

Private Sector Participation in Basic Education in Nigeria: Implications for Access and Quality Assurance

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Abstract: Quality basic education is the cornerstone for sustainable socio-economic development of a nation. The launching of the Universal Basic Education Programme by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the 30th September 1999 is a clear evidence of the nation's commitment to the Jomtien declaration on the move towards a drastic reduction of illiteracy within the shortest time frame. Nigeria is committed to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in achieving Universal Basic Education by 2015. Records however, showed that before the launch of the UBE programme in 1999, the transition rate from primary school to junior secondary school was 43.7%. This implies that 56.3% primary school pupils may likely grow into adulthood as illiterates. In recent times, the demand for education is on the increase in view of the increased consciousness about the role of education in enhancing upward socio-economic mobility. At the same time, sectoral competition for the nation's meagre resources is on the increase. Consequently, the government alone cannot meet the masses' need for quality basic education. Therefore, private sector participation in the ownership and control of schools is inevitable as complimentary to government efforts. The implications of this on access to basic education and quality assurance are notable. Private sector initiatives in the provision of basic education should therefore be properly coordinated through effective monitoring and supervision for quality assurance. This will enable the country to reach the goal of achieving quality Universal Basic Education in 2015.

Key words: Basic education, private sector, access, quality assurance, monitoring, supervision

INTRODUCTION

Education is a vital prerequisite for combating poverty and empowering the citizens of a country. Education not only opens the land in terms of resource development, it also opens people's mind to freedom. Quality basic education is the bedrock for sustainable socio-economic development of a nation.

The achievement of Universal Primary Education has long been a goal of the Nigeria government. The launching of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the 30th September, 1999 is a clear indication of the country's commitment to achieving universal access to basic education, which includes the three years of Junior Secondary School. In April 2000, the Dakar World Education Forum adopted a new set of goals for achievement by 2015, "as part of a renewed drive to make the right to education a reality for the millions of children still deprived of schooling" (FOS/ILO/SIMPOC 2000/2001). Nigeria is committed to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in achieving Universal Basic Education by 2015.

Data from UNESCO/Federal Ministry of Education (2003) showed that the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER), (Table 1) which is an indicator of the general level of participation in primary education ranged between 79% in 1991 to 93% in 2001.

This rate fell to 88% in 2003 (Bregman, 2005). Bregman further reported that from the net enrolment ratio, 60% of primary school age (6-11 years) were in school, implying that 40% are out of school.

Fabunmi *et al.* (2004) reported that the transition rate from primary schools to junior secondary schools is 43.7%. This implies that 56.3% of those in the nation's primary schools today are likely to grow into adulthood as illiterates. National Population Commission (Nigeria) and ORC Marco (2004) reported that about 70% of youths either attended school in 2003-2004 or previously while about 28% of youth age 5-24 never attended school. The report added that the percentage of school-age children who have never attended school is highest from age 5-8 (falling from 53-29%). In addition, according to the report, among youths aged 9-24, the percentage of children who have never attended school ranges from 28-11%.

Table 1: Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in Primary Schools in Nigeria (1991-2001)

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
GER (%)	79	83	86	86	81	70	71	76	92	95	93

Source: UNESCO/FME (2003)

In spite of government's commitment to the provision of basic education for all, dwindling financial resources coupled with sectoral competition for resources may hinder its progress. According to Hallak (1990),

Successive waves of economic and educational crisis affected the efforts of governments and social demand for education so that both the general tensions in the development of education and the imbalances that had emerged in the previous two decades were aggravated.

In view of the foregoing, the government alone may not be able to meet the social demand for quality basic education. Therefore, private sector participation in the ownership and control of schools is inevitable as complimentary to government efforts. What then are the implications of private sector initiatives in the provision of basic education for access and quality assurance? This question and other related issues will be addressed in this study.

PRIVATE SECTOR PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENT

The early years of western education in Nigeria will serve as a useful guide to examine the trend in the proprietorship of educational institutions in Nigeria. The Education Sector Analysis (2003) identified four non-mutually exclusive periods under which the development in school ownership may be considered. These are:

- Missionary monopoly and control era (1884-1904). This period was characterized by total ownership of schools by religious or church groups, which took the initiative in different parts of the country.
- Dual ownership and control era (1904-1970). This period was an offshoot of the 1887 Education Code, which led to the existence of government and Voluntary Agency schools operating simultaneously.
- Government dominance and take-over of schools era (1970-1985). Government dominance and complete take over of schools was formalized by the "School Take-Over Validation Decree" No 41 of 1977.
- Return of mission schools/partnership era (1985-2002). The deplorable infrastructural state of public schools coupled with seemingly dwindling quality of instruction in such schools ignited a kind of

disillusionment with the public schools. There was thus more pressure on the government to allow parents and students to have some choice in laying a solid foundation for their future through virile education enterprise. In the 1980s, the government succumbed to pressures to allow private schools to exist side by side with public schools.

In recent times, the observed crisis on educational priorities coupled with observed waste in public enterprise might have called for economic reforms in the country. The privatization of virtually all sectors of the Nigeria economy has become the order of the day. Perhaps it is in line with this new move that private schools have been on the increase to complement government efforts.

PRIVATE SECTOR PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS TO BASIC EDUCATION

There has been an improvement in the number and enrolment of students in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) in Nigeria consequent upon the implementation of the UBE programme. Data from UNESCO/FME (2003) showed that the number of primary schools increased from 49,326 in 1999 to 50, 518 (2.4% increase) in 2002, while primary school pupil enrolment increased from 17, 907, 010 in 1999 to 19, 342, 659 (8% increase) in 2002. The data also showed that enrolment in JSS increased from 708, 523 in 1999 to 941, 844 (34% increase) in 2002.

Access to basic education refers to the extent to which the basic "school-age" population (6-14years) is able to access basic education. One of the indicators of general level of access to education is the Gross Intake Rate (GIR). Data from UNESCO/FME (2003) showed that the GIR of primary education increased from 81% in 1999 to 103% in 2002. This may perhaps be due to increased government effort at mobilizing for attendance. However the GIR in JSS was still low, ranging from 26.1% in 1999 to 30% in 2002 (Table 2).

This implies that the general level of access to and participation in the second level of basic education (JSS) is still low.

The rationale behind government's involvement in the ownership and control of educational institutions is to make education available and affordable to a greater majority of the populace. The present demand for

Table 2: Gross Intake Rate (GIR) in Junior Secondary Schools in Nigeria (1991-2002)

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
GIR (%)	29.1	32.4	36.2	37.2	32.4	27.9	24.7	24.0	26.1	28.0	31.0	30.0

Source: UNESCO/FME (2003)

education has obviously outstripped government's ability and capacity to provide infrastructure at all levels of education. This has affected the quality of education service provided at the various levels. Many parents and guardians are therefore very eager to patronize private schools where they believe that their children and wards would be able to obtain quality education.

A pertinent question to ask is why should the private sector be involved in education which has already been considered as a central part of governments' responsibility? It may perhaps be because of the tendency for the private sector "to promote innovation and experimentation: The preoccupation with costs and benefits and with value with a concern for accountability; with knowledge of customers and optimal use of assets..." (Charles, 2002). He added that:

...private sector operations are more often than not infused with an overriding concern for standards... The discipline of the market has engendered within the private sector; a sense of urgency for pursuing and attaining results... The public sector tends to be a bit more settled in its ways... to be conservative in a manner that suggests reluctance to shift paradigms and to consider new solutions.

Private sector participation in the provision of education services no doubt has a link with the need for allocative efficiency. This involves the judicious use of scarce public sector resources. As noted earlier, the main focus of private provision of education in recent times is profit motive. This has serious implications for the polity. Perhaps this is why Fashina (2001) pointed out in clear terms that "the goal of education (service) is not to promote the profit motive; it is not to expand the scope of the market system..."

One basic implication of unbridled private sector provision of education services is in the area of affordability by most Nigerians who live below the poverty line. In recent times and in this era of privatization and overt private sector "take over" of schools some parents have been forced by the deplorable quality in public schools to patronize private schools. Without any doubt, only an insignificant proportion of Nigerians can afford private schools "that are even marginally credible as they have to spend upwards of N100, 000 per student per year" (Olorode, 2001). The Punch of November 10,

2005 reported that fees charged by elite schools in Nigeria ranged between ₦345, 000 to \$10, 000 per session (for day students) and between ₦585, 000 to \$17, 000 per session (for boarders).

According to Ekaguere (2003) access to primary education has been found to be very poor. The family economic background of primary school pupils showed that:

83.1 percent six-year olds were from rich households, 54.4 percent of six-year olds from middle-income households and only 21.1 percent of six-year olds from poor households were enrolled (Ekaguere, 2003).

The above implies that middle income and rich families were more likely to send their children to school than poor families (Ehiametalor, 2005).

The foregoing corroborates the view that finance is a key problem hindering access to education. According to Fagbamiye (2005) the proliferation of private schools is not likely to enhance access in Nigerian schools since admission is a function of the ability of parents to pay the fees, thus excluding those who cannot afford the tuition fees.

Ehiametalor (2005) reported that about 70.2% Nigerians are poor. By implication, this proportion may not be able to send their children to elementary school. It is equally pertinent to note that, according to the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme-UNDP (2005), 70.2% of Nigeria's 130 million people live on less than 1 dollar (N140) per day. This implies that at the current level of Nigeria's population of over 126 million people, about 89 million people live in abject poverty thus making the country a nation with the highest concentration of people living in extreme poverty (Mohammed, 2004).

In as much as the private sector participation in the provision of basic education may mean more opportunity in terms of supply, the issue of high cost of attending private schools has the tendency to limit access. This is more so considering the high-income inequality in the country, especially against the rural populace.

PRIVATE SECTOR PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE

According to Fabunmi (2002), most third world countries may not be able to provide education for all

their citizens because of overt lack of resources and the political leadership to do so. He added that two options face these poor nations:

- * To provide high quality education to a few, or
- * To play down quality of education and provide large quantity of it to an increasing percentage of the citizens

Bregman (2005) reported that although Nigeria is making progress, quality of primary education is insufficient for basic life skills and knowledge. He added that the several quality assurance issues involved include relevance of learning, school infrastructure, large class sizes, limited pupil/teacher contact hours, high pupil/teacher ratios, lack of teaching/learning materials and equipment and widespread use of unqualified teachers.

It should be stressed, however, that private and government investments in education call for accountability. For instance, parents are increasingly demanding education that meets the needs, yearnings and aspirations of their children. In the same vein, all stake holders and taxpayers are becoming more interested in what becomes of the proportion of the nation's resources allocated to the education sector as well as the quality of output. By implication, whatever goes on in the process of producing quality student output is of paramount importance. Thus the need for quality assurance is imperative.

Quality remains the most important attribute that creates value about the product/ service for the receiver. Quality assurance in basic education should embrace all its functions and activities that will ensure that quality of the academic (teaching, curriculum etc.) and structural (buildings, infrastructures etc.) and will allow an objective review of the quality of the programme/instructional delivery.

According to Fadipe (1999) efficiency can be regarded as a product of good quality education. The relationship between quality assurance and efficient UBE programme can thus be functionally expressed as follows:

$$EU = f(QA)$$

Where:

EU = Efficient Universal Basic Education and

QA = Quality Assurance

By implication an efficient and functional UBE programme depends on in-built quality assurance mechanism in the system.

Adepoju (2002) identified certain parameters, which can be used to assess quality Basic Education. These parameters have been used to raise some fundamental questions relating to quality assurance.

Teaching personnel:

- What is the quality of teaching personnel in terms of their training and qualifications?
- Are there any specialties among the teachers?

Teaching materials and equipment:

- What is the quality of the available instructional facilities such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories and other physical structures?
- Is the school environment child-friendly and conducive for teaching and learning?

Content of instruction and curriculum:

- What is the quality of curriculum delivery in terms of teacher effectiveness, staff motivation, pupil-teacher interaction, relevance and use of teaching aids?
- How relevant and related is the content to the needs of the pupils?

Pupil/students input:

- What is the quality of pupils / students as input?
- Is the class size large or small vis-a -vis the national standards?
- Is the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in line with national standards?
- To what extent are teachers overworked?

Textbooks:

- Are the recommended textbooks available for the pupils/students?
- What is the quality of the recommended textbooks?

Teaching techniques:

- To what extent are modern teaching techniques or technologies (such as the use of television, radio, team teaching, computers and individualized instruction) in place?
- What is the size of pupil/teacher contact hours?

Monitoring, supervision and evaluation system:

- How regular is the monitoring and supervision of instructional delivery?
- What is the quality of the monitoring, supervision and evaluation activities?
- Is data keeping being done effectively and consistently?

Leadership/organization structure:

- What is the quality of the leadership?
- What is the channel of communication between the head and the staff and between the head and the learners?
- What is the level of discipline among staff and students?
- Is there any noticeable working relationship among staff?

School environment:

- Is the environment clean or not?
- What is the aesthetic nature of the school?
- Is there adequate space for sporting and recreation activities?

Funding:

- Are educational programmes and activities adequately financed?

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study assessed the implications of private sector participation in the provision of basic education since the government alone cannot provide the needed quality education for Nigerians. It should be noted, that uncoordinated private sector participation in the ownership and control of schools has far-reaching implications for access and quality assurance. The objectives of the Universal Basic Education cannot be adequately realized if only a minority of students have access to quality education. However, through well guided, synchronized and articulated private sector initiative, the highest quality basic education can be attained. In view of this, the following recommendations are necessary:

- Economic empowerment of households to compliment government efforts in the provision of basic education for their members.
- Policy trusts aimed at improving the effectiveness and quality of service of private sector initiatives should be vigorously implemented.
- Approval of private schools should be painstakingly embarked upon based on laid down criteria. In addition, all unregistered (and unapproved) schools should not be allowed to operate.
- Efforts should be made to promote cooperation between private and public sectors in the provision of quality basic education services.

- The government should improve on the funding of education in order to upgrade and expand education facilities.

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