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The Need for Open Schooling in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria has been committed to the objective of universalizing primary education since signing the Jomtien Declaration in 1990. The achievements in this direction towards attaining the goals do not seem to match the enormous challenge with up to seven million children that are not benefiting from basic education provision if the country must achieve the MD and EFA goals. What is required is the utilization of unusual strategy which is the use of Open Schooling, the application of ODL to pre-tertiary education. The potentials of this can no doubt transform the education terrain of Nigeria as it is becoming increasingly glaring that the traditional method of formal conventional education will not deliver the goals come 2015.

The challenge of this paper is to briefly examine the EFA and MD goals vis-à-vis the efforts of government as it attempts to implement its basic education program through the conventional delivery system. This is where the role of Open Schooling will be examined as an unusual strategy for reaching the unreached in classless informal settings. The paper will give the highlights of the Open School proposal.

Background data on Nigerian Education

Nigeria is a developing, but leading country in Africa located in the West African sub-region of the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). With an estimated population of about 130 million, it is the most populous country in Africa and one of the largest (about 923, 768 sq kilometers) in terms of land area. The educational statistics show that Nigeria in 2005 still had a high illiteracy rate of about 52% and about 35% of the population is of school aged population, i.e. of basic education level, aged 6-14 years are not in school. Those enrolled are only 35% in this group (3.7million in Primary and 7.9million at Junior Secondary); the GER is 77.9%; Pupil: Qualified Teacher ratio is 71.8; school completion rate is 77.7% for primary and 34.7% for JSS; and transition rate into JS1 is 50.1%. Given this general picture but with internal geographic variations, we shall discuss the attainments of the educational system vis-à-vis the EFA and MD goals.

Background on Open Schooling

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After the successful participation of the Nigerian delegation at the Open and Distance Education Forum held in Denudin, New Zealand in July 2004 the then HMSE, Hajja Bintu Ibrahim, (head of Nigerian delegation) directed that Open Schooling (OS) would be useful if Nigeria is to achieve the EFA and the MDGs. She then challenged the delegates to put a proposal together for the consideration of Government. In September 2004, a stakeholders meeting organized by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was held in Nigeria with ODL practitioners from Cameroon, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Nigeria in attendance. It was at this meeting that the concept was further reviewed and the merits and demerits were re-examined. For Nigerian education system the benefits of Open Schooling were re-evaluated. As a result of the advantages of OS and its acceptance by the Nigerian stakeholders on its workability; a request was made to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to assist with the procurement of a consultant to carry out a small scale needs analysis/feasibility study for Open Schooling in Nigeria. The report of the consultant was the domesticated so as to include all the essential areas that would assist government in taking a decision on how best to implement the programme.

The challenges facing basic education with EFA and MDGs

The Universal Basic Education Programme was launched in September 1999, some months before the adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action and has become Nigerian strategy for attaining the goals of EFA and the two relevant MDGs. The programme has been able to mobilize states, local governments and their resources to ensure that more pupils are enrolled in primary and junior secondary schools; and the transition rate to Junior Secondary Schools are significantly raised so as to meet EFA targets. To encourage the states, the Federal Government provides a matching grant to states to enhance the rate of development. Some significant developments since the launching of UBE in 1999 include:

- Provision of a policy framework in the form of the UBE Act, 2004;
- Mobilization of all levels of government, parents, communities, NGOs, national and international agencies for the attainment of EFA Goals and the two MDGs listed above;
- Development of an Action Plan for EFA
- Expansion of existing teaching/learning facilities to boost enrolments and enhance access to primary and junior secondary education
- Training, re-training and recruitment of more teachers for the system.

These developments resulted in increased enrolments for both primary and secondary schools. The number of public primary schools rose from 40,204 in 1997 to 59,843 in 2005 (FME 2005, School Census); and enrolment also increased from 17,907,010 in 1999 to 19,549,114 in 2005 School Census.

However, despite the modest achievements recorded in enrolments, there are regional and gender variations in access; and the Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) is far lower than expected. The NAR was reported to be lowest for six year olds (39%) and highest for nine year olds (67%). NAR is also much higher in the south (e.g. 86% in the SW) than in the north (e.g. 28% in the NW) and that some states in the north have primary schools with less than 25% NAR (FME: 34). Similarly there is a serious gender gap in terms of access and participation. Available figures indicate that the female share in primary school enrolment in 2001 was 35% for the NW, 38% for the NE, 45% for the NC, 50% for the SE and SS, and 51% for the SW zones respectively. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) which refers to the number of pupils at a particular level of schooling - (irrespective of age) - as a proportion of the number of children in the relevant age group is a good indicator of access and inclusion. The GER can be

more than 100% if there are over aged or under age children or there are repeaters. The total GER for males was 100.4%, while that of females was 82.6% with a gender gap of 17.8%. The Apparent Completion Rate of primary education and the transition rate from primary education to JSS is less than 50 %.(FME 2003:36).

An important component of the UBE programme is the commitment to enhancing education for disadvantaged groups such as women and nomadic groups. Nomadic pastoralists and migrant fishing communities are groups which due to their occupations and the centrality of child labour in their production systems have not been able to participate in formal conventional schooling. Out of an estimated population of 10 million nomads, 3.6 million are children of school age. The literacy rate is 0.2% for nomadic pastoralists whose population is 6.5 million and 2.0% among the 2.8 million migrant fishing folks (FME 2003:39).

In (NTI: 2004) the total number of nomadic schools increased from 1,494 in 2000 to 1,820 in 2003. Similarly, total enrolments increased from 193,249 in 2000 to 303,543 in 2003. Out of the 303,543 pupils, 127,526 (42%) were girls and 176,017 (58%) were boys (NCNE 2003). Thus, not only is the proportion of school age children enrolled in primary education very low i.e. only 8.43%, gender parity is yet to be attained since girls constitute only 42% of total enrolments. If one takes into account the possibility of relatively high dropout rates and lower completion rates in nomadic schools as compared with conventional schools, then the problems of inadequate access and inclusion are more pronounced among nomadic communities than in the rest of the country.

An assessment of learning achievement of primary four pupils in 1997 which focused on numeracy, literacy and life skills indicated that the performance of the pupils in the various areas assessed were as follows: Numeracy mean = 32.2; SD=17.04; Literacy mean = 25.17; SD = 18.19; and Life Skills –mean 32.62; SD = 16.32.(FME/UNESCO/UNICEF 1997) The findings of a follow-up study conducted in 2001 which focused on primary 5 students indicate that “only 20% of the students were able to answer correctly more than 30% of the test items; and less than one percent of students were able to answer correctly more than half the test items”. The findings of a similar study conducted in 2003 suggest that there has not been any significant improvement in pupils' achievement (Aarons 2003:4; Tahir, et al.2006). Learning achievement of secondary school students is also unsatisfactory. The findings of a recent study of secondary education in different parts of the country indicate that the “performance in the SSCE is poor in virtually every subject on the school curriculum” and that “the SSCE is characterized by a heavy dose of frustration, as only about 10% of candidates “meaningfully pass” the examinations. (Obanya 2004: 31-32). The primary and secondary education sub-sectors are very good breeding grounds for Open Schooling.

Junior secondary education constitutes the final three years of the nine-year basic education. Those who complete the six year primary cycle are expected to transit to Junior Secondary Schools (JSS). Enrolment into JSS increased from 3,844,585 students in 1999 to 4,848,794 in 2002 and to 6,316,537 students in 2003, out of which 3,558,762 (56.3%) were boys and 2,757,775 (43.6%) girls.

Table 1: Junior Secondary School Enrolments: Population Projections and Gross Enrolment Ratio Estimates at National level, 1999-2000

Year	JSS Enrolment (in Thousands)			Population aged 12-14 (in Thousands)			Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs)		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	M/F

1999	1,144	916	2,060	-	-	-	-	-	-
2000	1,265	1,012	2,277	4,229	4,106	8,355	30%	25%	27%
2001	1,432	1,148	2,580	4,383	4,251	8,634	33%	27%	30%
2002	1,519	1,193	2,712	4,557	4,382	8,938	33%	27%	30%

Note: Enrolment and population data have been rounded to the nearest thousand; GERs are rounded to the nearest whole number. Source: FME (2003)

There are regional variations in Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) which the above table does not bring out clearly. The GER for girls is generally low in the North, while the GER for boys in the South East and South-South zones were declining (FME 2003: 44). Despite improvement in enrolments in the period 1999-2003, access to secondary education is grossly inadequate and less than 50% of children who complete primary school transit to JSS.

Adult education is an important component of EFA and the UBE programme. The National Commission for Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC), the State Agencies for Mass Education, some NGOs and CBOs are implementing a variety of adult literacy programmes. However, their efforts and those of other institutions (e.g. universities) have not engendered the attainment of the EFA targets in terms of enhancing access to adult education in general and significantly reducing the levels of illiteracy. The literacy rate for Nigeria is merely 49% which is far below the average of 57% for sub-Saharan Africa. This national average reveals very little about regional and gender disparities in literacy. For example, the literacy rates in the North West and North East are 21%-22% for females and 40%-42% for males (FME: 2003). The table below provides figures of enrolment in literacy classes for the period 1997-2000.

Table 2: Enrolment in Literacy classes (1997-2000)

Year	M	F	Total
1997	598,166	557,366	1,555,532
1998	666,131	598,130	1,264,289
1999	712,326	605,370	1,317,696
2000	701,798	705,156	1,406,954

Source: NMEC Statistical Digest

The table clearly indicates that enrolment in literacy classes was extremely low vis-à-vis the size of the illiterate population which is 52%. There is also the dearth of Adult and Continuing Education programmes that are relevant, functional and adequately address the learning needs of youths and adults. The findings reported in the SAPA document of 1993 are as valid today as it was ten years ago. According to the document, there was a "lack of access to adult education programmes for many adults with as many as 46% of the sampled communities not having access to adult education centers... (and) even where there is access, participation is restricted on grounds of non-functional programme offerings and other factors including age, unsuitable programme schedules, irrelevant programmes etc ...(and) that less than 3% of adults have access to adult and non-formal education programmes." (FME 2003: 55). The bottom line is that Adult and Non-Formal Education is weak.

Thus, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, Nigeria is far from the targets of EFA and particularly the MDGs, of universalizing access to primary education for all

children by 2015 and the elimination of gender disparities and the empowerment of women also by 2015. With a population growth rate of about 2.9%, Nigeria would be faced with an overwhelming 62.5million school aged children to provide with comfortable school environment (classrooms, furniture, books, sanitation and teachers) by the year 2015. It is glaring that the country will nowhere be able to meet up with the challenge. Alternative strategies must be sought where the existing resources will be able to reach more children who hitherto are not able to benefit from education. There is, therefore, the need to re-examine existing delivery systems in terms of cost-effectiveness and harness the potentials of other delivery systems such as open learning which can complement (not replace) conventional schooling and thus facilitate the attainment of EFA and MDG targets for 2015.

At this point in time, nothing can be said to have been done in respect of getting Open Schooling off ground for implementation. The document has already been submitted to government but a formal response is still being awaited. The existing ODL institutions are not having the best of time in implementation. The National Open University of Nigeria and the National Teachers' Institute go through thick and thin to have regular subvention for their daily operations. In fact, many of their programmes are stalled and sometimes suspended for not receiving the required fund at the time such is needed. It is from this experience that the funding proposal for the pilot stage is put under the Universal Basic Education Act 2004 so that a secured source of fund can help to nurture a strong Open School.

Establishing Open School

The over all goal of the proposed National Open School is to provide educational opportunities for children, youth and young adults whose learning needs are not being met by formal conventional schools and complement conventional schooling in the significant reduction and eradication of gender, regional and social inequalities in education.

The vision of the Open School is to harness the potentials of Open and Distance Learning so as to provide access to functional basic education for all Nigerians currently outside the educational system and promote equity in the basic education sub-sector in general so as to; above all complement conventional education in reducing poverty, improve the quality of life and meet the EFA and MDGs.

The School will explore, develop and establish a wide range of educational courses at post-literacy and pre-tertiary level and will set up effective Open and Distance Learning structures and systems to make those courses available throughout Nigeria to children, young people and adults not currently reached by formal or non-formal education. It will also explore all possible ways to assist, support and expand efforts to significantly raise transition rates from Primary to Junior Secondary School; and provide basic education to out-of-school children and youths, illiterate adults, primary and secondary school drop-outs, marginalized groups such as migrant groups, the girl-child and women.

The NOS shall operate four tiers of administration as follows: the National Office, the Zonal Offices, the State Offices and the Study Centres. This is intended to bring the school as close to the clients as possible.

The National Open School in Nigeria is being planned to start on a pilot basis. The main reason for this is to ensure that learning can be done systematically while problems will not be too confounding to frustrate the initiative. The courses that will be piloted in the school are: i) Basic and secondary education for adolescent girls and young women who have become early school leavers; ii) Technical/vocational education combined with remedial formal education for young men/adolescent boys; iii) Continuing education for adults at post-literacy level, and iv) Apprentice teachers in nomadic schools. The choice of these courses is based on the perceived needs of the communities of the Federal Capital Territory. The territory is largely a settler

community with continuous influx of population in search of opportunities that that may be offered by the new territory. The pilot will begin at the FCT which incidentally can provide all the sub-groups that the pilot stage will try-out.

The primary target audience shall be out-of-school youths and adults who can be considered as early leavers, but not pre-literates, men and women. Specifically primary school drop-outs; graduates of primary schools who could not transit to JSS; graduates of JSS who due to lack of places could not transit to SSS; Secondary school dropouts; and marginalized groups e.g. migrant groups and women. The age bracket will be about between 15years and 25years. Many would already be involved in some work or partly doing menial jobs to keep going or fill in the existing gap in their life's pursuit.

A core curriculum will be adapted from formal schooling for the National Open School which will bridge senior primary, Junior and Senior Secondary education in the country. The merit of this is that there will be no need for developing an entirely new curriculum. Furthermore, there will be ready basis for comparison in terms of input and output from both systems.

The choice of media technology will be such that the learners will have easy and ready access to print and radio. The use of ICT will however be encouraged and integrated in the programmes as they become available. There will however be extensive use of ICT in the administration and management of the programme. Its use in the delivery of programmes will be restricted to CD. This is to allow for the full participation of the clients, most of whom will not have ready access to ICT outside the study centres.

It is being proposed that the initial funding for the first six years of the NOS should come from government. Towards this, 2% of 2% UBE Consolidated Federal Revenue Fund is proposed to be deployed annually for NOS. The Universal Basic Education Act 2004 provides for 2% to be used as intervention fund to all the states of the federation. It is from this already approved fund that NOS will be funded for the first four years. This is an existing fund whose distribution has only been altered without making new demand on government. The estimated cost of the pilot years is USD8, 630,000. The advantage of this secured funding will insulate the NOS from the glaring problem of irregular and arbitrary funding which became an enormous challenge to the National Open University of Nigeria. This will be a basis for mobilizing all the tiers of governments as there would be enough resources for needs assessment, advocacy visits and negotiations.

The NOS will share facilities, personnel, materials, etc. of the existing ODL institutions in Nigeria, viz. National Teachers' Institute and the National Open University of Nigeria. Some of these existing institutions already have developed course materials, recording studio and course developers. These can readily be shared with the NOS under mutually agreed policy. It is our view that NOS must develop from the community, owned and protected by them as Open Schooling clients would have to depend on the communal infrastructure for either their private reading or group work. There is the need for total sensitization/mobilization at all levels of government; especially local communities, NGOs, CBOs, the private sector, and relevant national and international agencies to buy into this novel project. Above all, there must be firm political will and commitment of government to the establishment of Open Schooling.

The challenge that the NOS will face are different from those faced by similar institutions anywhere. It is important to have strong government political will and commitment. It is with this that the programme can see the light of day and thrive because the required protection and policy are coming from the right direction. A serious challenge is the acceptability of the programme as being a substitute for the conventional schooling. The products of similar existing institution are discriminated

against by government and employers of labour. The quality of the products and the process of their training are often subject of criticisms. The NOS must be able to surmount these from the very beginning. Furthermore it is not sure whether NOS will have enough teachers and facilitators given the fact that the conventional schools cannot boast of adequacy in this area. However, with the increasing number of people leaving service and still fit to bring their experience to bear on the system, it is likely that they will form the pool from where NOS can make its recruitment. There is also the challenge of funding considering that the bulk of the students and pupils will not be able to pay for the education to be provided. How long will government be willing to continue to provide the desired funds if the experience of the existing ODL institutions is anything to go by?

Concluding remarks

The NOS will be expecting a lot from the COL and similar ODE encouraging international organizations. What will be expected of them will include regular advocacy visits to Nigerian governments to keep them focused on the issue of Open Schooling and the many advantages. Furthermore, COL will assist in harnessing available resources in the field for the rapid development and growth of the institution. Nigeria will continue to look up to COL for the provision of technical advisory support, capacity building and will naturally expect a regular fostering touch to remain on course and relevant. Open and Distance Learning is currently gaining widespread acceptance the world over and Nigeria cannot but benefit from the numerous advantages it confers on the many developing and developed nations.

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