

Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the Democratization of Education in Nigeria: Matters Arising

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Introduction

Although lack of accurate data remains a huge challenge, all authoritative estimates agree that Nigeria has the largest number of out-of-school children in the world. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) had declared in 2013 that one in every five of out-of-school children in the world is in Nigeria and put the figure at 10.5million.

Two years later, a UNICEF Demographic Health Survey (DHS) with the active support of the Nigerian government revealed that the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria had risen from 10.5 to 13.2million. In the same vein, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics announced in 2017 that Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Sudan, Ethiopia and Indonesia, in order of magnitude, are home to more than one- third of out-of-school children in the world.

Admitting the failure of the Nigerian government to arrest the persistent astronomical rise in the number of out-of-school children, Adamu Adamu, the Minister of Education in Nigeria during his valedictory press conference to mark the end of his first term on May 21, 2019, apologized to Nigerians for his inability to reduce the out-of-school children by half as promised at the inception of the government. And while answering questions from Senators on Wednesday 24th July, 2019 during his screening as a returnee Minister, Adamu Adamu again announced that out-of-school children in Nigeria has jumped to over sixteen million based on February 2019 census. He blamed the ugly situation on the poor funding of

education by both the Federal and State governments and the high level of corruption in the country despite the anti-corruption campaign of the current government.

Access to education is a condition precedent to quality and equity in education. Given the humongous number of children in Nigeria who lack access to education, it is crystal clear that quality and equity will be far-fetched. Nigeria as one of the Member States of the United Nations has adopted the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with Goal 4 of its 17 Goals promising to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The theme of this conference covers all the three components of a democratized system of education as mentioned in SDG 4 which are inclusivity, equity and quality.

In order to achieve inclusivity, equity and quality in education globally, SDG 4 sets 10 targets to serve as the yardsticks for measuring progress of each nation towards the goal. This paper shall examine the concept of democratization of education, analyze SDG 4, assess Nigeria’s standing, and estimate her prospects on each of the targets before 2030. It shall then proceed to discuss the threats to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 in the country and offer some recommendations for their amelioration.

The Concept of Democratization of Education

To democratize something means to make that thing available to all without restriction or discrimination. It connotes mass participation, equality and justice. Thus, the Pedagogical Encyclopedia (1989) defines democratization of education as a process in which restriction of access to education is completely abolished and ways of its mass acquisition at all levels are open at all. It is the equitable provision of education to all the citizens of a society irrespective of their gender, social class, ethnicity or challenge (Ezeanya, 2015; Ibaba 2009). Nigeria has ratified, adopted and domesticated several conventions, declarations and laws which aim at democratizing education for all children and youths. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) later domesticated as the Child Rights Act

(2003), the Education for All (EFA) movement (2000), the Universal Basic Education Law (2004) which makes basic education in Nigeria universal, free and compulsory and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG 2 & MDG 3) which promise universal primary education and gender equality in education by 2015. The unmet goals and commitments of all these instruments have been rolled over and fully expanded in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure full democratization of education in the 193 member States of the United Nations by the year 2030.

The Place of SDG 4 among the Sustainable Development Goals

Sequel to the termination of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, the Heads of Government of the 193 Member States of the United Nations met in September, 2015 at the 70th Session of the General Assembly to ratify and adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda aims at freeing humanity from poverty, securing a healthy planet, and building a peaceful and inclusive society. In others words, the Sustainable Development Goals aim at democratizing the wellbeing of all citizens across the globe and is aptly tagged agenda “of the people, by the people, and for the people”. Promising to leave no one behind, the 2030 Agenda has a total of 17 Goals that are further broken into measurable targets.

Education is central to the Sustainable Development Goals, not only because one (SDG 4) of the 17 goals squarely targets education, but also because seven other goals have education related targets. SDG 4 promises to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. In essence, all the three components of the theme for this conference are encapsulated in SDG 4. SDG4 has ten targets to guide each country on the journey to a sustainable education system by the year 2030. This paper shall now proceed to assess Nigeria’s current standing on each of the ten targets and the prospects by the target year 2030.

Target 4.1. Free, Equitable and Quality Primary and Secondary Education

This target aims at ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. All available evidence shows that Nigeria is very far from guaranteeing free access to primary education for children between ages 6 and 11 not to mention secondary education. Although the Universal Basic Education Law makes basic education universal, free and compulsory and also stipulates sanctions for parents who do not send their children to school, this law has remained unimplementable because government has not fulfilled her part of the bargain by making provision for all children of school age. The apology of the immediate past Minister of Education for his inability to reduce the out-of-school children by half as promised is instructive here. Insurgency in the North East and farmers/herders' clashes, kidnapping and banditry across the nation have led to closure of many schools while early marriage of girls in the North and preference for trading by boys in the South East have also led to wide disparities in the percentages of boys and girls that complete primary education. The quality of education being received by those in school is nothing to write home about given the unfriendly environment, dilapidated structure and poor facilities in schools all over the country. The prospect for 2030, which is about 10 years away, is very bad given that the situation is getting worse by the day. Only an urgent, drastic and sustained intervention can reverse the ugly trend.

Target 4.2 Quality Early Childhood Development, Care and Pre-primary Education

This target is towards ensuring that by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. Early childhood development is currently not incorporated into the Universal Basic Education programme. Section 2(16) a-c of the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) says government shall (a) set and monitor minimum

standard for ECCDE centre, (b) develop and disseminate curriculum materials and (c) encourage both community and privates efforts in the establishment of ECCDE centres. By this provision, government has absolved herself of the responsibility of establishing and funding ECCDE centres. Section 2(17 &18) of National Policy on Education incorporate pre-primary education into the Basic Education programme to expand Basic Education to 10 years from 5-15 years. Apart from the policy statement however, nothing concrete is on the ground. Most schools are constrained to staff and equip this class through internally generated revenue as a means of boosting their enrolment.

Target 4.3 Quality TVET and Tertiary Education

This target is directed at ensuring that by 2030, there will be equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university education. According to Okoye and Okwelle (2013), TVET is a form of education that advocates the development of the head (knowledge) training of the hand (dexterity) and enriching the heart (conscientiousness) and has been instrumental to economic growth and gainful employment among the Asian tigers. Unfortunately, vocational and technical education in Nigeria is in shambles in the face of huge deficits in power, human and material resources. Government's recent decision to convert polytechnics to degree awarding institutions is a further slap on TVET.

Access to university education is still a major challenge. Even government universities charge exorbitant fees to keep afloat in the face of poor funding from government. Facilities are dilapidated and frequent strikes by academic staff due to poor working conditions detracts from the quality of education. Private universities are beyond the reach of the majority of the masses.

Target 4.4 Technical and Vocational Skills

This target aims at substantially increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. The huge youth unemployment figures in the country is a clear indication that many youths lack skills and decent jobs. The large army of unemployed youths are easily lured into insurgency, banditry, armed robbery, internet fraud and other vices thereby fueling the level of insecurity in the country.

Target 4.5 Equal Access to all Levels of Education and Training for the Vulnerable

This target aims at eliminating disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous people and children in vulnerable situations. It has been shown earlier that there is no equal access to primary and secondary education in Nigeria leading to the huge figures of out-of-school children. Children in conflict regions and those in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps across the country have no access to education. Person with disabilities have been turned to beggars and destitute on the streets. Although the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013) in Section 7 (118 & 119) identifies categories of special needs persons and aims at providing equal educational opportunity for them in an inclusive setting, no serious commitment has been shown in that direction.

Target 4.6 Youth and Adult Literacy and Numeracy

It is intended here that by 2030, the country should ensure that all youths and substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. The current literacy rate in Nigeria is 59.6% which places her below South Africa at 94.4%, Libya at 91% or Ghana at 76.6%. The growing numbers of out-of-school children and the abandonment of Adult Literacy Programme may further worsen the literacy rate in Nigeria as we march towards 2030.

Target 4.7 Knowledge and Skills Needed to Promote Sustainable Development

The agenda reckons that by 2030 Member States would ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

With respect to this target, Nigeria is retrogressing rather than progressing. Many children are out of school and are there on the streets eking out a living as beggars (almajiris) or child labourers which are definitely not sustainable. Schools across all levels are dilapidated and lack basic human and materials resources for meaningful learning. Our leaders have no faith in the education system and so send their children to the UK, US, Ghana or South Africa to receive education. All zones in the country are engulfed in violence ranging from insurgency in the North East; banditry in the North West; herders/farmers' clashes, kidnapping and armed robbery across the North Central, South West, South East and South South. Leaders fuel religious and ethnic violence through hate speeches and fake news while, human rights cannot be guaranteed by a government that chooses which court orders to obey.

Target 4.8 School Environment

Whereas targets 1-7 are expected outcomes, targets 8-10 specify the means through which the seven initial targets can be achieved.

Specifically, target 8 charges Member States to build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environment for all. Schools are expected to have electricity, connect to the internet, have adapted infrastructure and materials for students with disabilities, safe water and single-sex basic sanitation facilities.

The reality however is that most public primary and secondary schools in Nigeria especially in the rural areas are not connected to electricity, internet service is a luxury even in the best of public universities and almost all school and public buildings in the country lack adapted infrastructure for students with disabilities. The huge infrastructural deficit in schools make them unfriendly and unsafe for all children especially those with disabilities.

Target 4. 9 Scholarships

This target charges developed/donor countries to as from 2020 onwards, substantially expand the number of scholarships available to developing countries in particular, least developed countries, small countries, in particular states and African countries for enrolment in higher education, vocational training and information and communication technology among others. Nigeria has not benefitting much from this largesse from donor countries to support her education firstly because of her large population and secondly because Nigeria's poverty is unexplainable to the international community being one of the largest oil producers with one of the highest GDP growth rates in the world. Our poverty is considered to be self-inflicted as attested to by the high cost of running government, the flamboyant lifestyle of our leaders and the high level of corruption in the country. The high level of insecurity also makes the country less attractive to donors.

Target 4.10 Teachers

Member States are expected as from 2030 to substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries. Again, international cooperation will be too little and far between to guarantee adequate qualified teachers for the country. The welfare of teachers is so poor such that only candidates who cannot get admission for their courses of first choice come into education as unwilling teachers. The effectiveness of the ones on the ground is greatly hampered by poor working environment and decayed infrastructure.

Threats to the Realization Of SDG 4 in Nigeria By 2030

Having shown that Nigeria has achieved next to nothing in the march towards attaining the 10 targets of the Sustainable Development Goal 4, the paper shall discuss the major threats to the realization of goal by the target year.

i. Poor funding of Education

As argued by Edun (2019) the greatest disservice to the Nigerian education system and the root cause of all the other problems bedeviling the sector is the continued dwindling budgetary allocation to education in the Federal budget despite the geometric increase in the problems of the sector. For example, although the federal budgetary allocation to education increased quantitatively from 480.2 billion, 550.5 billion, 605.8 billion and 620.5 billion in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 respectively, in real qualitative terms, it decreased from 7.92% to 7.40% and 7.04% in 2016, 2017 and 2018 respectively and remained almost stagnant in 2019 at 7.05%.

The percentage budgetary allocation to education in Nigeria is a far cry, actually three times lower, than the 15 to 20% recommendation for developing countries by UNESCO in the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2006) and the Incheon Declaration (2015) at the World Education Forum. Regrettably, no other country apart from Nigeria among the E9 countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan) housing over half of the world's population and 70% of the world's illiterate adults allocate less than 20 percent of their budget to education. Regrettable still, no country apart from Nigeria among the D8 countries (Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan and Turkey) an organization of developing countries for economic cooperation, allocates less than 20 percent of her budget to education. The relationship between budgetary allocation to education has been strongly proved by Ghana who has consistently allocated over 25% of her budget to education over the last ten years and her adult literacy level jumped from 57.9% in 2000 to 76.6% in 2015. Nigeria with a current literacy

rate of 59.6% continues to allocate about one-quarter of the percentage Ghana allocates to education.

ii. Widespread Poverty

In June 2018, the World Poverty Clock announced that Nigeria has attained the unenviable status of the “poverty capital” of the world with 87 million of her citizens living below the poverty line. The figure has since risen to 91million according to the 2019 estimates by the World Poverty Clock. Although Nigeria has massive oil wealth and an equally massive population with plenty of natural resources, poverty remains endemic due to income inequality, corruption, ethnic, religious and political instability.

In the face of worsening poverty, many parents cannot bear the over-head cost of ostensibly free basic education such as food, school uniforms, books and transportation. Thus, many children are out of school to support family income or on the streets to eke out a living for themselves. Some parents manage to send some of the sons to school and marry off the girls early to reduce financial burden thereby fueling gender disparity in access to education. The inability to provide essential school materials for their children also impact negatively on the quality of education.

iii. Corruption

The anti-corruption fight of the current government has reduced the rating of the country from being the most corrupt country in the world some 5 to 6 years ago to being in the 144th out 175 countries in the world in 2018 according to Transparency International. In the real sense of it, corruption has reduced among the ordinary citizens, especially civil servants due to the introduction of Treasury Single Account and other financial regulations. Political corruption has however, increased astronomically among executives with immunity who divert fund meant for education to personal, political or nepotic uses and cover their tracks by anointing their successors or pledge their loyalty to the next party in power to evade prosecution after the expiration of their tenure.

iv. Lack of Reliable Demographic Data

Lack of accurate/reliable demographic statistics of the different proportions of the Nigerian population is a major problem for all sectors of the economy including education. Without accurate data, no serious planning can be done. As admitted by the returnee Minister of Education in Nigeria, a major concern of the government is finding an empirical means of determining the actual number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. In the face of lack of authentic data, claims and counter-claims only lead to confusion, wrong diagnosis and wrong prescriptions. To give a vivid example, whereas the World Poverty Clock claims that the number of poor people in Nigeria rose from 87 million in 2018 to 91 million in 2019, the government disagreed and claimed that it has lifted 5 million Nigerians out of poverty between 2015 and 2019.

v. Inadequate Respect for the Teaching Profession in Nigeria

Teaching is officially a profession in Nigeria by virtue of TRCN Act 31 of 1993 which empowers the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria to regulate and control the teaching profession in all aspects and ramifications. Beyond this official recognition however, government and all other stakeholders, including teachers themselves, have done everything to undermine the profession. No government at the federal or state levels will contemplate making a non-lawyer the Minister/Commissioner for Justice or a non-medically qualified person the Minister/Commissioner for Health. For education however, it is the exception rather than the rule to appoint a trained teacher as the Minister or Commissioner for Education. It is erroneously believed that anybody can manage education. It is this same erroneous belief that makes the Federal Government to make teaching the dumping ground for the recruits of the Graduate Employment Scheme known as the "N-Power Scheme". If the "N-Power Graduates" without relevant professional training cannot be drafted into hospitals as doctors and nurses or courts as lawyers and judges, why

should anyone think or accept that they will be good enough as teachers?

More often than not, educational policies are implemented wrongly because professionals are not in charge. For instance, although the Nigeria Certificate in Education has been made the minimum teaching qualification in Nigeria for more than 15 years now, there is no complementary programme for massive production of NCE primary education teachers. The result is that more than 75 percent of the NCE teachers manning pre-primary and primary schools across the country are “unqualified” because their pedagogical training is for secondary school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the analysis and discussion above, it is crystal clear that Nigeria has not made any appreciable progress on each of the ten targets of SDG 4, neither are there concrete plans on the ground to facilitate the process of attainment of the goal by the terminal year of 2030 which is 10 years away. Thankfully, ten years is the average life-span of a result oriented strategic plan. This paper wishes to recommend the following measures as critical inputs into the expected strategic plan of government to attain SDG 4 alongside the other 16 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Without reliable statistics, a good strategic plan cannot be put together, neither can its progress be monitored nor its intended outcomes assessed properly. The greatest challenge of development and educational planning and policy in Nigeria is lack of accurate data. Since the number of children and youths within the different age brackets for the different levels of education is not known, it is difficult to determine the number of classrooms, teachers and teaching resources to be provided. Government should re-invigorate the moribund National Population Commission to organize a national census upon which viable development plans can be made.

Next in importance to credible census figures is improved funding of education. The current government needs to demonstrate the political will to allocate nothing less than 20%

of the National budget to education like all other E9 and D8 countries of which Nigeria is a member. It is hypocritical for the President, Minister of Education and Senate to continue to lament the decay in the education sector but continue allocate less and less to the sector in the National budget. Once the Federal Government sets the pace, other levels of government will fall in line.

The erroneous impression that anybody can manage education should be done away with. Education should be accorded the same, if not more, respect that is accorded professions like law and medicine by ensuring that only professionals in the field are appointed to manage it at all levels.

It is generally agreed in common parlance that “you cannot give what you don’t have”. In the same token, the critical roles of teachers in nation-building through human resources development should be appreciated through the approval of the long awaited Teachers’ Salary Scale and improvement in their working environment. Those in whose hands the future of the nation is committed deserve to be treated with dignity. The huge income gap between the few rich and the vast majority of poor citizens should be urgently addressed through massive youth employment and other social security programmes to stem excruciating poverty and insecurity in the country. In view of the fact that most of the graft in the country are perpetrated by political office holders with immunity, the immunity clause in the constitution should be reviewed. Waiting for eight years for executives to milk the nation dry before they are prosecuted for financial crimes has been largely ineffective because by that time they would have acquired so much resources and power to fight the nation to a standstill as our experience in the recent past has shown.

Nigeria is at critical point in her history when the basis of her unity should be renegotiated. Huge resources that could have gone into developmental projects are being committed to endless wars against ourselves in the name of fighting terrorism, insurgency, farmers/herders clashes, banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, secession, religious extremism and lately “revolution”. Since no nation can fight against herself

and win, government should set the machinery in motion to negotiate with all aggrieved groups and individuals and address genuine concerns. The UN 2030 Agenda is targeted at “building a peaceful, inclusive society as a foundation for ensuring a life of dignity for all”. Given the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural composition of the country, all groups should be given the opportunity to determine how resources will be generated and controlled to guarantee peace and all round development.

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