

Repositioning Education to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria

¹Akinjide Aboluwodi & ²Olusegun O. Owolewa

^{1&2}Department of Arts Education,

Faculty of Education, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko

Abstract

Most countries in the world today, the developing countries inclusive, have begun to embrace education for sustainable development, (ESD). ESD seeks to develop competencies among students to enable them reflect on actions that may affect economic, social, and environmental issues in both local and global communities. United Nations has set some sustainable development goals, viz., eradication of poverty, reduction of hunger, provision of good health, achieving well-being, and access to quality education etc. that can be exploited for sustainable future. To achieve some of these goals, different countries have been urged to embrace quality education, especially that which develops in students skills and competencies that could meet the demands of sustainable development goals. The challenges as identified in the goals constitute threats to the survival of man and the environment; hence, the need to involve education that is capable of addressing some of these challenges. Such education will invariably task students to develop life skills capable of addressing a number of those sustainable development goals. The effectiveness of such education depends on the decision to review the content and approaches of the present education system in Nigeria. This effort is likely to provide Nigeria with the required education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the world's natural resources.

Keywords: *Competence-based education, Sustainable development, Sustainable development goals, Education for sustainable development, Skills and competencies*

Corresponding Author: Akinjide Aboluwodi

Background to the Study

Apart from being a tool for achieving an individual's well-being, either in the workplace or in the community, education is supposed to create awareness in the mind of the people so that they can support government's efforts to reduce poverty, eradicate hunger, and improve access to clean water. One of the items in the National Policy on Education that seems to support this notion is "the retraining of individual's mind for the understanding and appreciation of the world around." There seems to be a problem in the implementation of this item as such an awareness seems to be lacking in the mind of the people. The reason for the poor implementation probably lies with the structure of the country's education especially in the areas of methods and assessments of students. Assessments are not discreet and most of the students rely more on rote learning thus setting a limit to how students can think critically and creatively. Invariably, such education may not be able to promote learning that students need to reflect critically on the impacts of their activities on others and the environment.

Objective of the Study

This paper sets to examine the structure and content of education in Nigeria and to see how it can be repositioned to enable individuals acquire the *life skills* (critical thinking and problem solving) needed to understand the impacts of their activities on the environment. The paper concludes that educating people to question, criticize, analyze issues bordering on the environment, society and economy is a desirable exercise to do.

Sustainable Development Goals and Education

Human activities constitute the greatest threats to human survival today in the world. Though these activities vary along socio-cultural line, the greatest problem seems to be the threat to the natural resources. While fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions may constitute the greatest challenge to the industrial nations, the sub-Saharan African countries face the problem of deforestation (felling of logs) and environmental hazard caused by the activities of the individuals. There is also the problem of CO₂ (acid rain) whose effects are felt everywhere since it is climate-related. Developing countries are more prone to CO₂ since they lack the means to prevent its effects on the region. The felling of logs is an avoidable act if the people have had access to a climate-friendly source of energy; poverty does not allow the people to seek an alternative source of energy. No doubt poverty contributes more to how the people cause harm to the environment.

The United Nations set the Millennium Development Goals to tackle the problems of poverty, hunger etc. especially in the developing countries. It was assumed that by 2015 most countries in the developing world would have minimized the effects of famine, drought, poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS and others in their environments. Most of these countries managed to achieve marginal results in reducing the effects of famine, drought, poverty, hunger, and HIV/AIDS; the need to consolidate on these marginal results must have informed the creation of sustainable development goals with 17 items and a focus on the eradication of poverty and hunger by 2030. Because of the importance of achieving the goals, the United Nations decided to declare a Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Its main focus is to inculcate in individuals such a critical reflection on actions which impact negatively on the earth's resources. According to UNESCO(2012, p 3) ESD "is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources." What is at stake is how to achieve human well-being without depleting the source of such well-being.

Right from the time the Brundtland Commission released the report on sustainable development in 1987, there have been different efforts to confront the challenges posed by human beings to the environment. One of these efforts is the UN's declaration of the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) from 2005-2014. The recent declaration, Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives harps on learning of ESD. Each of these declarations was meant to explain the need for proactive measures in reducing the impacts of human activities on the environment. The UN sees the need to use education, formal and non-formal, to create awareness in the mind of the people, so that they can manage their lifestyles and avoid taking steps that can be injurious to the environment. It was on the basis of this that the new sustainable development goals, which succeeded the millennium development goals, came into being.

In its declaration of sustainable development goals, UNESCO (2017) identifies seventeen goals which nations can pursue in order to ensure sustainable future for human beings. The goals are: No poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions, partnership for the goals. The developing countries require most of these goals for their sustainability. Sadly enough, the vulnerable countries, mostly in the sub-Sahara region, had to look up to the industrial nations for assistance in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The reason is obvious; countries in the sub-Saharan Africa are not likely to get the resources to execute projects that will guarantee, at least, clean water, poverty reduction, access to quality education, and economic growth. Quite a number of these countries rely on foreign aid to finance their budgets. In other words, there are no adequate resources to achieve any of these goals even when the countries are determined to execute projects relating to the goals.

The question is: What form of education owe require to achieve some of the sustainable development goals especially reduction of poverty and hunger, procurement of clean water, assurance of good health and climate-friendly environment? The select goals not only reflect the needs of the local communities, but engage the entire people on how to ensure their well-being. To do this will require transforming the existing education to empower learners to be able think critically of their actions and deeds in their communities. UNESCO, 2005 (as cited in UNESCO, 2012) identifies ten key aspects that support such quality education, though are related to learners and the system of education. Five of these aspects of such education are: (i) seeking out the learner, (who may be an adult) (ii) acknowledging the learner's knowledge and experience, (especially when dealing with adult person) (iii) making content relevant, (i.e. addressing the needs of the people) (iv) using many teaching and learning processes, (adopting both pedagogy and and ragogy learning approaches), and (v) enhancing the learning environment, (making the environment conducive and learning-friendly). The essence of adopting these key areas of education is to enhance the learner's capacity to learn and think.

The Structure and Content of Education in Nigeria

The post-colonial education curriculum, as contained in the educational policy at least when it was adopted by educational institutions in Nigeria, is said to be “narrow in scope and did not meet the hopes and aspirations of Nigerians” (Imam, 2012, p.187).Reflecting on the same educational policy, Rwomire 1998 (as cited in Imam, 2012, p. 187) reveals that the educational

policy contains irrelevant curricula, obsolete methods, high drop-out and repetition rates, while many graduates were dependent, and low on initiative. However, efforts have been made to work on these deficiencies e.g. restructure the curricula, improve on the methods, and reduce the high drop-out rate. At least the rich content of the junior secondary school curriculum attests to this point. Subjects such as peace and security education, civic education, climate change education, and disaster reduction education now appear in the junior secondary school curriculum, suggesting that Nigeria has decided to reflect the aspirations of Nigerians in its education policy.

The first attempt to review the educational policy came in 1977, when a National Curriculum Conference was held to “change the colonial orientation of the educational system” (Imam, 2012, p. 188). Even though government saw the need to invest in manpower development, its preoccupation during this period was to use education to promote the country's unity and lay a solid foundation for its integration. There was no serious consideration for rig our in the system as the issue of certification instead of skill acquisition became the focal point. Subsequent changes in the curriculum express a considerable departure from the previous one. For instance, the revised edition, that of 1981, made provision for “competences and skills for the development of individuals and the Nigerian society”, though never effectively put into practice. Perhaps we may suggest that the Nigerian education system follows other countries in the world to advocate the development of skills and competencies; but never equips the beneficiaries with such skills and competencies necessary for national development.

Ivowi (2000) identifies some areas in the educational policy which attract the attention of Government, namely, (a) inculcation of right values and attitudes for the attainment of national unity and the survival of the individuals and the Nigerian society, (b) acquisition of appropriate knowledge, (c) competences and skills for the development of individuals and the Nigerian society, and (d) retraining the mind for the understanding and appreciation of the world around. It is clear that these areas of the policy sound so fascinating and instructive; translating them into reality becomes a burden for government. This problem, indeed, is due to inadequate political will and strategies to make the policy work.

Perhaps in response to the new global sustainable development goals (SDGs), Nigeria decided to review the curriculum of its junior secondary school to accommodate subjects relating to some of the SDGs. The junior secondary school curriculum contains the following subjects: English language, Mathematics, Nigerian languages Basic science and technology, (BST) Religion and national values, (RNV) Cultural and creative art, and Arabic language. Basic science and technology contains discussions on Climate change, Disaster reduction education, and Consumer education. Religion and national values also contains Social studies, Civic education, Christian religious studies, Islamic studies and the infusion of Consumer education, Disaster risk education, and Peace and conflict resolution education. The inclusion of such subjects as climate change, peace and conflict resolution education, disaster reduction education, consumer education, and civic education seems to be a response to what is required in UN's education for sustainable development (ESD).

The greatest challenge with the use of education to achieve sustainable development goals in Nigeria is found with the severe deficiencies in the structure that carries its education system. By structure we mean “the school buildings, teachers, assessment procedure, and so on”. Most of these elements still carry the old order as left behind by the colonial education officials. The

problem remains the same across the country. Most of the buildings inherited from the colonial officials are still being used; assessments are designed to measure performance in examinations, and the quality of teachers is declining by the day. Most institutions of learning in Nigeria hardly emphasize strict adherence to the teaching of 21st century skills and competencies identified by the World Economic Forum. The World Economic Forum (2015) identifies the skills and competencies needed to thrive in today's innovation-driven economy as collaboration, creativity and problem solving, character qualities like persistence, curiosity and initiative. These competencies constitute the elements of quality education that may support the achievement of the SDGs. Absence of such competencies may hinder the desired quality education needed “to stimulate students to ask questions, analyze, think critically and make good decisions” (Laurie, Nonoyama-Tarumi & Mckeen, 2016, p. 231).

Another important issue in education for sustainable development is access to quality education. Barro 2001, Hanushek and Kimbo 2000(as cited in World Bank's report, 2003) acknowledge the essential connection between the quality of education and labour, and economic growth. Unfortunately, however, Nigeria trails behind other countries in the sub-Saharan Africa in offering quality education. Yet on quality education, The Foundation of Hispanic Education (TFHE) 2000 (as cited in Bloom & Chan, 2005, p. 25) contends that “most African countries languish near the bottom of the Knowledge Economy Index (KEI). South Africa, Botswana, and Mauritius record scores near the middle, but Nigeria, Cameroon, Malawi, Tanzania, and others have struggled, scoring less than two out of a possible ten points” (p.12). These countries are located in Africa suggesting that most African countries with low quality education stand no chance in promoting sustainable development.

In his study, van Fleet (2012) reports that there are seven countries in which 40 per cent or more of children do not meet a minimum standard of leaving by grades 4 or 5. He identifies countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zambia, where over half of in-school students are not learning basic skills by the end of primary school. Since Nigeria is one of the countries affected, it is not likely to embrace “critical pedagogies geared to futures and system thinking, participatory and experience learning, critical thinking, partnership working and values reflection widely used in ESD”(UNESCO, 2012). And this is due largely to its education system which lacks the necessary structure to provide for creativity and innovation.

Nigerian Education and the Challenges of Sustainable Development Goals

In a paper by American Association of College of Teacher Education (AACTE, 2010) entitled: 21st Century Knowledge and in Educator Preparation, the authors argue that most assessment of students in the developing world are designed to measure students' ability to recall discrete facts using multiple-choice tests rather than to measure a student's ability to engage in and complete complex thinking and problems solving tasks. Markovic (2012) too confesses that in traditional education students are passive participants on all the education levels. He goes further to say that the knowledge students acquired in the course of their education process has frequently turned out not to be really applicable or be rather inadequate to meet the modern requirements of critical education. Still in traditional education, especially in Nigerian school system, some elements of African culture are noticeable. Marinho (2009, p. 7) says “students expected to speak only when spoken to, and student's participation in dialogue, discussion, debate or reflection is discouraged.” It is simply a product of cultural conflict; young people are hardly allowed to engage elders in debates as this would be regarded as disrespectful in every respect. For instance, culture does not permit a young person to correct an elder when the elder

does something wrong, e.g. felling of logs in the wood. Because ignorance and superstition pervade the local communities, it may be necessary to make such a correction for the purpose of sustainability, but indeed, African culture sometimes frowns at it. The only condition the young person can make the correction is for him/her to act with reasonable caution in his/her choice of words.

As reported by American Association of College of Teacher Education (AACTE) (2010) some of the competencies students required are being able to “adapt to change, be flexible, manage goals and time, work independently, be self-directed, work effectively in diverse teams, manage projects and produce results, guide and lead others and be responsible to others” (AACTE, p. 30). Ananiadou and Magdalena (2009), therefore, stress that the 21st century skills and competencies are “those skills and competencies young people will be required to have in order to be effective workers and citizens in the knowledge society” (p. 8). Besides, students should be able to think critically and make good decisions on their own lifestyles, values, and behaviour for sustainable reason.

In the face of the current economic recession, countries whose policy framework has allowed access, equity and quality in education are likely to relapse in their efforts to sustain this access, equity and quality in education. Financial constraint and issue of priority in policy framework are likely to account for failure in policy implementation. While some countries may want to get closer to the UNESCO's 26 per cent budget benchmark on education (Ebehikhalu, 2014), in spite of the recession, some other countries may probably not. Sometimes the policy framework may be sustained while corruption and official ineptitude eat deeply into it and get its implementation truncated. Again, it is likely few countries in the sub-Saharan Africa will have the urge to keep pace with the spate at which education reforms are going on in the world. Such countries stand the chance of making progress in areas bordering on socio-economic development.

In spite of the provision for “evaluation of pupils/students' performance and certification through continuous assessment”(Akinlua, 2010, p.23), the exercise has been faced with fraudulent practices, with the continuous assessments taking the form of some teachers compiling fictitious scores only to return them as pupils' continuous assessments. These scores are added to the examination scores and the product is the certificate issued on the basis of the two scores. This practice is an affront against education that tasks students to learn and think.

The drives for expansion and increase access to education as well as the various efforts to meet global demands for education reforms are not matched by the facilities in schools and colleges. The result is that educational reforms are not always translated into action; hence they remain paper works.

Repositioning Education in Nigeria for Sustainable Development Goals

Why is the sustainable development goals taken a crucial position today in spite of the progress that is claimed to have been made in millennium development goals? Why do we require quality education, formal and non-formal, in promoting the SDGs? Why is it necessary for the developing countries to attend to the crucial ones such as ensuring an end to poverty and hunger, promote life-long education, ensure healthy lives and well-being, and promote sustainable use of the ecosystems, in spite of the universal nature of the goals? It was claimed that the SDGs are universal in nature and were meant to apply to all countries (Leadership for

Environment and Development, [LEAD], 2016). The adoption of sustainable development goals is meant to consolidate on the achievement of MDGs. In spite of the essential nature of all the goals, their achievements may prove very difficult for the developing countries. Countries whose economy is run on aid and whose education does not promote the 21st education competencies are not likely to achieve most of these SDGs.

If education in the developing countries fails to align with the demands of the 21st century education to meet the challenges in the workforce and to ensure the well-beings of the workers, how do we use such education to promote sustainable development? Bokova (2017), The Director General, UNESCO, avers

A fundamental change is needed in the way we think about education's role in global development ...education has a responsibility to be geared with 21st century challenges and aspirations, and foster the right types of values and skills that will lead to sustainable and inclusive growth, and peaceful living together. (p. 7)

It is necessary to say that education, in this sense, is not meant to push economic growth alone, education has now been tailored to assist in social justice, global citizenship, and sustainability (Laurie, et al 2016). This is the form education for sustainable development (ESD) takes. ESD now promotes competencies that empower individuals to reflect on their own actions and see the impacts of such actions on the environment (UNESCO, 2017)

The problem of poor access to quality education by Nigerian children may stall their ambition to achieve meaningful lifestyles and well-being. The problem also spilled into how the country prepares to meet the SDGs. Thus, poor access to quality education is likely to prevent the country from participating in the current global drive to achieve the sustainable development goals. This is one of the problems the country is facing today. Verspoor (2008) uses Cameroon, Kenya and Niger to illustrate his point while explaining the problem of poor access to education in Africa. According to him, no children from the poorest income quintile, in these countries, are enrolled in tertiary institutions, yet Berthelem (as cited in Verspoor, 2008) believes that crossing the human capital threshold and moving to higher levels of economic performance will require 'ambitious investment in education'. Berthelem's study seems to suggest that countries in Africa affected by poor budgetary allocation to education risk further deprivation in human capital development.

The issue of quality education in sustainable development programme entails providing adequate learning experience for the young people. UNESCO (2012) declared in chapter 36 of Agenda 21 four goals of education to be provided.

1. To promote and improve the quality of education- to refocus lifelong education on knowledge, skills and values which the citizens need to improve the quality of their life.
2. To reorient the existing education programmes from primary to university- to serve as a vehicle of knowledge, thought patterns and values needed to build a sustainable world.
3. To raise public awareness and understanding of the concept of sustainable development- to develop enlighten, active and responsible citizenship locally, nationally and internationally.
4. To train the work force - continuing technical and vocational education involving directors and workers – to enable them to adopt sustainable modes of production and Consumption

In order to promote the four goals, Nigeria may have to adopt a policy reform option. The basic policy reform option may be to make teacher education rigorous enough to emphasize adequate knowledge of the content area and mastery of teaching methods. The emphasis should be to prepare students adequately for the contemporary challenges in the global community, and to make the teaching of fundamental skills and competencies teacher's teaching/learning paradigm.

The quality dimension in education implies that students are adequately prepared for their future. It implies that the needs of individual students are considered and addressed in both content and methods to be used in schools (UNESCO, 2005, as cited in UNESCO, 2012). It may be recommended that attempts should be made to discourage rote memorization; while participatory learning should be encouraged. School managements must ensure that a strict adherence to policy implementation is followed especially the one that exposes students to skills and competencies. There is a need to monitor the implementation of a policy of this sort to ensure that it does not create a vacuum in the system.

The National Policy on Education, either in its earlier form or in its present form, has never reflected what Imam calls "its social and political environment to fashion its educational system." Its root has been America's, hence foreign in spirit. In order to Africanize its content and structure, the policy should incorporate the input of teachers, community, experts in different fields so that in methods, contents, and principles it can reflect the need and aspirations of the people.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The level of development of education is said to determine the level of development of a nation's economy (Obanya, 2004). This is only possible if a nation is ready to address itself to various demands related to personal and societal survival and development (Obanya, 2004). There may be need to re-examine the curriculum content and delivery methods in Nigerian schools, shifting the emphasis from textbook-oriented learning to competence-related learning that can guarantee sustainable future for our children. Such an orientation is imperative given the demands of the 21st century society. This orientation involves a conscious acceptance that education is a preparation for life, hence educating people to question, criticize, and analyze issues bordering on the environment, and society and economy is a desirable exercise to do. There is a need to de-formalize the existing education system to provide the local community the opportunity to see the connection between the impacts of their activities on the environment.

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