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A World with **Equal Access** to Education

Equal access to education, Inadequate State Funding,
Out-of-School Children, Limited Tertiary Education Opportunities,
Access to tertiary education.

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Executive Summary:

Every child is born free and equal in dignity, with the fundamental right to education. This universal truth is echoed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, emphasising that education should be accessible to all. In Nigeria, a nation with great potential, education plays a pivotal role in national development. However, the gap between policy commitments and the grim reality of unequal educational access remains stark. This paper investigates unequal access to education, inadequate state funding, high number of out-of-school children

limited tertiary education opportunities, and cultural and religious ideologies as bottlenecks in achieving a world of equal access to education.

The paper goes ahead to offer recommendations for policymakers, private institutions, civil society, and government at the federal and state levels. These include improving policy implementation, addressing corruption, increasing funding, and promoting inclusive policies. Collaboration with international organisations and a focus on marginalised groups are also encouraged.

Introduction

Every human is born free and with dignity, regardless of their race, social class, gender, or other diversities. It is the responsibility of the state to protect the rights of every person in society. This includes ensuring that every individual has equal access to education. Education is a fundamental right that shapes how individuals understand their rights, respect the rights of others, and contribute to society. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly recognized the right to education in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26), stating that everyone has the right to education that is equally accessible to all. Globally, education is considered crucial for sustainable development, as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) - Ensuring Equitable Education for All.

In Nigeria, as in every United Nations member state, education plays a vital role in national development. The National Education Policy in Nigeria underscores that education enhances citizens' creative potential, self-fulfilment, social change, national integration, and overall national development.

Education is a right for every Nigerian, regardless of gender,

social status, religion, ethnicity, or other unique challenges, reflecting the aim of an inclusive educational system.

The National Child Rights Act (2007), as amended, declares that every child has the right to free, compulsory, and universal basic education. The Nigerian government, in line with this, has pledged to promote equal educational opportunities.

Despite these policies, the reality of the education sector in Nigeria falls short of the nation's commitment to equal access to education. For instance, Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, particularly at the basic education level, estimated at about 10.5 million. Factors such as cultural and religious beliefs, along with recent incidents of school kidnappings in the northwest, have exacerbated the issue. At the secondary school level, there is zero access for many adolescents. Examining data from the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB), only 33% of students who applied for the JAMB examination in 2018 were admitted into federal, state, and private institutions. The unequal distribution of educational opportunities is evident, as many students are left without access.

Challenges

1. Unequal Access to Education

Equal access to education means that every member of society has access to all forms of education, regardless of factors like gender, social class, race, sexual orientation, ethnic group, physical abilities, or other forms of diversity. In practical terms, this means that educational opportunities must be provided without any form of discrimination.

Educational opportunities encompass factors like the availability of academic institutions, government policies, financial resources, and more, that enable individuals in society to achieve their personal and societal educational goals and objectives.

However, the pivotal role of the state in education comes with its own set of challenges. When the state formulates educational policies that fail to consider vital factors like ethnicity, class, gender, and more, discrimination in education can persist, stunting the progress of society.

In essence, a lack of non-discriminatory educational opportunities exacerbates existing inequalities and impedes societal advancement.

To ensure equal access to education, a society should offer a certain level of free education, educational programs for children, a diverse school environment, and opportunities for all children to succeed. Education is a fundamental right that should not be compromised by any form of discrimination.

However, that has not been the case in Nigeria. To achieve equal access to education, Nigeria has to overcome the intricate web of challenges across policy implementation, inclusive educational development to ensure that no child is left behind, financial provisions to build more schools and provide educational infrastructures and transparency standards to track resource and financial allocations.

2. Inadequate State Funding

In principle, the state shoulders the responsibility of providing education to its citizens, which has the potential to be a potent tool for transcending socio-economic and political barriers. It can empower individuals to ascend the social hierarchy, thereby fostering societal transformation.

However, inadequate funding has been a recurring issue in the Nigerian education sector. The state contributes to the deepening inequality in educational opportunities to its people by investing less funds into the education sector.

Many Nigerians are denied access to quality education because of the country's deficit of educational institutions and infrastructure. Inadequate funding of the education sector in Nigeria has dwindled the quality of education from the basic level to the tertiary institutions. For instance, most of the primary schools in the country are bedevilled with problems such as overcrowding, delapidated structures etc., that results in the truancy of students and the emergence of private primary schools, which most of the people, particularly those who reside in underserved communities can not afford. Hence, they are being denied equal access to educational opportunities because of the failure of the state.

3. High Number of Out-of-School Children

The Universal Basic Education, an agency under the ministry of education, has driven demonstrative programs to ensure access to free and compulsory early childhood, primary, junior, and secondary education to every Nigeria. According to the data from the commission, Nigeria, as of 2010, there is a continued increase in enrolment in the Early Childhood Development Center, Primary, and Junior secondary school.

To add, there are 23,249 ECD centres, 59,007 Primary schools, and 11,295 Junior Secondary Schools in Nigeria (Ibe-Moses, Kelechi. Comfort, Olatokunbo. Christopher and Paul-Obi, 2018). According to data published by the National Bureau of Statistics,

there are currently 9,015 public mixed senior secondary schools and 12,758 private mixed senior secondary schools in Nigeria in 2017.

However, Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children aged 5-14 in the world, estimated at approximately 10.5 million.

Cultural and religious beliefs, along with recent incidents of school kidnappings, have contributed to this crisis. This situation, particularly in the northern regions, is depriving 69% of the 10 million out-of-children in Nigeria of their right to education, according to United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF).

4. Limited Tertiary Education Opportunities:

Access to tertiary education is another area of concern. While the demand for tertiary education is high, the supply of institutions and admission capacity is inadequate. According to the Nigerian University Commission, there are currently 197 universities in the country published on the NUC's portal- 45 federal, 53 state, and 99 private universities. All the tertiary institutions in Nigeria have an admission capacity of about 500,000 students (Nafarko, 2021), this is just 25% of the about 2,000,000 people who apply for admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions.

This intensifies inequality in tertiary education opportunities in Nigeria and therefore depicts an enormous tertiary education deficit in the country.

The polytechnic institutions in Nigeria are managed and regulated by the National Board for Technical Education, and according to the body, there are 152 polytechnics currently in Nigeria- 37 federal, 51 state, and 64 private polytechnics.

The National Commission regulates the affairs of the Colleges of Education in Nigeria for Colleges of Education, and there are currently 205 colleges of education existing in Nigeria.

In 2018, only 33% of applicants gained admission to federal, state, and private institutions. This leaves a significant portion, approximately 67%, without access to higher education, highlighting the glaring inequality in educational opportunities.

5. Cultural and Religious Ideologies:

Cultural and religious ideologies, which influence education, vary across the different regions in the country. The breakdown of UNICEF's data on out-of-school children in Nigeria revealed that 69% of 10.5 million out-of-school children are from the northern region than the subordinating regions – southwest, south-south, and southeast, respectively. In the northern region, discriminatory ideologies mediated by cultural and religious affiliation are the major

stiffening factors to equal educational opportunities in the region.

The failure of the state to completely ban or modify religiously insinuated education system such as Almajari and the Islamic education system has denied over 7 million children, as projected by the UNICEF, access to the form of education that will make them understand the world, live and informed life, communicate with others, and grow into responsible adults in the society.

Case Study 1 **The Nordic Countries**

The Nordic countries, including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, have a longstanding tradition of prioritising equal access to education. These nations have implemented policies and practices that aim to eliminate disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes, ensuring that all citizens have access to quality education.

Key Initiatives and Strategies

1. Free Education:

The Nordic countries offer free education at all levels, from preschool to higher education. This eliminates financial barriers to education and ensures that students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, can access quality learning opportunities.

2. Comprehensive Early Childhood Education:

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) are highly developed in these countries. Access to affordable and high-quality ECEC services is available to all children, promoting early learning and social development.

3. Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education is a core principle in the Nordic countries. Schools are equipped to accommodate students with diverse needs, whether they have disabilities, come from immigrant backgrounds, or have other special requirements. Special education services are available when needed.

4. Teacher Training and Professional Development:

Nordic countries invest heavily in teacher training and professional development. Educators are well-prepared to meet the needs of all students and adapt their teaching methods to foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

5. Supportive Welfare Systems:

Strong welfare systems provide financial support to families, ensuring that students have access to nutritious meals, healthcare, and other essential services. This helps create a level playing field for all children.

Outcomes:

1. High Educational Attainment:

The Nordic countries consistently rank high in international education assessments. This demonstrates that their commitment to equal access does not come at the expense of academic excellence.

2. Low Achievement Gaps:

These nations have some of the smallest achievement gaps between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. All students, regardless of their family's income or education level, have a similar chance of succeeding in school.

3. High Levels of Literacy and Numeracy:

The strong emphasis on early childhood education, teacher quality, and individualized support has resulted in high levels of literacy and numeracy among the population.

4. Strong Social Cohesion:

The commitment to equal access to education contributes to social cohesion in the Nordic countries. Citizens have a shared belief that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed in life.

Conclusion

The Nordic countries' focus on equal access to education serves as an example for other nations. However, it's essential to note that these policies come at a cost, and high taxation is often required to fund these initiatives. Additionally, there is always room for improvement, especially concerning the integration of immigrant populations and addressing the gender gap in specific fields of study.

In conclusion, the Nordic countries provide a compelling case study of how a commitment to equal access to education can lead to high educational standards, low achievement gaps, and social cohesion. Their emphasis on quality, inclusivity, and support from an early age sets an example for nations seeking to enhance educational equity.

Recommendations

Recommendation for Policy Makers

- 1. Improve Implementation:** Policy makers should go beyond developing policies to enforcing them to ensure that they lead to equal access to education.
- 2. Reduce Corruption:** To address the issue of corruption in the education sector, policy makers should create a transparent and accountability mechanism to hold stakeholders i.e. public officers in the education sector accountable and ensure that financial and resources allocations are used efficiently and effectively.

Recommendation for Civil Society

Reduce Corruption: To address the issue of corruption in the education sector, civil societies should drive advocacy campaigns and demand for accountability and transparency from stakeholders i.e. public officers to ensure that financial and resources allocations are used efficiently and effectively.

Recommendation for Federal and State Government

- 1. Increase Funding:** The Nigerian government should allocate more funds to the education sector to improve infrastructure and the quality of education at all levels.
- 2. Overcome Religious and Cultural Biases:** The government must address religious and cultural ideologies that hinder access to education, especially for disadvantaged groups like the Almajiri system.
- 3. Enhance Security:** Address the security issues, such as school kidnappings, that have disrupted access to education in certain regions, especially the northern region.

Recommendation for Government

Increased Funding: The Nigerian government must allocate more resources to the education sector, focusing on infrastructure development, teacher training, and the provision of necessary educational materials. Effective implementation of the Universal Basic Education program is crucial to bridge primary and secondary education gaps.

Expansion of Tertiary Institutions: To address the limited tertiary education opportunities, the government should invest in establishing more universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. This expansion will accommodate the high demand for tertiary education.

Promotion of Inclusive Policies: To mitigate the influence of cultural and religious ideologies, the Nigerian government should actively promote inclusive educational policies. This includes reviewing and reforming systems that hinder educational access for certain groups, such as Almajiri and Quranic education.

Improved Security Measures: To address the challenges posed by school kidnappings and other security threats, the government should strengthen security in and around educational institutions. Ensuring the safety of students and teachers is essential to maintaining educational access.

Private Institutions

Public Awareness Campaigns: The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Communications can partner with communications companies and media houses to launch nationwide campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of education and the consequences of denying children this fundamental right can help combat cultural and religious ideologies that hinder educational access.

NGOs and INGOs

Strengthening International Collaborations: The government should collaborate with international organisations, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNDP, to leverage expertise, resources, and support for educational initiatives, with a particular focus on out-of-school children and women's education.

Policy Maker

Research and Data Collection: Policy makers should regularly collect and analyse data on educational access and quality, focusing on marginalised groups. This information will help policymakers make informed decisions and track progress.

Conclusion

Education is essential for the development of Nigeria. However, a massive deficit exists in the basic, secondary, and tertiary levels of education, leading to deepened inequality in access to educational opportunities. Despite numerous policies and commitments to equal access, more efforts are needed to address the bottlenecks that have prevented the realisation of these goals.

The Nigerian government must allocate more funds to the education sector and address issues like religious and cultural ideologies and corruption. Even more importantly, the government must adopt a data-driven model for planning, managing and monitoring the outcomes of education interventions (governmental and nongovernmental). This will ensure that children in underserved communities are not left behind, community-centric pedagogies are designed, needs-driven curriculums are developed and financial and infrastructural developments are accounted for.

Only through these efforts can Nigeria truly provide equal and free access to educational opportunities for all.

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