

THE DEFINING ROLE OF EDUCATION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION

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Introduction

Indeed my first message or task is to remind us of the invaluable and defining role of education, including in national development and regional integration. Secondly, I would paint a picture of the kind of education that is most beneficial and would be beneficial to the West African sub-region, and that should be the target of our policies and engagements.

As my third task, I would identify those challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of the realization of the desirable quality and type of education that could underpin our national development and regional integration. As my fourth endeavour I would offer some thoughts on what could be done to engage the education sector more effectively as an integral element of human development.

To my first point: a net experience of human society is that the nature of education, both formal and informal, that a people receives conditions the character, aspirations and vision of a nation. As individuals, we are all witnesses to, and beneficiaries of the importance of informal education, contextually often referred to as ‘upbringing’, ‘socialization’, encapsulating the informal acquisition of knowledge in a manner that defines the character of the individual. In its informal dimension, the role of parents, extended families and the larger society are important in conditioning the eventual character of the individual, based usually on the socio-cultural values and norms. Formal content of formal education is encapsulated in the teaching curricula, which is the product of relevant education policies and articulation of the formal education system principles.

The content of education, both formal and informal, and the values it inculcates equally determine the resilience of individuals and societies and their ability to adapt to evolving circumstances as well as the vagaries of national and international adversity. In other words, education determines our individual and collective shock absorbing capacities.

This educational foundation equally determines individual nations’ attitudes in the community of nations. A country whose education system is based on a clear set of national priorities has a proactive basis on which to predicate its relations and engagements with other countries and other parts of

the world. Conversely, a country with a dysfunctional educational system is intrinsically limited to reactive international engagements, driven by the priorities and dictates of other nations rather than by its own national agenda.

Regarding social development, education also brings significant social benefits, such as a decline in inequity in society. Education helps to decrease broad income inequalities, improve health indices, particularly of women who receive education in sexual and reproductive health. Again, higher levels of education are associated with declines in rates of reproduction, increase in family planning and the fight against deadly practices including female genital mutilation and other infringements on the rights of women. Therefore, education is important in achieving key social development indicators.

With particular regard to peace and security, it has been established that an increase in the proportion of the population with a secondary or higher education is critical to the prospects for addressing sustainably post-conflict contexts. This is demonstrably significant, given that Africa has a large and expanding secondary education age population. Currently about 46% of all Africans are aged between 5 and 25 years, with more than a quarter of these between 5-14 years of age. I am, at this point, reminded of the remarks by UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres in this message of International Youth day that "Governments must work with young people to successfully achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Empowered young men and women can play a critical role in preventing conflicts and ensuring sustainable peace."

The relevant question at this juncture, and which takes me to **my second point, is what is the kind of education that is needed to respond to national and regional challenges in West Africa?** Firstly, from a regional perspective, it would be important to place national educational policies and strategies within a broader West African framework especially in addressing those challenges which are best tackled with regional approaches. For example, we are today confronted with regional challenges of transhumance, violent extremism, illegal trafficking in so many areas, all these with a particular impact on girls across the sub-region. Effective collaboration will require a West African revision of regional educational vision and priorities to uplift the quality of life of its people and overcome various obstacles to development and varied threats to national and regional peace and stability. Such a regional educational policy framework is essential if we are to be able to devise common solution to our common problems in this region, with implications for all other areas of human endeavour. Our collective regional thinking on education is a key element in our collective future.

At the level of national development and related to a common regional approach, we will require the type of education that aims at fighting against the ills of violence, corruption, kidnapping, vigilantism, poor governance, nepotism, unemployment and gender exclusion, among others. What this means is a partnership between formal and informal education. A viable education system cannot be the responsibility of teachers alone. We require an educational system that is based on a partnership between teachers and parents, and in which parents live up to their own share of these responsibilities despite the pressures of modern life.

We also need an educational system that responds to our socio-economic needs and enables our teeming youth population to be gainfully employed. Failure to develop effective educational strategies to provide the requisite skills and competencies to respond to economic opportunities for Africa's growing population could see the continent falling yet further behind other global regions. Two key issues arise in this regard.

Firstly, while primary education enables us to escape having an illiterate population, post-primary and higher education has become an essential ingredient for economic development in today's highly competitive digitalized global economy. Research of the World Bank Secondary Education and Training in Africa Programme indicates that for them to be economically competitive on the global scene, African countries must offer all school going-age children 8-9 years quality education with the possibility of a selective higher or further education. Similar studies have pointed to a clear link between higher levels of education and stronger economic performance and growth. For instance, one does not have to undertake to prove that there are generally direct links between the level of education and individual income; and that in this region, barring corruption and other crimes, those with secondary level education are more likely to improve their living conditions and respond more positively to efforts at poverty alleviation. This is because of the interconnectedness within the globalized economy makes human capital an increasingly critical factor for the achievement of effective trade and economic growth for the enhancement of employment opportunities. Clearly therefore, there is a direct link between the level of education and level of development. Primary education is at best necessary but certainly not sufficient in today's digitalized economy.

Secondly, this does not however mean that we are only in need of PhDs, which we understand as 'doctor of philosophy'. Truth be said, there is currently a mismatch between vocational demands and the education curriculum. Educational institutions need to update their curricula to align with the direction in which the world and Africa are going. We need an up-to-

date, context-relevant educational system that allows us to play a meaningful role in the global economy, while meeting the employment needs of our citizens. In this regard, we need our technicians and craftsmen (and women), we need those with technical skills. This critical sector is the engine room of development. Yet, vocational and training programmes account for 10% of secondary-level enrolments in sub-Saharan Africa and is indicative of the deficit in relevant education. Consequently, limited attention is paid to the acquisition of key life-skills.

Let me therefore make bold to say that we need to recognize and prioritize a second cluster of PhDs: the ‘Productive Hands for Development (PHDs). These PhDs (Productive Hands for Development) which are often the result of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) can provide us the requisite expertise with which to more effectively participate in, and contribute to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterized by a fusion of technologies and technological breakthroughs in a number of fields, including information technology and artificial intelligence.

What then are the challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of a responsive and people-centred educational system that could be a vehicle for our advancement? This is the third issue I would like to address.

In this regard, I must confess my sympathy with the concept note for this event that was earlier shared with me. The references to the deteriorating quality of, and lack of equitable access to education, the widespread decline in the quality of teachers and the paucity of much-needed funding to this important sector are sad reminders of some the key challenges to the education sector. This is also an existential challenge for teachers, and teaching has increasingly become a profession for heroes and heroines, In Nigeria, at least 611 teachers were deliberately killed and 19,000 forced to flee between 2009 and 2015.

A keen observer of the education sector would be concerned with an emerging trend of dichotomies. The first dichotomy is between the focus of many West African governments on UPE on the one hand, and the demands of today’s modern economy the specialization that only post-secondary education can provide. In the final analysis, the balance between UPE and the need for advanced and specialized education has to be struck based on the specificities of each country. The second discernible dichotomy in the education is between the public and private sectors. Public schools have become the only inevitable resort of the poor and under-privileged while private schools have become the

exclusive preserve of the rich. The former responds to the imperatives of quantity, while the latter responds to the demand for quality. This dichotomy between education for the rich and education for the poor is responsible for a broader polarization of society, devoid of a meeting point between rich and poor. Experience has shown that polarization, whether economic, social or political, is a root cause of conflict.

Many have also highlighted the decline in the funding of education, as a proportion of total GDP. Linked to this is the decline in the quality of education infrastructure and standards, including of teachers. On deeper reflection however, the apparent 'misfortunes' of the education sector reflect a more deep-seated and fundamental change in approach to the role of education in development. Once an indispensable and urgent requirement and a public good essential for socio-economic advancement, education has become increasingly a mere commodity, not to be provided, but to be afforded. In this regard, many West African states have not recovered from, and have continued on the path of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s. In reaction to the declining quality of education, there has educational partnerships have declined, as well as the training of teachers.

I have been severally reminded that these challenges owe their origins or at least their exacerbation to several historical factors, especially colonization and the consequent existence of three different linguistic and education traditions: anglophone, francophone and lusophone systems. However, after six decades of independence, these can be easily be, and often are used as an excuse for inaction. We must take responsibility for own existence, and look to the future through our own eyes.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 of them in total, represent the UN's strategic policy framework for addressing the issues of human development in a holistic and sustainable manner. While SDG4 is dedicated to education, to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all', it also noteworthy that SDG4 directly enhances the prospects for virtually all other SDGs, including poverty reduction and reduced inequalities, health and nutrition, economic growth and labour market opportunities, as well as peacebuilding and the promotion of democratic institutions. For the United Nations, education is a catalyst to meeting many of the most important development challenges that exist today. **My first recommendation is therefore a call for more dedicated and context-specific application of the SDG4.** In this call for inclusive and equitable education, we should be reminded of the young African women. As the UN Secretary-General has noted, "one third of African youth are unemployed and discouraged; another third are vulnerably employed

or in low-value jobs in the informal sector. This reinforces poverty and inequality.

Young African women are even worse off. It is estimated that gender gaps in the labour force cost Africa US\$105 billion in 2014 alone". Girls have been most affected and far less likely to complete education at both primary and secondary education, with an average Gender Parity Index in school-level education of 0.78 in Africa (compared to 0.94 in developing countries, and 1.01 in developed countries).

Secondly, I believe that we need to re-think the role of education in West African societies. While the need for efficiencies cannot be denied, it is also not, given our stage of development, a viable approach to approach education merely as a commodity. Otherwise, poor citizens have little chance of benefiting from the entire array of human development, and poor countries are confined to marginal roles in the global system of production and exchange.

Thirdly, we must create incentives for teachers to work in the most underprivileged geographical areas and provide opportunities for in-service training, such as state-funded distance-learning and exchange programmes. We must take deliberate steps to employ some of the best graduates as teachers, with accompanying remuneration packages. Such a new incentive regime would not only help to retain the most qualified teachers, it would also address the frequent disputes between universities and governments, often caused by poor conditions of service.

Fourthly, there is need for better partnership in public and private sector investments in education. Until 1990 it was not possible to register a private university in much of Africa. Things have now changed. And that is an indication of an appropriate response to real needs, as well as improvement in some local capacity to offer such services. Yet, enormous challenges exist. Mutual suspicions linger on, and better understanding of each other is required. Some of the complaints involve unreceptive attitudes of national registration agencies and visiting inspectors as well as outright obstruction and other forms of subtle opposition.

Private higher institutions have been small scale and operate under economies of scale, have limited number of courses and curricula often based on the arts and inexpensive courses needing little logistical input. They often attract those who did not secure admission in public universities and are often perceived as being of a lesser status and quality; they lack the incentives, bursaries and scholarships enjoyed by their public counterparts as well as the

unavailability of bursaries in private higher education, and relatively generous schemes for public students.

There is also the need for West African countries to strengthen the partnerships with international organizations. These partnerships declined in 1970s-1990s. The revival of exchange programmes and joint research first among West African universities and then with their counterparts in other parts of the world is necessary for the attainment of our educational objectives.

We also need to pay better attention to the establishment of more effective regulatory and oversight regimes which protects students and ensures adequate standards of education. Codes of conduct for teachers should not only exist, but should be enforced. Conversely, teachers need to be protected from recalcitrant and sometimes violent students. The several reported cases of cultism need to be dealt with more effectively, and beyond exclusively punitive methods, more holistic approach is necessary. The measures should also include strengthening schemes of decentralization and community involvement whereby not only states, but also local and district assemblies have education departments that assume supervisory and oversight functions and responsibilities. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) could also be assisted in their advocacy to encourage dialogue between parents and teachers and to raise awareness of existing and possible resources that are available to support education.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by reminding us that success in revamping the education sector should be driven by courage and vision, as the benefits of educational investments at the national and regional levels are neither immediate nor always physically visible. In a nutshell, we need education systems to cater for all, including female students and vulnerable groups such as the vulnerable and IDPs and disabled; we look forward to education systems that unites not only the peoples of respective countries, but also the countries of the West African sub-region. We call for qualitative education that enables us to compete favourably in the global economy, while promoting a culture of peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need education that produces jobs, we need teachers who can teach, and professors who can profess. This is indeed a long list of wishes from a non-expert. So it is at this juncture that I hand over to you as the experts in this important area as you discuss the intricacies and realities of this important subject.

Ladies and gentlemen, before I depart therefore, let allow me to do so on a matter which is closer to my current occupation, the matter of elections in

this great country. Allow me therefore to take advantage of this platform to reaffirm the joint call the president of the ECOWAS Commission and I made yesterday.

On behalf of the United Nations, I would like to once again congratulate all designated flagbearers and wish them successful electoral campaigns. I would equally like to remind them of their ensuing responsibility and entreat them to ensure violence-free election by conducting campaigns devoid of hate speech, any action that might lead to violence or any disruption of the electoral process. I also plead with them to conduct issues-based campaigns.