Nigeria which by implication, indicate inequalities in access to basic necessities of life including acquisition of functional education (UNICEF, 2009). While a few have access to good education within and outside the country, the majorities are left unattended to or at best, acquires "half education"- a substandard education. The global

demand is such that a person with this kind of education cannot effectively participate in the global market. This idea is yet to be fully appreciated in Nigeria as the attitude of the government towards education clearly implies. The fact that the gap between the rich and the poor in the society has turned unbridgeable chasm and continues to expand, again accentuates this position.

The hope of the average Nigerian desiring a sound education is challenged by the harsh economic situation in the country. So many now wish for the revival of the good old days of the mission schools when the church played a decisive role in education matters in Nigeria. It is incontestable that the mission schools were effective as well as accessible. Education seemed to have run better in their hands than now. Many are now of the opinion that education would drastically change for the better if the church is allowed an unrestricted involvement (Olayoyin, 2010). This position holds not only in terms of standards but also in accessibility and affordability. It is not insinuated here that government should hands off completely in education. The advocacy however is that government should allow the church more leverage to participate more actively in the sector. The end product of such opportunity if given to the church would be education with solid moral foundation and the consciousness of human capital development.

What is Education

There are myriad of definitions of education. The paper does not intend to explore these definitions in toto as this current endeavour is not mainly on the definition of education. For the purpose of the understanding however, the paper takes a brief look at “education” and “functional” as its adjective.

Education is concerned with the system of formal teaching and learning as conducted through schools and other institutions of learning (Encarta *encyclopedia*, 2008). Ehiamentor cited in (Isiramen, 2010:110) sees education (formal or informal) as involving an organized system of learning. He added that such learning should have a goal to change human behavior through the imparting of new values, new knowledge and new ideas.

In a broad sense, education can also be seen as the process by which the individual acquires the many physical and social capabilities demanded of him by the group into which he is born and within which he must function (Ohikhokhai, 2002:154).

Functional on the other hand has to do with, having practical application or serving a useful purpose (Encarta *encyclopedia*, 2008). For something to be functional, it means that it is designed to be useful rather than beautiful or attractive (Della *et al*, 2005).

Simply put, functional education means practically useful and purposeful learning aimed at changing behaviour and imparting new values and orientation. It is in this light “functional education” should be understood in this paper.

Western Education in Nigeria: An Overview

The history of Western education (formal education) dates back in Nigeria to the early contact of some people in Nigeria with the Europeans. The Portuguese had made contact with the Edo people of Benin as early as the second half of the fifteenth century (Osagie, 2002: 13). The arrival of the Portuguese into the hinterland saw the beginning of international relation especially in the areas of commerce. However, this early contact was not devoid of religious motives as the Portuguese also had interest in Christianizing the people (Erhagbe and Osagie, 2002:81) in order to effectively engage in meaningful dealing

with the indigenous people, the Portuguese then, thought it necessary to give the people some rudimentary education and Christianity.

Following the abolition of slave trade in 1804 and the reawakening of Christian missionary activities in the world, Nigeria again became an area of interest. The freed slaves who were settled in Sierra Leone and those who were intercepted by the British government were trained as missionaries and teachers. It was these black missionaries and teachers the British government used for the evangelization of West African especially Nigeria (Erhagbe and Osagie 2002:86). According to Erhagbe and Osagie (2002:84), a number of African missionaries and teachers were produced in Sierra Leone from where some of them found their way to Badagry - a town near Lagos, where the first English speaking church was established. One of such pioneering African missionaries was reverend Samuel Ayayi Crowther.

What can be considered as the first formal school in Nigeria was opened in Badagry on 24th September 1842 by Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman and Mr and Mrs Graft of Wesleyan missionary society (Erhagbe and Osagie 2002:82). From this early beginning, the influence of the missions on education was vitally evidenced. Fafunwa, quoted by Erhagbe and Osagie (2002:82) agreed that Samuel Ajayi and Townsend, who began their missionary work, in 1844, both arrived at Abeokuta where mission houses, churches and schools were built. The success of the early moves to establish schools in Nigeria is largely attributed to the efforts of these pioneers.

The first forty years (1842-1882) of the history of education in Nigeria lies only in the hands of the mission groups. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), The Primitive Missionary Society (PMS), were at the fore front in this endeavour (Erhagbe and Osagie, 2002:84).

The colonial government of the British started showing interest in education after a long period of about forty years. At this stage, missions were given grant to help facilitate education. It was only after some years that the colonial government intervened in the sector. Starting with the promulgation of 1882 education ordinance which was aimed at supervision of educational activities across the West Africa Coast, education gradually passed on to the control of government. Even with full involvement of the government in education, the missions continued to maintain the lead in providing education for Nigerians. For instance, in 1912 the number of -government owned primary schools stood at fifty-nine (59) while mission owned schools were ninety-one (91) (Fafunwa, 1974:91-92).

The large number of pupils who graduated from these schools necessitated the provision of secondary education which again, were basically the efforts of the missions. With the help of the government through favorable education policies, the missions provided functional and affordable education in Nigeria at this earliest period.

It's worth noting here that the activities of the missions were centered mostly in the south because of the resistance of the mission activities in the North. This situation accounts for the great disparity in the educational orientation of the two regions (*Encyclopedia of the nation*, 2011). This phenomenon has remained an intractable challenge in educational development in the country (Obanya et al, 2005:28).

Meanwhile, the issue of furthering education beyond the secondary school level eventually led Nigerian secondary school leavers to agitate for higher education from the British colonial government. The efforts of Edward Blyden and James Horton were quite remarkable in this regards. However some Nigerians found their way into Britain and America to further

their studies. Education Abroad at this stage was not an exclusive reserve of the rich as it is today. The situations at that time adequately suggest that every one with the right capacity and wiliness to study at a higher level of education had the opportunity. The missions also provided necessary support to students who graduated from their secondary institutions.

However, the quest for higher education in Nigeria continued to engage the mind of various sections of the society and from 1943, decision to establish universities in the West Africa Coast was taken. In May 1947 a college was established at Ibadan and by the first half of 1960s, indigenus universities had started emerging across the country with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka leading the way in 1960. (Erhagbe and Osagie, 2002:94). Since 1960 till date, Nigeria has witnessed exponential and astronomical increase in the establishment of schools at all levels. Thus, from non availability of schools, attention has gradually shifted to the issue of standard and affordability of education in Nigeria.

The State of Education in Nigeria Today

To say that the standard of education has fallen in Nigeria is to put the situation mildly. Imhanlahimhin (2000:224) opined that the Nigerian government is too relaxed with standards in the public schools. Hence, the deplorable state of education in Nigeria is evidenced in all public schools. From the primary to the tertiary levels, the situation is the same. Teboho (2005:5) however pointed out that these problems have been most pronounced at the foundational levels of education. Government lack of political will to address the decadence in the system is very well reflected in what Ubhenin *et al* (2005:10) described as lip service of policies without appropriate implementation which the government continue to pay to the sector. According them, policies and funding which are core to vitalization of education continues to lack government attention in Nigeria.

The fact that Nigerians had begun to loose fate in the educational system gradually started manifesting in the proliferation of private schools across the states. It would be recalled that government once relaxed hold on the education system had given the missionaries and other private bodies and individuals the opportunity to participate fully in the sector. Also we can recall how the Nigerian government; following the oil boom of the 1970s, took over the missions schools. It is believed that this act government interference in the missions' activities in the education sector led to the collapse of education system from which the nation is struggling to recover. However, private participation in the education sector especially the church again blossomed from the late 1980s. This got to its peak when the federal government approved the establishment of private universities in 2002 and the eventual granting of certificate of operation to some church owned universities.

The point to note in the foregoing is the emergence of the Christian owned universities and other institutions of learning. While this is seen as a welcome development as it is hoped that the church will bring in the Christian ethos and standard that the mission schools were known for in the past, accessibility of these universities to the ordinary Nigerian is a major challenge as fees charged by these institutions continues to increase (Olawoyin, 2010). The failure of the public education system to yield the right result, now make the church owned institutions the envy of the average Nigerian who have no means of achieving such good dreams.

It has already been established that the church have been in the vanguard of providing qualitative education to Nigerians. This is again accentuated in the recent return of schools by some state government to their original missionary owners. Abia , Edo, Lagos Imo States,

have recently demonstrated their acknowledgement of the fact that the church is more effective in providing qualitative education. An addition to the motivating factor spurring these state governments action is not farfetched. It is the realization that they cannot boast of providing education that can match the standard and quality of the one provided by Christian churches.

Acquisition of Functional Education: The Challenges for the Average Nigerian

It is evidenced from our daily experiences that the economic situation in the nation does not favour the ordinary people. The fact of poverty is glaring in Nigeria. It is not exaggeration to say that many people are denied the right to functional education because of financial incapacity. It is a reality that many parents complain of their inability to educate their children or wards as a result of financial constrain.

The bad state of public schools apart, it still remains the only hope of the poor of been educated. This hope however, starts to face serious challenges from primary level of education. It is estimated that over one million children are forced to drop out of school at this level due to poverty or because of parents' demand for children or wards to contribute to family income. Again, over eight million children combine schooling and work (Report on Education for all: No date). Note however, that government policy guarantee a free primary education for all Nigerians and also made it compulsory under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme of 1999. (Report on education for all: No date). In spite of this, many parents still find it difficult to send their children to school. For instance, an estimated 40% children in the North are not in school especially female. Also in the North, a child can drop out of school for the simple reason of his/her parents' inability to provide school uniform (Jaulme, 2007: no page). One can only imagine how many drop outs there are in the secondary and the universities considering the drop outs from primary school which is free of charges.

A considerable percentage who makes it through the secondary, finds it difficult to secure a university education because of the same reason of economic hardship. To some, it is the same lack of access to quality education that account for the reason behind many people's inability to escape the cycle of poverty around the world (Challenge, 2011: No page). Conversely, extreme poverty also account for many people's inability to access quality education.

The size of this work will not permit a complete profiling of the stunning records of students who dropped out of schools – Universities from 2005-2010 as a result of lack of finance, talk less of those who could not gain entrance at all.

The irony however lies in the fact that the nation needs improvement in human capital in order to address these economic challenges and the key to this improvement is functional education (Okuwa, 2004:2). Therefore, a country like Nigeria cannot afford to leave education to the whims and caprices of individual choice. Okuwa (2004:2) opined that since available resources for development are highly limited, public policies in the field of education must take to full account the need of the country in terms of development of manpower and skills which must begin by a conscious effort at improving the standard of education in the country.

Odebiyi and Asina (No date) while examining the alternative modes of financing higher education submits that one major problem facing Nigeria education especially at tertiary levels is the problem of under-funding. The federal government of Nigeria has starved the

education sector consistently below UNESCO recommendations. The situation has not change much till date.

Governments deliberate refusal to adequately fund education further compound the hardship of acquiring education with ease. It is an established fact that almost 70% of Nigeria population lives below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2007: No page). Added to this, is the social inequality of wealth, power and prestige that results from social stratification which the privilege few that have been able to break out of the cycle of poverty, use to intimidate the poor majority. (Umer and Enock eds., 2004: 115). With these realities staring us in the face, the government may have to declare a state of emergency on education as a deliberate option to ameliorate the sufferings of the poor in the country. Obviously, this cannot be achieved in isolation. They must partner with other stakeholders in the education sector for any meaningful result. The church must be given the right policy framework by the government to fully participate in the sector.

The Role of the Church

Earlier in the work, the point was made that the history of education in Nigeria is incomplete without mentioning the Church and the effort of the Mission groups. In addition to this, the Christian Churches have remained indispensable stakeholders and strong partners in education sector in Nigeria.

The Church is seen as socio-religious Institutions in the society that help individual not only in terms of satisfying the spiritual dimension of their needs but also have interest in the moral aspects of personal development. The activities of the Church affect all facets of human life including education (Umer and Enock eds., 2004: 93). The Nigeria Church has actively demonstrated it special interest in human capital development as part of it belief in the liberation of the total human person. The words of Isiramen (2010:110), fully captures the Christian philosophy of education. According to her:

The goal of education is vividly illuminated by Proverbs 1:1-7 of the Holy Bible which states that education is meant to teach people to acquire wisdom that will lead to “intelligent living” of persons in honesty, justice and equity. This is again properly articulated by Proverb 22:6 which states that when a child is trained in the way he should go, he will not depart from it when he grows up. The major aim of education therefore finds fulfillment in successful living.

It can be succinctly adduced from the above excerpt that this philosophy has been the driving force behind the desire of Church to fully and actively be involved with education in Nigeria as in other countries. The government of Nigeria has also followed this philosophy in its policy formulations in the education sector. This is one visible contribution of the church to development of education in Nigeria. Some have argued that Islamic education also aimed at same objective (Lemu, 2002: No page). This claim however stand to be contested as the educational orientation of the Muslims is in clear variance with Western education which the average Muslim condemn as a corrupting element because of the Christians influence on it. The *Boko Haram* which is a figurative expression of “Western or non-Islamic education is a sin”, is a case in favour (Wikipedia, 2011: No page).

Attempt had been made in the early stage of this work at tracing the impacts of the missions on the educational system in Nigeria. Ever before Independence the missions were at the forefront in providing sound moral education in Nigeria. The Church has continued to maintain its interest and inseparable bond with education in the country even after independence (1960). Olawoyin (2010) like Isiramen (2010: 111), submitted that this union of the Christian Church and education can only be explained by one underlying philosophy of Christianity that Jesus is the *Logos* – the organizing and governing principle of the world. Without contradiction, there was a time the Church was in full control of providing basic education in Nigeria. The effectiveness of its involvement in providing primary education saw the gradual development and its venture into provision of secondary education. Today, the Christian Churches are emerging with landmark developmental stride in the education sector. Their renewed passion for education in the country is resulting to a surge in the provision of sound primary and post primary education across the states of Nigeria. The Church's passion for sound education most recently, saw it involvement in providing higher institutions of learning across Nigeria. This can best be described as ground breaking. The Covenant University of the Living Faith Church, Aka Winners Chapel, Redeemer's University of the Redeem Christian Church of God, Benson Idahosa University of the Church of God Mission, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Samuel Adegboyiga University Of the Apostolic Church, the Evangel University of the Assemblies of God Church, the Light House Polytechnics of the New Covenant Gospel Church, Madonna University, Bowen University of the Baptist Church, Crawford University of the Apostolic Faith Mission, Ayayi Crowther University, Salem University, are few of the Christian Universities and higher institutions of learning which now suggest to Nigerians that all hope is not lost yet in the matter of standard education in the nation. The quality of education provided by these institutions demonstrates that the Church has contributions to make in the effort to reform education system in Nigeria.

The Church has played significant roles in education sector. One of the undeniable contributions of the Church in the sector is its continuous insistence on standard and quality. The Church has also argued consistently that one of the keys to fighting the entrenched corrupt system in the nation is sound moral education from primary through tertiary levels. Hence, the church has seize on every opportunity afforded it in providing sound moral education.

Today, apart from the schools owned and administered by the mainline churches, like the Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, etc, there exist myriads of other schools owned and administered by the broad class of the Pentecostals. There is hardly a church with considerable membership strength in Nigeria without a school, at least a primary school.

The Church is today considering the fate of so many adults illiterates who could not for one reason or the other acquire education in their early age. In this regards many churches have started developing adult literacy classes for their members. This is particularly viewed as a step in the right direction considering the ripple effect the development would have on the appreciation of education in general.

In a religiously pluralistic society like Nigeria there is need to guard against tendencies of disintegration and any religious manifestation or attitude that is capable of generating crisis. Churches in Nigeria take this to serious consideration in their continuous effort at training and retraining of clergies. As part of their contributions to the education sector in the country, an average Church in Nigeria now boast of an improved seminary and leadership

training center. This has indeed paid off by the emergence of world class clergies from Nigeria.

As Nigeria looks into the future with sincere desire to make meaningful progress especially in the realm of education, it must engage the church by ensuring appropriate policy framework so that the many opportunities provided by the church in its continuous participation in the education sector are adequately harnessed.

Towards a Better Future for Education in Nigeria

Obanya *et al* (eds.) (2005:32) have well stated that:

A clear perception of factors that have determined the fate of Nigeria's education progress over the years is a necessary first step in understanding the condition under which specific education policies and programmes have worked or have not worked. It is also a foundation for initiating the social dynamics that could enhance meaningful educational reforms.

In agreement with the above position the paper adds that instead of haphazard experimentation of any policy that appeals to the conscience of any government in power, there is need to carefully examine policies and programmes that can adequately take care of Nigeria's peculiar demands in terms of human capital development and capacity building. The Church should be a major player in this exercise. For instance, there is nothing wrong with the structure of the formal education system which is popularly summarized as 6-3-3-4 system in Nigeria. Viewed against the ages that are required for entrance into these levels of education, the idea is a perfect one. Specifically, from age 0-5, a child undergoes the pre-primary schools, at 6-11, the primary school, 12-14, junior secondary school, 15-17 senior secondary school, 17 and above, can study at a higher institution of learning (Obanya *et al*, eds. 2005:24).

There are national policies on the different levels of education in Nigeria in terms of the involvement of the various tiers of government, that is, the Federal, State and Local Government all have corresponding functional responsibility with respect to education. There are numerous *Parastatals*, Boards and Commissions, saddled with responsibilities of providing supervision, through their operations and service departments. These later group comprises of the supervisory and regulatory *Parastatals*, those for research, development and training, those for measurement, evaluation and examinations, and those for language, training and development. (Obanaya *et al*, eds. 2005: 26).

From the foregoing, everything seemed to be in place for effective education system. However, there are obvious problem with the system. Aiyekpeku (1989:45) said in this respect that the problem is not much of policy deficiency but rather the half-hearted implementation of the policies. In the same vein Adesina (1988:254) maintained that the desire result is not achieved from education because of improper supervision and inspection of the system from the implementation stage.

It goes without saying that the entire education system would benefit from coherent national policy development rather than piecemeal reform. Major educational transformation is required in Nigeria education system. The tasks ahead are numerous and daunting. It is quite clear that it is not possible for these tasks to be tackle alone by the government of Nigeria or

with the assistance of a few international donor agencies. The involvement of major stakeholders, especially the church will be quintessential to the realization of functional education for all. The paper therefore recommends as follows:

- (I) The Nigeria government should give more leverage to the church to operate in the education sector. In some other countries, education is administered by the government. Churches frequently play an integral role in its delivery. Church-run schools that are alternatives to the secular system. Typically these schools receive state funding if they agree to teach the regular curriculum. The Nigerian church has never been opposed to the general curriculum. Government should therefore extend its intervention through the instrumentality of Education Trust Fund to the Church owned schools.
- (II) The church as a major stakeholder in the education sector must immediately begin to engage government in serious discussion of policy trust that can ameliorate the burdens of the very ordinary members of the church who cannot get government attention. The church through the ecumenical instrument of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should place demand on government to channel some of its resources to revamp church owned schools while also demanding the return of schools to the church.
- (III) The church should see itself as the hope of the poor in all its engagement. Its involvement with education in Nigeria should reflect its interest in helping to ameliorate the sufferings of the people. The church owned primary schools should be made free as part of contributions to host communities and introduce flexible means of financing secondary and higher educational service it renders
- (IV) A holistic economic reform is necessary to address the problem of inequalities in income distribution in the country. Priority in the reform should be on massive generation of employment opportunities. Accessibility to soft loans, development of relevant skill acquisition centers across the nation, is keys to achieving this reform.
- (V) Nongovernmental organizations and financial institutions should rise up to the occasion of providing alternative modes for financing education. Apart from direct income earnings of parents and guardians, flexible students loan schemes should be put in place and the public, be sensitized on other means of financing education as done in the developed nations of the world.
- (VI) The Church should intensify its effort in adult education. The programme should be made formal and design in a way that it includes the general public as against its restriction to local church members.

Conclusion

Attempt has been made in the few pages of this paper to examine the issue of acquiring functional education in the face of a very negative economic situation in Nigeria. The work discovered several problems in the education system that requires urgent attention. Also within the limited space of this paper, the all important role of the church as a major

stakeholder in education sector in Nigeria has been x-rayed. Finally the paper submitted that the task of effective education system is one that requires concerted efforts to surmount. The church as a major stakeholder in the sector has proven its interest in all levels of education in Nigeria. The government must develop the right policies capable of stimulating greater participation of the church in all levels of education in the country. We only hope our recommendations find favour with the authorities in charge of education in the country.

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