

## **Access, Equity and Quality Education: The Tripod for Sustainable National Development in Nigeria**

Timothy OKEMAKINDE  
okemakindetimothy@gmail.com

*School of Education,  
Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo  
Oyo State*

### **Abstract**

*It is a fact that education is an impeccable instrument for the development of the potentialities of a nation which would ultimately bring about national development by way of combating poverty, illiteracy, diseases and other social and economic problems. This paper thus acknowledges the imperativeness of access, equity and quality education towards national development. It emphasizes the tripod of access, equity and quality education as a catalyst for sustainable national development. It points out that although Nigerian governments have been making frantic efforts towards enhanced access, equity and quality education, challenges such as inadequate carrying capacity, poor socio-economic background, inadequate public financing, among others, have been major constraints. To tackle these identified challenges and enhance national development, it is suggested that the need for improved funding and equitable access to quality education should be guaranteed for all citizens, and transparent and effective monitoring of educational system should be ensured to enhance quality education among others.*

**Keywords:** Access, equity, quality education, educational development, sustainable national development.

## **Introduction**

The right to education has been recognized at least since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and has since been reiterated and elaborated through numerous human rights treaties and conventions. These treaties, their use and interpretations have produced a framework through which the right to education is understood to comprise four essential and related components: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. This implies that countries have a responsibility to ensure non-discriminatory, inclusive education at all levels, including universal primary education; teachers and learning environments to guarantee quality, and finances to guarantee this. However, there is widespread concern that the model of educational programme that is evident in Nigeria is unsustainable. There is serious crisis in the Nigerian education system that can be characterized in terms of access, equity and quality.

Education is a concept that is universally accepted as being the impeccable instrument for the development of the potentialities of a nation which would ultimately bring about national development by way of combating poverty, illiteracy, disease and other social and economic problems. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) described education as a key factor in the drive for sustainable development. It is a birthright, not a privilege, of every citizen of any country (Muftahu and Hazri, 2015). This was echoed by Tomasevski (2003) that every person has the right to education and shall be made available to all children and in the same way as education shall be made accessible on merit with parents having the priority to choose the right education for their children. To facilitate this, Imam (2012) suggested that government should strive to make education available, accessible, acceptable, equitable and adaptable.

Access to education is seen as a central plank in development strategies linked to the Millennium Development and Dakar goals associated with Education for All. These headline the achievement of universal primary education and gender equity in enrolments across all low income countries as an essential component of efforts to reduce poverty, increase equity and transform the developmental prospects of individuals and nation states. That equity matters for children, teachers

and societies is indisputable. Equity is a fundamental value of public education systems, which goes beyond narrow considerations of effectiveness and efficiency. It is also a powerful policy tool in the development of quality in education. Research-based evidence increasingly shows that equity is an intrinsic part of quality in education and a key factor in achieving it. Equal access for all children to quality teachers, schools, and teaching materials and facilities enhances the overall learning outcomes for those children, and their well-being and social development, and reinforces the quality of the education experience.

According to McCowan (2010), equity in education opportunities is of paramount significance if the goals of education and societal development are to be achieved. Access and equity in education denote availability of opportunity for every child to be in school at the relevant age (not minding gender or class). The National Policy on Education reiterates this and states that;

*“Nigeria’s philosophy of education is based on the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system” (Akanbi, 2014:7)*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 had the right to education as one of its components. The right to education, according to Abdul-Kareem and Muraina (2014), implies that everyone has the right to education. By this, governments are obliged to make education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable.

However, despite the fact that education is a veritable tool for national development, access to education opportunities still eludes many people in Nigeria. The centrality of education in human development is clear. The right to education as an internationally recognized right is all the more important as it is not only a human right in itself, but also essential for the exercise of other rights. While Nigeria, as a developing country is committed to achieving the right to basic education for all, the gap between commitment and reality remains significant and, if sustainable steps are not taken, this can easily widen.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Access to education, according to the National Policy on Education (2013), implies making it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it. According to Ene (2005), equity in education implies ensuring that all the segments of the society get their fair share of access to whatever educational opportunities being provided. In essence, access implies opportunity for formal education while equity is fairness in admission.

United Nations and Universal declaration of human rights 1948 put forward the idea of the education attainment that reflects on the human's right to gain education (Burke, 2013). According to Meyer and Bradley (2013), freedom of education attainment and its full access refers to unbiased and robust educational opportunities at every stage, polishing of knowledge, skills, and ability to participate in the improvement of the society. Therefore, lack of access to education institutes refers to various situations such as, failure of enrolment, inadequate opportunities to attend school, non-completion of programme of study, lack of opportunities of attaining desired objectives and also for the transitioning to the next level of education (Ebisine, 2014).

According to Igbokwe (2015), access in education typically refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure, or at least strive to ensure, that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. Increasing access generally requires schools to provide additional services or remove any actual or potential barriers that might prevent some students from equitable participation in certain courses or academic programmes. When used in reference to education reforms, access typically refers to school strategies or policies designed to remove institutional disincentives or to provide the resources, social services, and academic support that certain students may need to succeed in school. If access is denied or left unaddressed by a school, students may struggle academically or drop out, learning gaps may compound or widen over time, students may be unable to participate in certain courses, school programmes, extracurricular activities, or sports, among other undesirable outcomes (Robinson, 2008).

The need for all children to have access to quality education, regardless of background, has become increasingly prominent in national

and international policy agendas (UNESCO, 2008). Igbokwe (2015) defines equity in education to mean that personal and social circumstances, such as gender, ethnic, origin, or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills. He further asserts that equity in education has two dimensions. The first is fairness, which basically means making sure that personal and social circumstance should not be obstacles to achieving educational potential. The second is inclusion, in other words, ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all.

Students differ from one another in terms of their socio-cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, and their life experiences, which may have differential influences on their educational outcomes. However, the principles of equity suggest that any differences in educational outcomes should not be dependent on factors such as student's background, or quality of educational input, over which students have no control (Perry, 2009). Strong equity policies do influence the overall quality of educational provision and outcomes through structural and process variables, including access and accessibility; opportunities via curriculum, pedagogical differentiation; materials and resources; high quality teacher education; outcomes for children. In countries where these conditions are provided, horizontal and vertical equity are more likely to be achieved, and are more likely to lead to positive cycles of advantages.

Quality, according to Babalola (2007), is most often defined as fitness to purpose in relation to the user and customer needs. It can also be taken to mean that the product conforms to standards, specifications or requirements. Quality education on its own can be seen as a relative term because what constitutes quality education vary from country to country based on their economic resources, value system, educational goals and philosophies, among others. Quality education improves the quality of the work force by raising the level of its skills and efficiency. Quality education gives a nation access to the world's body of knowledge, hence the adoption and adaptation of the reigning technology to specific environment is facilitated (Gbenu, 2012).

Asiyai (2013) sees quality education as that education that is relevant and adapted to the needs of the society. Such needs must meet the standards in health, growth, and physical survival in a complex and globalized world. It implies education that is worthwhile and which empowers the recipients with relevant skills, knowledge, ideas, values and attitudes needed for him/her to make informed decisions and live a self-sustaining life. Quality education, therefore, builds knowledge, capabilities and life skills and values, and develops the creative, social and emotional capabilities of learners. It fosters broad cognitive and personal development, including critical and higher order thinking, problem-solving, self-discipline, and can support active citizenship, leadership and more. Quality education must also be non-discriminatory; equality is in itself a key component of quality education. However, among the basic factors affecting quality education in Nigeria are inadequate funding, inadequate and poor quality of teaching staff, poor policy implementation, inadequate information communication technology facilities, among others.

### **Quality Education for Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development implies development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is characterised as a continuous, guided process of economic, environmental and social change aimed at promoting the well-being of citizens now and into the future (UNESCO, 2007). To realise the development of this nature requires creating a sustainable and resource-efficient economy founded on a fair and just society, which respects the ecological limits and carrying capacity of the natural environment (Ryan, 2011).

Education has made many valuable contributions to societies and development globally, and is recognized for the important role it plays in improving livelihoods worldwide. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the process of equipping students with the knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way

that safeguards environmental, social and economic wellbeing, both in the present and for future generations. It encourages students to develop critical thinking and to take a wide-ranging, systemic and self-reflective approach, adapting to novel situations that can arise from complexity. An ability to anticipate and prepare for predictable outcomes and be ready to adapt to unexpected ones is an important goal.

ESD is an approach towards re-orienting education systems, educational institutions and teaching-learning processes so that they become increasingly consistent with the principles of sustainable development. It aims to integrate the principles of sustainable development into all forms of education and learning and to help realise a change in attitudes, behaviours and values to ensure a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2012).

ESD has essential characteristics that can be implemented in many culturally appropriate forms. Education for sustainable development, according to UNESCO (2007):

- is based on the principles and values that underlie sustainable development;
- deals with the well-being of all three dimensions of sustainability— environment, society and economy;
- uses a variety of pedagogical techniques that promote participatory learning and higher-order thinking skills;
- promotes lifelong learning;
- is locally relevant and culturally appropriate;
- is based on local needs, perceptions and conditions, but acknowledges that fulfilling local needs often has international effects and consequences;
- engages formal, non-formal and informal education;
- accommodates the evolving nature of the concept of sustainability;
- addresses content, taking into account context, global issues and local priorities;
- builds civil capacity for community-based decision making, social tolerance, environmental stewardship, an adaptable workforce, and a good quality of life; and,
- is interdisciplinary.

Thus, the vision of ESD is that of transforming education systems so that they can help to build a better future by making education better in quality, more relevant and more responsive; providing learners with the tools and techniques needed to deal effectively with contemporary challenges in our unstable world and encouraging people to be innovative, think critically, solve problems, understand complexity and cooperate with others.

### **Access, Equity and Quality Education: Catalyst for Sustainable National Development**

The dividends that result from investments in quality education are immeasurable: greater economic growth for individuals and societies; improved public health; increased efforts towards environmental sustainability; and more resilient, peaceful and just communities and societies. However, for these benefits to accrue, all girls and boys must have educational opportunities both inside and outside of school and they must be learning.

Access to education lies at the heart of development. Lack of education is both a part of the definition of poverty and a means for its diminution. Sustained and meaningful access to education is critical to long term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women, and reductions in inequality. It is central to the long-standing and recent images of development that depend on the capabilities that create choices and freedoms that ignorance denies ((Robinson, 2008).

Access and equity are critical for enabling all girls and boys to continue their education and thrive to the best of their potentials in life. Without these key issues, students are more likely to be out of school, drop out of school and fail to make progress. But alongside these, a more holistic framework of quality learning is required. In addition to reading, writing and numeracy, students need to learn relevant transferable life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, civic values, mental health and well-being skills.

Lewin (2007) asserts that quality communication and technological literacy are also necessary to prepare students for the workforce and

to be active, productive members of their communities and nations. Thus, education systems for the future must be pragmatic, innovative and facilitate learning in changing contexts. To ensure that students are taught by qualified and motivated teachers, more investment is needed in teacher education and ongoing professional development, teaching and learning resources, deployment of good teachers to the poorest areas and adequate and timely remuneration.

As a right, basic education should be free, compulsory, and result in relevant learning outcomes that enable all children to actualise their full potentials and positively contribute to the society. Bringing in the voices of learners and teachers will be critical in monitoring progress and ensuring that all children, including youth, are provided with the skills needed to thrive in adult life. According to Lewin (2007), the basic propositions that underlie these observations are well established in research literature and widely believed. Fairly, universal poverty reduction is seen as unlikely unless knowledge, skills and capabilities are extended to those who are marginalised from value-added economic activity by illiteracy and higher level reasoning that links causes and effects rationally.

In most societies, and especially those that are developing rapidly, households and individuals value participation in education and invest substantially in pursuing the benefits it can confer. The rich have few doubts that the investments pay off; the poor generally share the belief and recognise that mobility out of poverty is increasingly education-related, albeit that their aspirations and expectations are less frequently realised.

There is, of course, no development theory of substance that advances the counter-factual—that investment in quality education individually and collectively is somehow not developmental. The reasons are obvious. Knowledge and skill do transform capabilities, competencies that are acquired through education do have value in labour markets, and social selection and mobility are increasingly mediated by educational progress and qualifications. Necessarily this observation depends on the proposition that educational provision does actually deliver knowledge and skill, values and dispositions that are developmental—attributes that link access to educational quality, relevance, and livelihood and well-being outcomes.

Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008) opine that development is inextricably linked to equity in education. Modernising societies use educational access and attainment as a primary mechanism to sort and select subsequent generations into different social and economic roles towards national development. Whatever the best explanations are, the result is that those with more education, and the qualifications that validate what has been learned, enjoy higher living standards, greater incomes and accumulate more assets.

Social development as a process has to value educational equity if it is associated with more rather than less democratic processes, greater participation in civil society and governance, and respect for human rights. Economic development may or may not be accelerated by greater equity in the short term. But there would seem much to lose and little to gain by long term strategies that do not seek to raise the educational level of the next generation and distribute knowledge and skills related to productivity more widely. The idea is to improve access to education as a vector promoting developmental transitions, as the purpose of education for many is to transform capabilities. If educational process does not enable its beneficiaries to think, feel and act in different ways than they would otherwise do, it would seem to have little merit. The transformation can span many levels. Individuals may be transformed and acquire new knowledge and skills which have utility. They may acquire new values, aspirations and desires that provide the motivation to become socially mobile. Communities can benefit both from the enhanced capabilities of individuals, and from new ways of organising and supporting social action that depend on literacy and numeracy, new technologies of communication and abstract thinking skills. Production and service sector activities can be transformed with more knowledge-based processes and intelligent design.

Access, broadly defined, has to encompass the extent to which educational participation is meaningful to those it is presumed to benefit, and at least some insight into whether it actually does have benefits. What stakeholders believe about efficacy and utility influences family and individual choices to invest in education, and decisions to persist through to higher levels. In all but the short term, what is believed will be mediated by the realities that lie behind the perceptions of beneficial outcomes.

### **Challenges of Access, Equity and Quality Education in Nigeria**

Among the basic factors that frustrate building a standard/stable educational system in Nigeria, according to Sule-Kano and Edeh (2007), in Akanbi (2014:3), are:

- i. lack of genuine commitment by Nigerian rulers to the development of education;
- ii. pursuit of economic policies wholly unsuitable for sustaining a serious drive towards an advanced system of education;
- iii. dominance of colonially derived ideologies and paradigms of education;
- iv. abuse and misuse of oil wealth in the race for accumulation of wealth; and,
- v. the political disenfranchisement of the people.

Major constraints to access, equity and quality education in Nigeria are:

*Carrying Capacity:* Educational demands are increasing with the growth of the population, thus school ratio should also be increased with the increase in the demands. However, findings have shown that many institutions of learning are already carrying more students than their capacity. Over-populated institutions refer to the facilities overstretching, which entails that the students are more enrolled from the limits of facilities available in the institutions (Aluede, Idogho, and Imonikhe, 2012).

*Inadequate Public Financing:* Lack of funding is a major reason for reducing the access of many prospective students to education. Expansion of educational institutions is directly associated with funding, as enhanced funding will accomplish the expansion phenomenon. Education is supposed to attract considerable portion of public expenditure because of its position as a social service with direct economic significance with generally acclaimed positive spillover effects. It is considered as a long term investment that leads to a high production for a country in the future.

Therefore, most of the developed and developing countries emphasize the enhancement of educational sector. But in Nigeria, there is no denying the fact that education is very poorly funded, because it is yet to comply with the UNESCO recommendation that 26% of annual budget be spent on education. The country spends less than 11% of her total annual budget on education. Botswana spends 19.0%; Swaziland, 24.6%; South Africa, 25.8%; Cote d'Ivoire, 30.0%; Ghana, 31%; Kenya, 23.0%; Uganda, 27.0%; (Ejiogu, Okezie and Chinedu, 2013). About 7% of the budget was allocated for education in the year 2017 in Nigeria. This poor financing in the Nigerian educational sector causes the inaccessibility and low quality education in Nigeria. According to Ajayi and Haastrup (2011), lack of funds is the major cause of inaccessibility to education and the quality of education in Nigeria is directly affected by the funding system.

*Socio-Economic Background:* Majority of Nigerians are poor and cannot afford to pay for their children's education. This hinders access to equity and quality education as majority opt out while some attend overcrowded institutions that lack educational facilities that could enhance effective teaching learning process. Nzomo (2001) established a positive correlation between the socio-economic status of primary school pupils and the level of their learning achievements. The results show that as the socio-economic status of the sampled pupils improved, the mean scores in the learning achievement also increased. Ajasa and Okemakinde (2015) also found that families with higher socio-economic status had the ability to provide their children with necessary facilities and materials pertinent in improving academic performance.

*Infrastructure/Facilities Challenge:* Insufficient and obsolete infrastructures and equipment, and poor library and laboratory facilities have become the major threat to the quality of education in Nigeria. Moreover, the environment of the classrooms and the laboratories of educational institutions in Nigeria are not according to the standardized level of teaching and learning Adebeyeje (2000) opines that material resources are very important and indispensable in the educational process and

therefore must be provided in adequate quantity and quality so as to enhance job and academic environment for better results in the education system. Also, Okebukola (2008), in Oyekan (2014), confirmed that the place of physical resources in any educational process cannot be overemphasized but unfortunately according to him, many of the Nigerian educational institutions are laced with unbefitting physical resources. Oyekan (2014) also found a positive relationship between material resource situation and academic staff productivity.

*Curriculum Issue:* Curriculum is vital in achieving the goals of education at any level. Curriculum content must be tailored to meet the needs of the learner and the community in which he or she lives. Inappropriate and irrelevant curriculum will hinder, to a very large extent, goal achievement (Akanbi, 2014). Allele-Williams (2004), in Gbenu (2012), lamented that what is of greatest concern is that most curricula offerings are not current, most learning is paper and pencil work, and that there is very little practical hands on learning in Nigerian educational institutions.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of education in nation building cannot be over-emphasised. Investment in education has become internationally recognized as an instrument par excellence for development and eradication of poverty. Thus, education requires financial support more than any of the other sectors of the economy. However, the education sector has suffered tremendously in Nigeria ranging from poor finance, inappropriate allocation, lack of effective monitoring and supervision and a host of other problems.

Education is a major mechanism available to governments and communities to bring about social transformation and thus create a more stable, equitable and resilient societies. Thus, it is important for Nigeria to improve on her present state of educational operations which is far from what operates in the developed countries by enhancing equity, access and quality for improvements in the quality of human lives and the society generally.

## **Recommendations**

Towards an enhanced sustainable national development through equity, access and quality education, the following are suggested:

- One of the factors that have led to the harmful trade-off between quality and access, whether in terms of sacrificing quality to expand access, or limiting access in order to improve quality and learning has been the drastic shortage of funding to fully finance the right to education. If we are to deliver the right to education, as is required to advance so many other global priorities, there must be sufficient, well-designed public financing. This must include sufficient domestic financing, alongside international support. Nigeria governments should allocate sufficient finance for education and in particular basic education, paying attention to recognized international targets of a minimum of 20 percent of national budgets or 6 percent of gross domestic product to education.
- Guaranteeing equitable and equal access to quality education for all requires attention to governance. Transparent and accountable systems must be in place to ensure oversight of spending and avoid leakages, misdirection, and under-spending.
- Fostering inclusive education implies active engagement of civil societies. The intellectual community and the civil society play a central role in promoting better understanding of inequalities in education. The advocacy work of these stakeholders is vital to ensuring widespread attention to issues for ensuring equality of opportunity in education. Civil society should be allowed to participate in decision-making and oversight at all levels. The engagement of learners, teachers and other stakeholders is a crucial check on the use and direction of funding, and on the adaptability and acceptability, as well as the accessibility and availability, of education.
- For quality education to be achieved, Nigerian governments need to implement a transparent and effective monitoring system that examines and measures compliance and progress, and allows for redress. Quality norms and standards should inform education systems throughout the country, within a framework that provides

guidelines whilst being sufficiently adaptable to allow for regional difference (e.g. in language) and trusting professional teachers to make decisions about teaching and learning.

- Educational activities aimed at achieving equality of educational opportunities need to be intensified. Nigerian governments should recognise and incorporate key importance of adequate legal frameworks on equality of opportunity in education in line with international standards for ensuring such equality. There should be adequate legal protection to the rights to education and its equal enjoyment in all its inclusive dimensions by all citizens in Nigeria.
- Nigerian governments should address multiple forms of inequality and discrimination through comprehensive policies. Prevailing disparities in access to education—between boys and girls, and between the rich and the poor—must be given special consideration, recognizing that good policies backed by a commitment to equality can make a difference. Policy measures must respond to the need for making learning accessible for the most marginalized and vulnerable. Adequate allocation of resources should be made to where they are needed most.
- There is the need to step up the institutional capacity building in education. Teachers should be motivated and mandated to attend training workshops and conferences to improve their teaching skills. Concerted efforts by ways of quality control and monitoring would improve the quality of education and governments need to enhance poverty alleviation process by rendering assistance to parents in the rural areas through provision of free books, uniforms and even free mid-day meals to the children of the poor to increase access to education.

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