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ACTUALIZING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL FOUR (4) FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

This paper dealt with actualizing sustainable development goal four (4) for early childhood education in Nigeria. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined the world we want. They apply to all nations and mean, quite simple, to ensure that no one is left behind. SDGs are a collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all which was set up in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. SDG 4 stated to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Early childhood/Pre-primary education is the core foundation of any educational system as it is considered by many societies and individuals to be beneficial for educational development of young children from school-entry age. The paper pointed out that if early childhood/pre- primary education is to serve its purposes as stated in the National Policy of Education in Nigeria amongst others for making the children to have an effective smooth transition from the home to the school and prepare the child for the primary level of education, then it should be made free for all children of age, well supervised, staffed, equipped, financed and coordinated. In order to achieve this, this policy requires political will, determination, transparency, accountability and steadfastness and a close interface between policy formulation and implementation.

KEYWORDS: SDGs, SDG 4, and Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Iddrisu (2017) described that sustainable development goals (SDGs) agenda came into fruition after the Rio+20(2012) which gave grounds for intergovernmental negotiations to constitute a set of plausible and holistic SDGs. Apparently, the principles underlining the SDGs are drawn from the just ended MDGs (Olsen, Zusman, Miyanzawa, Cadman, Yoshida, & Bengsson, 2014). SDGs are anchored on the principles of UN charter and respect for international law.

Member countries therefore in 2015 reaffirmed all the UN summits laying foundation for the SDGs (UN, 2015). The SDGs are part of the global goals instituted to build on the achievements of the MDGs which normatively expired in 2015. It is tagged "Transforming Our World: Nicolai, Hoy, Berliner, & Aedy (2015) submitted that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" which is intended to promote welfare of people and the planet as well as promote prosperity, peace and partnership was adopted in September, 2015 by Heads of States and Governments as well as High level representatives in New York at the seventieth anniversary of the UN. All the 193 member countries comprising both developed and the developing countries agreed on the agenda to be applied in all countries in the next 15 years (Klapper, El-Zongbi, & Hess, 2016). The SDGs comprise 17 goals with 169 associated targets arrived at after a series of consultations and high level intergovernmental negotiations as well as recommendations of an open working group put in place by the UN Secretary General. The targets are global in nature and serve as guidance for setting national targets in respect of real national aspirations and policies (Iddrisu, 2017).

The 17 SDGs are:

1. Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere;

2. Ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition as well as promoting sustainable agriculture;

3. Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages;

4. Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all;

5. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls;

6. Ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;

7. Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and moderate energy for all;

8. Promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all;

9. Building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation;

10. Reducing inequality within and among countries;

11. Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;

12. Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns;

13. Taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;

14. Conserving and sustaining the use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;

15. Protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainable manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;

16. Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels and

17. Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

Each of these stated goals has its associated targets meant to be achieved by 2030. Invariably, goal four (4) which is the focus of the study has 10 interrelated targets. It states that by 2030, member states should ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN General Assembly, 2015). SDG 4 is a holistic and an adaptable goal reflecting the desire of stakeholders in the education sector to achieve the education and learning needs of the marginalized, under-served, and poor population of every country. Its scope expands beyond the MDGs, which was focused on attaining universal primary education and narrowing gender gaps between males and females. Its principles call for planning and contextualization of education, focusing on diversity, quality learning and education along the life course (Xavier & Margarita, 2016). Although donors after the inception of UN thought that state expansion will eventually bring expansion to schooling. However, in of wake of democratization across the globe, the educational system has not expanded. To avert this phenomenon, donor partners employed broad strategic planning processes by 1990. This culminated the launch of the EFA concept by UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP and the World Bank. The EFA were related to the just ended MDGs and both were intended to be achieved by 2015. Although, advancements were made on these twin frameworks, their indicators felt below their targets by 2015. Beyond these agendas, a series of international conferences eventually led to the adoption of integrated lists of SDGs including SDG4.

SDG 4 has 10 interrelated targets as listed by Iddrisu (2017).Thus:

- By 2030, ensure all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes;

- By 2030, ensure that all boys and girls have access to early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education;

- By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable technical, vocational and tertiary education including, university;

- By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship;

- By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable including persons with disabilities, indigenous people and children in vulnerable situation.

- By 2030, ensure that all youth and substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve numeracy and literacy;

- By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development;

- Build and upgrade educational facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all;

- By 2030, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships availability to developing countries, in particular least develop countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries and

- By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small-island developing States.

Kadle (2013) is of the opinion that there exist strong links on issues of equity, equality and quality of children in relation to opportunities to participation in formal education, quality of their experiences in schools, learning outcomes and overall achievement. Arguably, the conception of quality from structural and process lenses makes it difficult to measure, because inequity and inequality cannot easily be determined by the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, but also the conditions under which teachers work as well as the socio-cultural and economic milieu that shape teachers work. Access to education is embedded in the conception of right to education as contained in international conventions and charters of human rights such as the declaration of human rights by the UN in 1948. Article 26 of the convention stipulates for free compulsory elementary education at least, availability of professional and technical education and accessibility of higher education. It also further enjoined nations to direct education to the full development of human personality, advancing respect for human rights and freedoms as well as building common understanding, tolerance and friendship among different nations and different groups-religious or racial (Nashimura, Ogawa, & Sifuna, 2015). Free access to education may be seen as the provision of number of schools and their locations, the number of grades available as well as the appropriate mechanisms put in place to link up pupils' development from pre-primary to primary to secondary and vocational levels. The apparent disparities in educational provision in communities underpin the development of strategies by policy planners to expand access and increase school participation especially in developing countries. It has been the primary policy goals of developing countries to broaden access to education in the past several decades (Sifuna, 2007).

Komalavalli (2013) sees equity in terms of fairness, where pupil's social and personal

situations do not undermine their route to achieving education potentials as minimum standards, where socio-economic backgrounds are not considered in distributing education benefits, but equal opportunities for all. It is often imperative for schools to provide equitable and quality education but normally academic achievements are hampered by disability, gender background, location-urban, rural or remote and socio-economic status. Whereas, equitable education emphasizes on ensuring that educational benefits extend to the most disadvantageous or marginalized regions, poorest, disabilities, remote localities and ethnic minorities through practical policies and initiatives. It involves adopting "policies, planning, institutional structures, capacity, partnership and coordination to achieve the right of all children to education in their locality…" This is usually achieved by implementing these policies in a safe and child-friendly environment; attention is paid to diversity to reduce barriers to participation and learning (Iddrisu, 2017). However, in many countries, public spending on education is based on equal amount per child (horizontal equity), instead of considering disparities in schools and regions and the needs of the most disadvantageous groups(vertical equity) (UNESCO, 2015; Kadle, 2013). Apart from viewing equity from either horizontal or vertical point, where the former tends to mean giving equal people equal opportunities or the later emphasizing treating unequal people equitably and basically structured to reduce inequality, albeit making horizontal equity a means to achieving vertical equity (Brown, 2006). Quality education on the other hand is the one that focuses on basic learning needs and shapes the overall lives and experiences of learners. It also reflects the health, environment, content, processes and outcomes of learners and learning in general (UNICEF, 2000).

Philosophy for Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Nakpodia (2011) posited that underpinning the importance attached to early childhood education which early childhood education is an integral part, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in 1990 undertook a joint commitment to make an urgent universal appeal to give every child a better future. In addition, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasized urgent priority to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for all children. Adenipekun (2004) listed eight reasons given in support of the provision of affordable, quality programmes of early childcare that are community based, and which are linked with health care and nutrition as part of an integrated approach to meeting the needs of the young child. These reasons include:

1. From conception of six years of age, children, according to research findings, undergo rapid mental, social and physical development to the extent that by the age of six, their brains would have developed to almost the size of an adult;

2. The convention on the rights of the child stipulates that children have a right to live and develop

to their full capacity;

3. Moral and social values postulate that through children, societies pass on values and culture from generation to generation;

4. Supporting the development of the child physically and mentally leads to increased enrolment, improves performance and the society generally.

5. Provision of early childcare facilities and offer equal opportunities to children from both the privileged and disadvantaged homes.

6. A programme in early childhood development should be used as an entry point for other developmental activities which will benefit the entire community;

7. ECC (Early Child Care) projects should be linked with other developmental activities for women, nutrition, health, water and sanitation.

8. There is a growing demand for better ways of caring for children through an ECC project given the advancement in science and technology which now ensures the survival of many more children, thereby increasing population growth.

The National Policy on Education for Nigeria became necessary to avoid the previous half-measured educational policies, administration and control which was a hallmark of the missionary and regional eras of education in the country. The policy is meant to put in clear perspective the educational jurisdiction of the Federal Government, including that of the State and Local Governments. The document being the first after Nigeria's independence (enacted in 1977, but revised in 1981, 1989, 1998 and 2004), is meant to have universal effect throughout the federation. This can be seen from its content that is in its philosophical anchorage for Education' in Nigeria. The National Policy on Pre-Primary Education in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004) early childhood education is labelled as pre-primary education and is defined as the education given in an educational institution to children aged three to five plus prior to their entering the primary school. The N.P.E. identifies the responsibilities of government at this level as the promotion and training of qualified early childhood/pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable curriculum and supervise and control the quality of such institutions. Sub-sections 13 of the policy enumerate the purpose of pre-primary/early childhood education thus:

1. Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;

2. Prepare the child for the primary level of education.

3. Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the market, offices etc);

4. Inculcate social norms;

5. Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.

6. Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;

7. Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and

8. Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc through play.

The Nigerian Government announced its responsibilities and strategies for implementing this sub-system as:

- Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre- primary education.

- Make provisions in teacher education programmes for specialization in early child-hood education;

- Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will:

- Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages;

- Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages;

- Ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this, and

- Regulate and control the operation of pre-primary/early childhood education.

With the objectives of pre-primary/early childhood education in the policy and Government's intended line of action(s) as previously explained, the question should be asked: to what extent has the Government encouraged private efforts in the provision of pre-primary/early childhood education in Nigeria?; what are the provisions in Teacher Training. Institutions for students who want to specialize in pre-primary/early childhood education? Is the medium of instruction principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community? Has much been done in the areas of developing orthography and producing textbooks in Nigerian languages for use in the existing pre-primary/early childhood institutions? To what extent is the government regulating and controlling the operations of pre-primary/early childhood education or even enforcing the educational laws which relate to the establishment of nursery schools?; Are the existing nursery schools in the country well equipped and staffed with the required qualified manpower?; Any set standards for their operations in terms of curriculum materials and teaching methodologies? So many questions but few answers (Nakpodia, 2011).

Implementing Early Childhood/ Pre-Primary Education Policies in Nigeria

In the National Policy on Education (2004) the Government committed herself extensively as to the measures she will take to achieve the stated objectives for pre-primary/early childhood education. Supriselly, however, six years after the last revision (2004) have been made, most of the measures and proposals are still mere paper formalities. While the government proposed assisting private efforts in the establishment of these institutions, what obtains now is a far cry from all expectations. As "the spirit directs" these private individuals, they open these institutions without adequate planning. What we have on the ground are more of "mirage", the aftermath being a

systematic mal-adjustment of our young ones. Where even standard ones exist, they are relatively few and concentrated within the urban centres and later become elitist. The government in the "Policy" further made more undertaken in the area of making provisions in the Teachers Training Colleges for students who want to specialize in pre-primary/early childhood education. Inspite of this, it is a known fact that some of these institutions including the Universities, have little or no provisions for this aspect of our educational system. This set-up has led to the drafting of graduates of Colleges of Education who were originally prepared for the secondary schools system to nursery schools. This situation could be better with some institutes of education/departments of our universities bracing up with this challenge. The "Policy" further states that the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC) while orthography and textbooks of Nigerian languages will be produced to aid this. Ironically, however, in most of our existing pre-primary/early childhood institutions, the medium of instruction is the English language. The centrality of language to the teaching-learning process, the importance of Nigerian languages to the protection, preservation, promotion of Nigerian culture, and inter-ethnic cohesion, the enhancement of human dignity, the necessity of learning a major language for purposes of promoting national unity and integration have constitutional backing in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and even justification in the NPE (Emenanjo, 2001). Evidence has shown that a child learns better and develops faster intellectually, psychologically and cognitively if he is taught with the mother-tongue continuously over a period of time. The failed language policy of the NPE is not just the primary and post-primary levels of education but also pre primary/early childhood level of education and has brought about many criticisms from many language experts (Nakpodia, 2011).

Challenges facing Early childhood/Pre-primary Education Policies implementation in Nigeria

The Challenges of early childhood/pre-primary education policies Implemention in Nigeria can be attributed to the following according Akinrotimi & Olowe, (2016). Thus:

1. **Early Childhood Curriculum:** Curriculum is what and how of any educational enterprise. It is the vehicle through which any educational programmes can be successfully implemented. The early childhood curriculum helps to ensure that staff or teachers cover important learning areas, adopt a common pedagogical approach and reach for a certain level of quality across age groups. Its indispensability spurred the government of Nigeria to see to the development and production of National Early Childhood Curriculum for Ages 0-5years by NERDC, with the support of UNICEF. This curriculum was launched in 2007. The unfortunate thing however is that this curriculum, since it was launched, is not found in almost all pre-primary schools in Nigeria. This is particularly true of privately owned schools. The non-availability of the National Early Childhood Curriculum for Ages 0-5years in pre-primary schools has been confirmed in findings

of researches conducted in different states in Nigeria (e.g., Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri, & Dagunduro, 2011; Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012).

2. **Professionally Qualified Caregivers/Teachers:** It is widely acknowledged that early childhood educators with required professional preparation provide more developmentally appropriate, nurturing, and responsive care and education experiences for young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2007). Unfortunately, the situation is contrary in most pre-primary schools in Nigeria. In privately owned pre-primary schools, teachers with no training in ECE are often found in children classrooms while in pre-primary sections of government owned public schools, old female teachers with no qualification in ECE are often seconded to children classrooms. Findings from various studies conducted by researchers in Nigeria have consistently confirmed this same situation (e.g., Olaleye & Omotayo, 2009; Amadi, 2013; Okewole, Iluezi- Ogbedu, & Osinowo, 2013).

3. **Resources:** When resources are available for ECE programme at pre-primary school level, it helps the caregiver/teacher to nurture and support the development of young children, and to successfully implement curriculum. Chukwbikem (2013) said that the quantity and quality of resources available for any educational programme would determine schools systems capacity for the implementation of the type of educational programme. In spite of the fact that resources are critical to successful implementation of ECE programme, they are not found in many Nigerian pre-primary schools, especially in the pre-primary section of public primary schools that belong to the government. Many researchers in Nigeria who have assessed the r resources that are available for ECE at pre-primary school level have confirmed this same situation through the findings of their studies (e.g., Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri, & Dagunduro, 2011; Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012; Okewole, et al., 2013).

4. **Professional Development:** The teacher holds the key to successful implementation of any educational enterprise. This is why the federal government of Nigeria stated in NPE (2013) that no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2013). Jibril (2007) has submitted that whatever input is made into an educational system in respect of management, resources, facilities and array of instructional materials, will be of little avail if the teacher is unskilled, poorly trained or even ignorant. This is to say that whatever intervention the federal government of Nigeria makes to improve ECE will be of little effect if pre-primary school teachers are not given constant professional development.

The Way forward for Achieving SDG 4 for early childhood/pre-primary education in Nigeria

The SDG 4 can be achieved by 2030 for early childhood/pre-primary education in Nigeria if governments and their citizens put in more efforts to attain the goals and their targets by adopting actions towards national aspirations. To easily attain the targets, Nigeria must progress in line with

high performing countries. It is suggested governments and stakeholder in education should review curricula to ensure effective learning outcomes and strengthening institutions and school leadership through community involvement in education management among others to help achieve SDG4 (UNESCO, 2015). It is therefore necessary to expand educational processes and institute specific targets in respect of early childhood/pre-primary education within the framework of the SDGs. Free, equitable and quality education is the corner stone and foundation of any educational system, and this need to be enjoyed by the early childhood/pre-primary education level. Government should Training teachers, specialists and desk officers to handle Inspectorate of Education in the rural schools as well as expanding facilities to train more experts on the new goals of education; government should enforce the elimination of schools under trees and redesign the curriculum (UNESCO, 2013) and the textbooks to reflect various diversities (MoE, 2015) and current global educational goals; effective monitoring and evaluation systems; involving more NGOs in education delivery; continuous provision of free school materials such as uniforms, sandals, exercise books, textbooks, feeding (Kwame, 2009); involving parents and other stakeholders in education management and delivery to the success of the implementation of SDG 4; institute legal and policy frameworks to promote accountability and transparency; and above all, early childhood education must be made free to children of age .

Conclusion

National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) emphasizes that the purpose of child education is to prepare the child for primary school education, which is universal, free and compulsory, and to offer every Nigerian child the opportunity to go to school and receive education as a right. Honestly speaking, a faulty foundation cannot give out standard building. Meaning that children education foundation matter most, as other levels of education will be built on it and if properly taken care of, the set goals of education is achievable. Early childhood/pre- primary education should be seen as recognized foundation step of Nigerian educational system. Therefore, it should be made free, and accessible, properly funded, well equipped, well-staffed and whole- heartedly implemented and not neglected for the realization of SDG 4 in 2030.

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