This paper attempts to give an overview of the Nigerian educational policy by appraising it and providing a justification for Universal Basic Education (UBE) within the curriculum reform in Nigeria.

I. PROBLEMS AND BACKGROUND

Universal Basic Education (UBE) emerged as a consequence to the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (1990) and was reaffirmed by the Dakar Declaration (2000). Prior to this, there had been a global concern that educational policies in many parts of the world, especially Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, ignored early childhood care and pre-school education and restricted the goals of primary education. In Nigeria, the goals of primary education did not include life-skills. An overview of the education system is summarized below.

1. The Nigerian education system

The Curriculum Conference of 1969 gave birth to a change in Nigerian educational policy. The desire to develop a more relevant education system that could serve as a tool for accelerating national growth and development had been strong since independence in 1960. The NPE, first published in 1977, had undergone revisions in 1981, 1995 and 1998. The policy is unequivocal in its insistence on functionality, universality and quality as the key objectives of the country’s educational endeavours.

The importance of early childhood/pre-primary school education is underscored. However, it has to be provided largely through private initiatives. At the formal level, a system of six-year primary education, three-year junior secondary education, three-year senior secondary education and four-year tertiary education (6-3-3-4) system is planned. The first nine years of the formal level is one of the primary concerns of the UBE programme. The other concern is literacy and adult, non-formal education. Education policy also conveys the values that teachers should inculcate into learners and it spells out the objectives of each level of the education system. Policies are also expressed for the teacher and special education programmes.

2. Problems with the National Policy on Education

Perceived problems with the National Policy on Education are as follows:

- neglect of early child-care education, which is left to private initiatives;
- narrow goals of primary and secondary education (with the exclusion of life-skills such as health/HIV/AIDS education, population and family life, etc.);
- emphasis on formal education at the expense of the non-formal targeting of children and adults in difficult circumstances;
- emphasis on formal education at the expense of technical, pre-vocational and vocational skills at all levels;
- attendant social problems of unemployment resulting from graduates with excessive ambitions but no skills looking for white-collar jobs;
- tendency for society to relegate technical education to the background in preference to university education;

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• under-utilization and non-committal attitude of communities/societies to ownership of primary education.

3. Problems with the school system

In Nigeria today the public school system is confronted with the following problems:
• overstretched facilities;
• a population explosion in recruitment into schools;
• poorly trained teachers;
• poor remuneration in teachers’ wages leading to poor motivation and low morale;
• little or no plans for career development for teachers;
• inflexible curricula;
• inadequate supervision of schools;
• lack of teacher supervision.

The policy on education, prior to the launching of the UBE, created schools and communities that looked towards the government to satisfy its needs. Efforts at community participation, such as setting up parent/teacher associations, were not standardized but left to the discretion of succeeding administrations.

4. Problems with the curriculum

Prior to UBE, curricula were rigid and inflexible, focusing on formal education at the expense of technical, vocational and pre-vocational skills. Technical equipment was imported and distributed to secondary schools to facilitate training in technology, but few technicians were available to operate it. In some cases, communities were unable to provide an environment that was conducive to achieving proficiency in operating the machines. Specifically, the curriculum was faced with problems such as:
• inflexibility;
• non-availability of funds for the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) to review education on a regular basis;
• limited capacity-building for curriculum experts;
• inability to respond to the need of the immediate environment.

5. Preferred solutions to the education system

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) attempts to offer solutions to the perceived weaknesses and shortcomings in education policy. The UBE objectives, based on the Jomtien and Dakar Declarations, are to ensure the following:
• the expansion of early childhood care and development activities, especially for disadvantaged and handicapped children;
• universal access to basic education in the first nine years of school from primary one to junior secondary;
• compensatory education to school drop-outs;
• reduction of adult illiteracy through the provision of education to adult illiterates and those in difficult circumstances, such as migrant fishermen, farmers and women;
• expansion of basic education and training in essential life-skills and learning-to-learn skills;
• increased teaching of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living.

6. UBE vision and curriculum development

Curriculum delivery has been and still is the bedrock of any educational goal. Universal Basic Education (UBE) is geared towards a new philosophy that asks what type of UBE would serve the greatest good. Other questions include:
• What type of Nigerian citizen should the UBE produce?
• What specific learning experience(s) should such a person acquire?
• How can Nigerian UBE be promoted and with what means?

7. UBE vision

The UBE vision aims at righting the wrongs of the unfulfilled curriculum dream. The old curriculum turned out graduates who were not self-reliant, and only fit for white-collar jobs. Life-skills and coping skills were ignored. Technical and pre-vocational skills were relegated to second place behind Western education, which further promoted white-collar jobs. Emphasis was also placed on formal education at the expense of the non-formal.

The new UBE vision is a bottom-up approach with teachers as end-users playing active roles in the curriculum process. The teachers are involved in the curriculum review and text development processes. The learners benefit from an environmentally friendly text, while the pedagogical process is interactive and child-centred. The UBE vision encompasses every child within formal, non-formal and informal settings. Philosophically, it will have to consider four sets of factors:
• the learners: from primary to the third year of junior secondary, their status, characteristics, hopes, fears and aspirations;
• the primary education phase: the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills acquired at this phase and the need to consolidate them and broaden their scope at the junior secondary phase;
• the existing junior secondary system: its curriculum and other related features and the need to adapt them to the demands of the times, as well as to the special requirements of young people in the twenty-first century;
• a special consideration for those who may be out of school and will need non-formal complementary approaches in the junior secondary bracket.

The UBE vision should promote a learner and society-centred philosophy with a curriculum that strives to relate the art of literacy and numeracy to that of skills
acquisition in the primary. It should consolidate the gains of traditional disciplines of languages; maths and science, social science, pre-vocational subjects and technology to the goals of basic education in the junior secondary classes. The subject disciplines highlighted should be used to consolidate literacy, numeracy, life-skills and learning-to-learn skills. Any genuine curriculum development efforts must address this issue.

The UBE vision will produce children who are not limited in content to just knowing, but also doing. The UBE curriculum must strive to do the following:
• teach local arts and crafts (primary and junior secondary);
• teach pre-vocational skills (in the junior secondary);
• teach essential life skills required for daily living, e.g., health and sexuality education, HIV/AIDS education, population and family life education, aesthetics and environmental education, etc.;
• teach learning-to-learn skills;
• teach creative skills;
• teach fundamental human rights and respect for the rights of others;
• teach sports for healthy physical and mental development;
• teach citizenship education and the ideals of democracy;
• teach information technology and scientific knowledge;
• teach cultural values, ethics, morality, discipline and peaceful existence.

8. Specific learning experiences

• The teacher is perceived not as a passive instructor but a helper involved in helping pupils to know and be able to do through interactive contacts.
• Rote learning is discouraged as the outcome of learning achievement.
• The learning environment goes beyond the conventional classroom to the pre-vocational workshop, the school farm, the sports field, etc.
• The curriculum should be enriched with the essentials to equip children who may not be able to go beyond the third year of junior secondary education before entering the job market.
• The new vision should look carefully at the role and objective of examinations within the framework of the UBE vision.
• The objective of assessments should shift from how much a child knows to how much he or she is able to do.

At present, the NERDC has been given approval for the curriculum review of five primary school subjects for the UBE. Emphasis will be placed on multi-grade teaching in parts of the country where the population is sparse.

The National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) has also been given approval to develop texts in some Nigerian languages in line with the concept that children learn better when taught in the mother-tongue and that the first three years of primary schooling should focus on this.

9. Current educational reforms

The UBE Commission is a body that tries to co-ordinate all agencies that are directly involved in curriculum and text development, namely: the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC); the National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN); and the National Teachers Institute (NTI). As a result, these bodies should be better placed to share their field experiences in the areas of curriculum reform. The UBE, working closely with related stakeholders, will continue its efforts to promote the new curriculum vision for the twenty-first century.

References