



Research Article

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## Beyond the Rhetoric of Educational Policy in Nigeria: Understanding the State Actors Neglect on Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*Different educational policies established in Africa as well as the Nigerian 2013 National Policy on Education (NPE) as revised has clearly shown that education is the key to human life. As such, it should be given to every citizens of the country especially those in the lower basic classes. Contrary to this statement, Nigerian governments in the first phase of easing the lockdown have failed to incorporate the policy blue print in its words, deeds and actions. This neglect manifested in the lifting of bans on church closures, inter-state movements, operation of other non essential businesses at the expense of education in the country. This is a cross-sectional study aimed at examining the State actors' neglect on education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that Nigerian governments at different levels (national and sub-national) treat education with disparity, contempt, and levity. Unnecessary value placed on frivolities was observed as a factor militating against education in the country.*

**Keywords:** Educational policy; State actors; COVID-19 pandemic; Lockdown; Education sector

## 1. Introduction

Education attainment has remained central at the heart of every nation in the world (UNESCO, 1994; Max & Esteban 2016). However, the extent at which it is achieved by different states is considered to be something that could be improved upon. A connecting thread, though, is deep and rising incidence of children out of school. To be specific, about 263 million of these children were affected in 2017; statistics show that 63 million (24%) of them were in their primary school age, 61 million, (23%) others were found in junior secondary school age and 139 million (53%) were in the post secondary school age (UNESCO UIS, 2018). These occur despite different governments' commitment to achieving a widespread access to free, quality and compulsory primary education by 2015 (UNICEF, 2007). The effect of this could account for why over half of the world's children population cannot read and internalize a simple written text. Consequently, the progress achieved from educational sector is far from being adequate especially in African region. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to have the highest rate of non attendance to education among other continents in the world, with 21% of her primary school age children having no access to formal education (UNESCO, 2018).

Similarly, countries noted as worst hit with out of school children are found in Africa - South Sudan (68%), Liberia (62%), Eritrea (57%), Equatorial Guinea (56%), Sudan (44%), and Djibouti (41%) (UNESCO UIS, 2018). Initial challenges observed on this led to the call for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a *sine-qua non* to reduce poverty and improve peoples' lives anywhere in the world by the United Nations (UN) by 2030 (United Nations, 2020a). The Goal 4 of the SDGs is meant to enhance "Quality Education" of these countries. Consequently, efforts made towards achieving this are built in the National Policy of Education (NPE) of these countries with the intention to change the narrative for good. National Policy on Education is a guideline through which effective administration, management and implementation of education at all tiers of government can be utilized and enhanced (*Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 2013). It is meant to have a fundamental change in the country's socio-economic and political structures. Accordingly, this would improve a total and comparative poverty worldwide, particularly the exertion to ending illiteracy and low education would be affected (Ahmed & Buheji, 2018). Based on the policy inputs, education is viewed as a government's main concern which serves as growing consciousness of the vital call for the country's children to be educated, particularly, persons from poor families, which inadvertently will strengthen the country's economy.

Understanding how to address today's educational challenges requires seeing beyond the rhetoric of educational policies of different governments. Often, these policies especially in African continent are not proactively structured in a way to accommodate emergency situations or uncertainties. These could account for several crises (attacks on education which culminates into abduction of school children, burning and looting of

school properties in the case of Nigeria), low budget in education and constant strike actions in their educational sector resulting from governments' insensitivity in many African states. It has been established that the right to sound education and maintenance in schools, particularly at the secondary school levels are determined by the socio-economic and demographic uniqueness of children (Serfa-Nyarko, Kyei & Mwambari, 2018). Therefore, this has a way of influencing the outcome of educational attainment of these individuals, development of the less privileged persons and the national development (Lewin, 2009; Humble & Dixon, 2017; Filmer & Pritchett, 1999). While several efforts are being made through SDGs, and reforms in educational policies of these countries, the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) has adversely undermined such efforts. This is possible given that many businesses have momentarily wind-up and many government activities worldwide have equally been placed on hold thereby restricting movement of persons whilst providers of essential services are allowed to operate strictly in line with the non pharmaceutical protocols of containing the spread of the virus.

Regrettably, the educational sector is a fraction that has been adversely hit by the pandemic. A trend that left over one billion students out of the class room learning which represent 61% of the world estimated enrolment (*Science*, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Initial responses to contain the widespread of the virus include the closure of schools beginning in mid-March (NCDC, 2020) as recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). This happened at a time when many schools in the Sahel region closed for several months due to insecurity, strike and climatic hazards (United Nations, 2020b; Peyre-Costa, 2020). Following the effects of this virus, is the need to embrace technological innovations. Significantly, online communication and interactions are gradually replacing face-to-face interactions which have helped to reduce the outright disruption to academic learning. UNESCO had earlier recommended that schools should adopt different platforms that would assist both the institution and teachers in reaching distance learners. Such platforms include open educational applications, distance learning programmes, among others (International Association of Universities, 2020). Increasingly, different institutions are collaborating with internet providers in line with the governments' initiatives to surmount this challenge in the educational sector, as in the case of Rwanda, South Africa and Tunisia (ADEA, 2020; Anifowoshe, Aborode, Ayodele, Iretiayo, & David, 2020). Nonetheless, access to online may not be that easy especially for a continent where many of her teachers had little knowledge of basic digital skills (*Teachers taskforce on Covid-19*, 2020) and where about 24% of the people living in the area have access to the internet, with challenges relating to poor connectivity and interruptions in power supply. To be specific, the United Nations statistics show that about 3.6 billion people lack access to internet connection and will hardly benefit from online education (United Nations, 2020a).

Interestingly, any achievement that is likely to be made by this is dependent on the nature of the technological solutions adopted, which would be supported or anchored on

the consistency of electricity supply, internet connectivity and technical know-how of teachers, students, parents, and different school administration. Convincingly, the outbreak of COVID-19 has obviously exposed some level of inequalities in African education sector given that only students with access to online learning will continue to learn with ease while students without access to online are left unattended to. In Nigeria, a report from UNICEF shows that about 10.5 million of her children 5-14 years old are not in school while only 61% of children within the age of 6 to 11-year-olds often attend primary school. On specific terms, more than half of the girls in the North East and North West geopolitical zones of the country were not registered in schools as marginalization guarantee deprivation of basic education of these girls. Series of plans were already in progress prior to COVID-19 to ensure that young people attend school and have quality education, as statistics show that 20% of the actual numbers of students' out-of-school in the world were Nigerians. Although, many regional governments across the country understood the challenges being witnessed in the educational sector with the Lagos State Ministry of Education bringing out a plan of radio and Television lesson programme for students in public secondary schools. Nevertheless, what could be stalked from this disparity in Africa is that Nigerian government have failed to demonstrate requisite diligence in facilitating their educational policies, or failing to assist the policy makers in addressing the challenges. Given these perspectives, an attempt is made to underscore and analyze this failure by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN).

## 2. Education, Policy and Human Development

Development is a process of attaining greater heights in life. These heights could be in terms of acquisition of necessary skills, impact of such skills acquired and the capacity to build in them either as individuals or groups in the society. Simply put, the capacity to build is based on the relationship that exists between and among these people in the society. Therefore, no development takes place in isolation of human beings. Rodney, (2005, p.5) notes that development is a social process that could be determined by the interplay of individual exertion to change his natural environment. Similarly, this change requires concerted efforts of human initiatives, skills, free will and interaction among others to achieve. Taken together, the report by International Cooperation in 2005 views 'human development' as:

*"Freedom as well as forming human capabilities—the variety of things that people can attain and become in life. Individual freedoms and rights is necessary, because people can easily be limited to that which they can achieve if they are deprived, sick, uneducated, discriminated against, in danger by violent conflict or deprived of a political voice" (UNDP, 2005, p.18).*

This definition tries to see individual improvement, capacity, creativity and freedom

as part of freedom by chance (choice) and of process freedom (development built in social relations and forceful process) (Alkire, 2010). Accordingly, United Nations Development Programme of 2001 define “human development as the process of creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accordance with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations, thus, development is about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus about much more than economic growth, which is only a means—if a very important one – of enlarging people’s choices. Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities – the range of things that people can do or be in life.” (UNDP, 2001, P. 9), while living lives they value in anticipation that they are not only the beneficiaries but serve as the change agents to other individuals in the society (UNDP, 2002). Human Development Index (HDI) seeks to measure life expectancy, literacy rate and the standard of living of people in a country. This index is meant to underscore whether a country is a developed, developing or non-developed country and also show in which height the effect in its economy affects the standard of living of people living therein. The Human Development Index was first developed by Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq in 1990 and is being presented by United Nations Development Programme in annual Human Development Report since 1993. The HDI considers the below three key dimensions in the countries:

- Long and Healthy Life,
- Knowledge,
- Decent Standard of Living.

Amartya Sen see human development, as a foundational structure to developmental ideas which could advance skills and capabilities to human life. And these capabilities are the substratum of human development. Although, capabilities change and advance with time, in situations, in space and as well as in societal norms and values but individual freedom to make decisive choices in line with what is needed/required is necessary towards achieving it. While development is seen to be holistic, it cannot be achieved without the required skills, capacity and individuals who would interact with the natural environment to bring to bear/fought the expected end. As all development is geared towards increasing human potential, widening their chances of becoming viable, research has shown that education is necessary to a societal ability to improve its economy and environment, both of which are important to achieving sustainable development (Nevin, 2008; United Nations, 2008).

Consequently, all aspects of human development are directly or indirectly linked to education. While acknowledging the logical sequence between education, and human development, this paper finds UNESCO’s analysis on education useful as it defines education as the capability for sustaining development in emerging but dynamic concept that includes a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2002, p.1). The concern

is that education (either as an informal or formal sector) has the key to different human development trajectories in the world. Thus, education is associated with the intellectual and organizational change in any society (*Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 2004). As a concept, education could be said to be relational which in its construct cannot be simplified or generalized. Therefore, it represents the intellectual ability of an individual towards developing the society. Importantly, it is only in education that the basic capabilities (early childhood survival, primary education, entry level technology, resilience to recurrent shock) and enhanced capabilities (access to quality health at all levels, high quality education at all levels, effective access to present-day technologies, resilience to unknown new shocks) of individuals could be found (UNDP, 2019). In line with the above, it is necessary to underscore that the lower a country's human development, the larger the gap in access to education of such countries and vice versa.

This explains the basis for premium placed on the educational policies of many countries in the world. The belief is that the policy has the capacity of drawing planning in a rational and systematic process towards attaining educational development in a manner that would enhance the needs of individuals and society (Nwagwu, 1997). However, rather than achieving this by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), more emphasis was placed on technicalities and logistics instead of individuals and society (Coombs, 1970). For instance, UNESCO's recommendation is that not less than 20% of a country's national yearly budget should be allocated to education. That of Nigeria in the last five years are 7% (2015), 6% (2016), 7% (2017), 7% (2018) and 7% (2019) (Ndujihe, 2018; Ameh & Aluko, 2019). These percentages could show that Nigerian government pay lip service to education as shown in the paltry sum allocated to education year on year in the national budget. This is common among the developing nations in the world. Given this perspective, a UNDP reports indicates that in the second quarter 2020, about 86% of children in the lower basic education have been out of school in countries with low human development when compared with 20% of countries with high human development (UNDP, 2020).

Many developed countries in the world had never ceased from embracing education in their policy structure or blueprints (Bell & Stevenson, 2005). However, it is one thing to have a policy structure or blueprint and another to have it implemented in the society. Time has shown that we have more state actors that engage or involve in education policy only in an ideal situation. They are often disturbed on the change processes that need to take place in the education sector but hardly see the need to uphold on the efforts towards achieving these changes. These change processes could be inform of reform to restructure and improve on any policy input that may have become obsolete. This is necessary for the following reasons: on the one hand, it enables both the policy initiators, makers and executors to assess how effective each of the policy is to the local environment, on the other hand, resulting from this, the impacts of any policy as could be obtained from its local environment will provide an avenue for better policy designs or

reforms in the future especially in the emergency situations and uncertainties.

### 3. Method

Cross-sectional study was adopted in this study with selected secondary schools, parents, teachers and students across six geo-political zones in Nigeria. The choices as well as the selection of these schools, institutions, parents, teachers and students were done in consideration of their role and how objective they would be. This study was carried out to ascertain the government neglect on education during the COVID-19 ease of lockdown in the country. Six states covered from the six geo-political zones are: South-East – Enugu; South-South – Rivers; South-West – Lagos; North-West – Kano; North-Central – Plateau; and North-East – Gombe. The selected states in the six geo-political zones were the ones the researchers could reach out to due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the fear of being affected. The study was carried out from April 24th, 2020-July 31st, 2020. This period covered was to elicit information that could enhance the study.

Three different cases of non-probability sampling method were used for the study. The need for this sampling technique is to provide the researcher with the necessary data or information (Asika, 2010) that would be required in the study. The survey was sent to the respondents through mail. The pattern of questions was adapted from the study of Akan et al. (2010); Khalid et al. (2016); Roy et al. (2020) and Baloran, (2020), and was structured in line with the objectives of the study. A total of 600 questionnaires were used, that is 100 questionnaires were sent to each of these states respectively.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Among the 600 participants who filled the questionnaire, 415 (52%) were female, 185 (31%) were male. Most of the participants 478 (80%) were parents, teachers and students in the secondary schools who understand the need for basic education. Age of the participants ranges between 18 to 70 years old. Sequel to the participants view of state actors neglect on education during the COVID-19 lockdown, 70% of them believe that there could be online teaching across the states. Although, 510 (85%) of the respondents understood the urgent need to close secondary schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak but expected that government should be proactive towards providing alternative to teaching and learning programmes of the affected students. However, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) failed to rise to these challenges. Empirical evidence has shown that about 40% of the poorest countries in the world failed to support learners at risk during the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020) while accumulated experiences indicate that education and gender disparities are equally neglected, abandoned and uncared for during an outbreak of disease (IIEP-UNESCO, 2020). Extant but related literature has also shown that COVID-19 spread easily (Okoye & Agbo, Forthcoming). The fear of being

affected led to measures towards containing it. Such measures include border closures, physical distancing, avoidance of crowds, avoidance of handshake, and ban on inter-state movement among others (Onyishi et al, 2020; Okoye, et al, Forthcoming).

**Table 1:** Respondents’ responses on Nigerian National Policy on Education (*n* = 600)

|   | Yes, n(%)  | No, n(%)   | I don't know, n(%) |
|---|------------|------------|--------------------|
| Do you feel that an outbreak of a virus such as COVID-19 could lead to closure of schools?  | 331(55.2%) | 194(32.3%) | 75(12.5%)          |
| Do you think that online class and modules can be established in Nigeria considering its technological backwardness?                                  | 222(61.7%) | 246(41.0%) | 132(22%)           |
| Do you agree that Nigerian government neglected education albeit it's national policy on education during the ease of lockdown?                       | 458(76.3%) | 134(22.3%) | 8 (1.3%)           |
| The reasons for saying “YES” to government neglect on education during the lockdown <i>n</i> (%)  |            |            |                    |
| a) Poor planning in the Nigerian educational policy creates more problems in its implementation   |            |            | 324 (70.7)         |
| b) Nigerian children still hawk along the streets during school hours albeit the educational policy that mandates them for basic education attainment |            |            | 268 (58.5)         |
| c) Non consistent and constant changes in the educational policies in the country   |            |            | 412 (90.0)         |
| d) Many schools were in shambles even before the lockdown   |            |            | 360 (78.6)         |
| e) No profession in Nigeria has its entry point lower than bachelors degree or its equivalent except teaching (NCE)                                   |            |            | 241(52.6)          |
| f) The pandemic exposed the inequalities in the educational policy blue print in Nigeria  |            |            | 189(41.3)          |
| g) No effort to train her teachers on ICT that can enhance students learning during the pandemic  |            |            | 177 (38.6)         |
| h) The free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child as could be seen in the country's policy is a mirage                            |            |            | 315(67.8)          |
| i) Educational policies in Nigeria has not solved the problem of many students dropping out of schools  |            |            | 95(20.7)           |
| <b>Total</b>  |            |            | <b>458 (100)</b>   |
| The reasons for saying “NO” to government neglect on education during the lockdown  |            |            |                    |
| a) Reports alleging educational neglect is required to come from school officials   |            |            | 116 (86.6)         |
| b) Government closure of schools is necessary towards curtailing the viral spread of the virus  |            |            | 100 (74.6)         |
| c) Effort was made to use radio and Television in the teaching and learning of students in the public schools   |            |            | 87 (64.9)          |
| d) Necessity demands exceptional measures to handle it  |            |            | 94 (70.1)          |
| e) Studying at home could not be proper for a developing country like Nigeria   |            |            | 62 (46.3)          |
| <b>Total</b>  |            |            | <b>134 (100)</b>   |

While these were going on, parents, teachers and students in the secondary schools expected proactive measures, 458/600 (76%) from the government to institute an online platform that can sustain proper teaching and learning of these students. Also, some teachers 52 (8.7%) noted that Nigerian government established “education sector COVID-19 contingency plan” which was seen as intervention to education within the period. The aim of this contingency plan is to: ensure the continuation of education (both formal and

informal) in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19; provide uninterrupted education in the event of COVID-19; provide safe water sanitation hygiene (WASH) facilities to support prevention and transmission of COVID-19; train and sensitize the school community on preventive measures against COVID-19 outbreak; provide psychosocial support for members of the school community; coordinate education sector response (*Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2020*). Accordingly, some parents and students 377 (63%) acknowledge governments' effort to use radio and television in teaching students in the public schools.

However, it is surprising that despite how logical the Nigerian governments' response to the deadly disease is, its outcome has not been fruitful in the educational sector. Parents and students 350 (58%) believe that 95% of Nigerian students in public secondary schools stay at home without benefiting anything in the radio and television programmes meant to enhance their learning ability. Equally, some secondary school teachers 36 (6%) noted that "education sector COVID-19 contingency plan" established by the Nigerian government has not been properly implemented. Moreover, about 412 (67%) parents, teachers and students had very high dissatisfaction with the constant change in the national educational policies in the country. This is consistent with the work of (Okebukola, 2015) which maintains that the inconsistency of government policy on education is largely attributed to its national politics which according to (Obioma, 2013) has not yielded any meaningful results. Similarly, (Akinpelu, 2005; Akanbi & Jekayinfa, 2019) note that the constant change in its philosophy and goals of education in the country is at par with the reality on ground. This reality as could be observed in all the Nigeria Policies on Education seems to concentrate more on literacy rather than real education of individuals that would not only transform the personality but as well as the society through the individual capacity to create, build and sustain development initiatives (Akanbi & Jekayinfa, 2019, p. 182; Lauder, Jamieson, Wikeley, 1998; OECD, 2010). It is this same attitude that was carried into the lockdown. Another show of this attitude is that even when the lockdown was lifted, schools in Nigeria remained closed and government seemed not to have lost sleep that these schools (primary, secondary and universities) were closed.

**Table 2.** Parents, Teachers and students responses on the image of education in Nigeria ( $n = 600$ ).

| Before the Lockdown   | n (%)      |
|---|------------|
| a. Nigeria has not attained the international standard pupil-teacher ratio of 20, 35 and 40 in the pre-primary, primary and secondary schools | 273(45.5%) |
| b. Education boards responsible for the appointment, promotion, posting and discipline of teachers always politicize it                       | 452(75.3%) |
| c. Poor basic amenities and deficient architectural building are common among the public secondary schools in the country                     | 311(51.8%) |

| Before the Lockdown   | n (%)      |
|---|------------|
| d. Nigerian educational policy manifest reluctance on the educational divide between the national government and sub-national governments                     | 331(55.1%) |
| e. Nonpayment of staff salary and other emoluments' accrued to teachers is common in public schools.  | 228(38.0%) |
| f. Unnecessary existence of different bodies and parastatals in the education sector with overlapping functions distorts better teaching and learning process | 250(41.6%) |
| g. There is always a discrepancy between the annual budget allocation to education and the recommendation given by UNESCO                                     | 391(65.2%) |
| h. Some of the instruments and materials required to enhance students practical orientation are rarely available  | 276(46.0%) |
| i. Heads of schools and institutions are being masterminded by primordial factors   | 418(69.7%) |
| j. Grading and assessing of students are determined by institutional failure  | 345(57.5%) |

**Table 3.** Parents, teachers and Students responses on challenges exposed in the educational sector during the COVID-19 pandemic ( $n = 600$ ).

| During the Lockdown   | n (%)      |
|---|------------|
| 1. No effort to train her teachers on ICT that can enhance students learning during the pandemic  | 351(58.5%) |
| 2. No better plans were put in place as regards to school resumption even when other non essential businesses have been opened.                     | 427(71.2%) |
| 3. Amidst the economic challenges in the country, some State government imposed COVID-19 test fee on her students across the State.                 | 239(39.8%) |
| 4. Nigerian education system was not designed to adapt to changing world order  | 370(61.7%) |
| 5. Digital tools that will enhance teaching and learning of students were not provided by the government  | 265(44.2%) |
| 6. The pandemic has transformed the centuries-old, chalk-talk teaching model to one driven by technology  | 430(71.7%) |
| 7. Reliability in the Nigerian electricity has not been guaranteed nor sustained  | 500(83.3%) |
| 8. There has not been stability in the use of internet services   | 226(37.7%) |
| 9. No existing ICT driven learning instrument/tools like Google classroom, whatsApp, YouTube and Zoom was found in many Nigerian schools.           | 396(66.0%) |
| 10. Some students and teachers doubt the effectiveness and feasibility of online pedagogy due to technical issues relating to change from old order | 371(61.8%) |

## 5. Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 has thrown many countries in the world off balance but the approach followed by these countries is determined or dependent on what is important to them. In other words, attempt has been made to underscore how insignificant education is to Nigerian government before and during the pandemic. Results showed that Nigerian governments at different levels (national and sub-national) treat education with disparity, contempt, and levity. Unnecessary value placed on frivolities was observed as a factor militating against education in the country. It has also failed in her different

policy response which manifest in constant review of educational policies which was adjudged to be on technicalities and logistics rather than the personality development.

The argument of this paper is that education prepares individuals for future endeavors that would lead to developments (their ability to be ready). This has been the response of many countries after the 2002 conference that led to the provision of education for all initiative. While efforts to sustain this was still on, it had some challenges especially in Nigeria policy inputs which focus more on lofty ideals of policy makers that would neither be realistic nor translate into students' knowledge base. This is basically on the complex nature of its policy structures. In African continent, it has become a common knowledge that they are good at drawing out plans, strategies, that becomes difficult during implementation (African Union, 2007; Adediran, 2015). This was noted in many studies given that adequate funds and attention could not be channeled to education sector.

Therefore, the observation of this paper calls for repositioning of educational policy of the country as to see that rhetoric placed on its policy input could be attended to and realized especially during an emergency situations and uncertainties.

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