

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper is on sustainable education in the era of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria: Issues, challenges and way forward. The paper looks at the concept of COVID-19 pandemic, its devastating effect and the negative impact on sustainable education on a global scale. The paper examines the concept of sustainable education, COVID-19 pandemic and sustainable education: Issues and challenges, way forward in challenging the challenges of education in Nigeria in a pandemic era, proffering suggestions that could improve educational delivery in Nigeria in pandemic era.

Key words: COVID-19, pandemic, sustainable education, remote teaching and learning.

Introduction

The year 2020 was marked by the massive Coronavirus otherwise referred to as COVID-19 pandemic, a global health crisis that cut across boundaries, aggravating deeply interrelated crisis that shut down the whole world as had never been witnessed in history. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2019), COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus. WHO first learned of this new virus on 31 December 2019, following a report of a cluster of cases of 'viral pneumonia' in Wuhan, People's Republic of China. COVID-19 was declared by The World Health Organization as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. According to the report **pandemic** is a disease outbreak that spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic

when it became clear that the illness was severe and that it was spreading quickly over a wide area.

It is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is going through rough times, with the upsurge of COVID-19 pandemic contributing to the already bad situation of high rate of unemployment, poverty, insecurity and economic challenges prevalent across the country. This phenomenon has affected personal and professional lives of millions of people, including students, educators and researchers. The education sector is the worst hit. Consequently, there are lots of challenges facing education, instructors, institutional heads, and policy makers to grapple with delivery of quality teaching and learning. As a coping strategy for the unexpected global calamity, many countries implemented temporary measures to slow down the spread of the virus. These measures include closing public institutions and schools. As of August, 2020,

more than one billion learners were affected by the closure of schools, training institutions and universities, with nationwide closure effective in over 100 countries of the world including Nigeria (UNESCO, 2020).

The nationwide school closures occasioned by the pandemic as well as the elongated strike action by Academic Staff Union of Universities greatly disrupted learning and access to teaching and learning services for students in Nigeria especially at the tertiary level. According to UNESCO, almost forty million learners have been affected by the nationwide school closures in Nigeria, of which over 91% are tertiary education learners. In a short time, COVID-19 has disrupted the landscape of learning in Nigeria by limiting how students can access learning across the country. For an already fragile education system, the COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges on the government, students, and parents that could amplify some of the cracks in the system. As a result, education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms.

As the nation begins to grapple with these challenges, a key question arises: Is the Nigerian education system designed to adapt rapidly to the changing world in terms of skilled personnel, infrastructural facilities, institutional readiness? Given the state of affairs in the world today, the nation's ability to ensure continuation of learning will depend largely on her ability to swiftly harness available technology, provide adequate infrastructure, and mobilize stakeholders to prepare alternative learning programmes aimed at

achieving sustainable education. This Conference Theme titled: "Sustainable education in the era of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria: Issues, challenges and prospects" is quite apt and could not have come at a more auspicious time than now.

Concept of sustainable education

Education constitutes the very foundation of meaningful socio-economic, political growth and development of any nation. No wonder the federal Government of Nigeria adopted education as an instrument par excellence for affecting national development and social change (FRN, 2013). Education is globally acclaimed as the bedrock of sustainable development. According to Adelabu in Aju and Karim (2016), education provides individuals with opportunity for self-improvement, as well as the inculcation and sustenance of basic and positive life skills. These could be achieved both in the formal and non-formal system of education. Education enhances freedom of interaction among members of the societies and also develops the society through modernization. It empowers the individual and also helps every member of the society to appreciate the quality and value of life, thereby leading to the achievement of independence.

Education is conceptualized in diverse terms as the authors are diverse. In one sense it is thought of as a process through which plans are made for the impartation of knowledge and transmission of societal value. In this regard, the Federal Republic of Nigeria in her National Policy on Education stated one of the goals of education as the development of appropriate skills, mental, physical and social abilities and competencies to empower the individual to live in and contribute

positively to the society (FRN, 2013). Aristotle, the great western philosopher said that Education is the creation of a sound mind in a sound body. It develops man's faculty, especially his mind so that he may be able to enjoy the contemplation of supreme truth, goodness and beauty of which perfect happiness essentially consists. Education as a discipline is concerned with methods of imparting and acquisition of knowledge in schools or school-like environments. In the view of Chukwurah (2013), education is seen as a life-long process through which individuals acquire relevant knowledge, skills, and values that enable them to become useful to themselves and to the society in which they live. It is pertinent to state here that education is a basic necessity of life as well as an important criterion for effecting changes in the individual and the society. Education in this context is the process that facilitates the impartation and acquisition of knowledge, skills, values and attitude for the total development of an individual into a functional citizen. Therefore, education must be sustainable. Sustainable education is the type of education learning that emphasizes acquisition of knowledge, skills and values needed to maintain and improve the quality life for the people, for the present and the future generations. Sustainable education implies finding long-lasting solutions to societal problems through education with regard to social, environmental, and economic issues which are globally acknowledged as the three pillars of sustainability (UNESCO, 2019, IGI 2021). It involves active academic participation to create economic, social and environmental programmes for the improvement of life standards, creating empowerment and respecting interdependence. Sustainable education also involves training and

educating individuals on sustainable practices and development. In this regard, sustainable education is seen as the type of educational learning that emphasizes acquisition of knowledge, skills and values needed to maintain and improve the quality of life for the people in the present and the future generations. Sustainable education for what it stands for must be vocational in content, principles and practice. According to Sterling (2008) sustainable education is education that is inclusive of four descriptors, namely: Educational policy and practice which is sustaining, tenable, healthy and durable.

- (a) **Sustaining:** This implies that education helps to sustain people, communities and ecosystems.
- (b) **Tenable:** This means that education is ethically defensible, working with integrity, justice, respect and inclusiveness.
- (c) **Healthy:** This emphasizes that the education itself is a viable system that embodies and nurtures healthy relationships and emergence at different system levels.
- (d) **Durable:** The emphasis here is on the workability of education. It implies that education works well enough in practice to be able to keep doing it.

Therefore, as stakeholder in education, our collective interest should focus on education itself – its paradigms, policies, purposes and practices as well as its adequacy for the era in which we find ourselves.

Sustainable education also requires collaborative teaching and learning methods that increase learners' motivation and empower them to change their behaviour, taking action for sustainable development. Collaborative learning

is an educational approach to teaching and learning, involving groups of learners that work together with a view to finding a solution to an identified problem, accomplish a task, create a product or provide valuable service or services. Nwosu and Okoro (2020) asserted that collaborative learning brings a group of students together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product.

It is incumbent on all stakeholders in education to pay greater attention to educating the citizens for sustainable development. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014), education for sustainable development allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitude and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. It implies the inclusion of key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; climate change, risk reduction, poverty reduction, biodiversity and sustainable consumption. The report pointed that while we can draw upon experiences of the past to solve the problems of today and tomorrow, the reality is that citizens of the world will have the task of learning their way towards sustainability. Consequently, sustainable education promotes competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and making decisions in collaborative way. Education is therefore central to learning and to a more sustainable future.

COVID-19 Pandemic and sustainable education: Issues and challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the inequities that exist within and between communities, providing a challenge for remote education to reach everyone, as well as an opportunity to bridge the divides that exist by addressing them head-on in the re-imaged

education system we are in the midst of creating. A new global education system, leveraging ICT for knowledge and skills-development, has the potential to close intra- and international achievement and well-being gaps, as well as to advance the understanding and implementation of education as life-long learning for all of society. This has given rise to several challenging issues:

- 1. Funding:** Funding is a fundamental criterion that is pivotal to the achievement of educational objectives. The implementation of any educational programme will be a fallacy without adequate funding. Funding according to Nwafor, Uchendu and Akani, (2015) is a form of financial that is given for the achievement of a Project. In this context, funding simply means the consistent and adequate provision of money or other financial resources needed to execute educational projects or a programmes. Funding of education is globally acknowledged as a crucial factor in the implementation of educational programmes. It is based on this premise that UNESCO recommended that 26% of the annual budget of any nation should be allocated to the educational sector (Okute & Chukwurah, 2011). However, the government of Nigeria has not been living up to her responsibility in this direction as the trends in annual budgetary allocation would show. For instance, a three-year trend indicated in Table 1 shows that the budgetary allocation to education has been dwindling.

Table 1. Federal Government Allocation to Education from 2016 – 2018 in Naira

Year	Total Budget	Total Allocation to Education	Education % of total Budget
2016	6,060,677,357,227	450,278,314,660	7.92
2017	7,441,175,486,758	550,507,184,148	7.40
2018	8,600,000,000,000	605,800,000,000	7.04

Source: Elogbo (2020)

2. **Digital exclusion:** The onset on the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the digital exclusion of the vulnerable group. The implication is that children in rural and underserved communities in Nigeria are being left behind as they are not equipped to adapt or transition to new methods of learning, whereas the children of the rich who have access to digital technologies and resources that keep them busy at their study at home. The pandemic has unmasked substantial inequities in the education sector. Private and non-governmental sectors are tirelessly working to salvage this situation. Public institutions of learning and those who patronize them are the worst hit. In the first instance, the curriculum designed for the conventional classroom cannot be automatically adapted to the online delivery of instruction without a review. Secondly, Institutional readiness in terms of infrastructural facilities and competent online instructors is an issue to grapple with. Thirdly, affordability of technological gadgets to support online learning by students is an exclusive reserve of the few privileged while majority of the students who cannot afford the facilities and digitally excluded. Fourthly, there is no policy framework for developing a platform that enable different categories of learners to be exposed to the learning experiences appropriate to their levels and needs. All of these combine to render the e-learning adoption and adaptation without adequate preparation a mockery.
3. **High level of poverty:** The high level of poverty among Nigerians has denied some children access to quality education. Nigeria has overtaken India, effective from June, 2018, as the *World's Poverty Capital* (Inyang-Abia, 2018). This is a great threat to education. With a poverty rate of 61% (majorly caused by low economic growth performance, high crime rate and violence, weak government, high incidence of poor health, diseases and debt burden) and insensitive political nuances tainted with plundering, corruption and impunity, one would wonder if the government cares what happens to education. No wonder then that the declaration that "The Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for national development" in the previous editions of the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1977, 1981, 1998 and 2004) has been carefully removed from the 2013 edition. According to a 2019 Executive Summary on Poverty and Inequality by the National Bureau of Statistics, 40.1% of the population in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and the largest producer of oil in Africa, is classified as poor. That is, on average, four out of 10 Nigerians has per capita expenditure below

\$400. A UNICEF report states that 10.5 million of the country's children aged 5-14 years are not in school. Only 61% of 6 to 11-year-olds regularly attend primary school. Some states in the north east and north west of the country have more than half of the girls not enrolled in schools as marginalization ensures that girls are deprived of basic education. Education, instead of being the right of every child, has become the exclusive right of a few privileged group. This is a great source of worry.

4. **Insecurity:** Although there has been security challenges threatening Nigeria prior to the pandemic, it has been aggravated with the onset of COVID -19 pandemic. As schools are grappling with resumption, the security challenges of kidnapping, children or students disappearance, killing are prevalent.
5. **Dilapidated infrastructural facilities:** After about ten months of school closure, there were no preparations put in the to welcome students back. Although some Vice Chancellors, Provosts of Colleges, Head Teachers among others, tried to put some measures in place to check the spread of the pandemic the facilities on ground had decayed and some vandalized during the EndSars protest. There is need to renovate the existing structures and facilities.
6. **Falsification of quality assurance indices:** Quality assurance is the planned and systematic activities that are implemented in a system to ensure that required quality of product or service is met. The quality of education is measured by the quality of output, that is, the products of educational programme. This index of measurement of quality of education has been comprised by

the emphasis on paper qualification and grade rather than the capacity and ability to perform and unfortunately, some stakeholders are involved in perpetuating this evil. They do this by encouraging examination malpractices, money or sex for grades, godfatherism among others. Supervision of educational/instructional programmes is one of the indices to measure the quality of education, but gone are the days when inspectors and supervisors visit schools to assess the quality of performance. Programme accreditation is a process of external assessment of the quality of programme, personnel and facilities needed for quality delivery of educational mandate by tertiary institutions as prescribed by the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Council for Colleges of Education (NCCE), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) and other supervisory agencies. It is unfortunate that this instrument (accreditation process) has also been compromised as it is now characterized with window-dressing. This gives room for falsification of accreditation result with its attendant implication for quality assurance.

7. **Political interference in education.** Lack of exercise of integrity in the recruitment of staff, admission process, and provision of needed facilities, most of which are politically manipulated also contribute to the problem of education in Nigeria.

Challenging the challenges of educational system in Nigeria: The way forward

It does appear that the issues and problems plaguing the Nigerian educational system are insurmountable. Yet there is hope. It requires the

will power and the sacrifice of the stakeholders to redress the situation. The following are recommended suggestions.

1. Utilization of remote teaching and learning:

One of the ways to tackle the problem and bridge the gap of disruption in the academic calendar of tertiary institutions is to adopt remote teaching strategy. Remote teaching is a kind of teaching that occurs outside the conventional classroom in a situation where the teacher and students are far apart or separated by distance and/or time. Remote teaching and learning involves the application of social media and technologies such as video conferencing (Zoom, Skype, UberConference, etc) Google Hangouts, Google Drive, YouTube, WhatsApp and other social media facilities to engage students in remote locations. Remote instruction is not only changing the entire landscape of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions but it is also poised to influence the entire education system throughout the world. Selwyn (2016) added that remote teaching is an example of what is now called “genuine disruption,” that is, using technology to do fundamentally different things. Any resistance to adapt to the use of technology now renders the individual irrelevant.

2. Digital inclusiveness/Adaptation: It is no longer contestable that the digital era in which we find ourselves has naturally compelled everyone to be digitally inclusive or be left behind by the voyage of digital explosion. The exponential advancement in technology is paving the way to a paperless world. There is need to match education with future occupations. Educational offering

should be designed to equip the learner with 21st century skills. We as stakeholders must take the lead by adapting to the new normal and be globally connected to deliver our mandate as facilitators of learning. This can be achieved by utilizing the opportunity of online training and skill/retooling, knowledge upgrade pedagogical adaptation to integrate digital technologies into the teaching and learning process. There is need to match educational delivery with future occupations. The exponential growth in technology is paving the way to a paperless world. Educational delivery should be adapted to prepare learners for the job of the future.

3. Alternative Sources of Funding: TETFund, grants, school fees, Alumni, Public-Private partnership, donor agencies, non-governmental organizations, proceeds from businesses operating in institutions of learning etc are sources of alternative funding that should be harnessed for education.

4. Government Funding: The government is one of the major sponsors of education in most countries of the world. Funding of public schools is one of the major functions of the government (Hall, 2013). This is done through the preparation of annual budget for meeting the needs of the various sectors of the economy including education. Similarly, supplementary budget is usually prepared by government to take care of financial inadequacies in the education sector. The various levels of government; local, state and federal are partakers in the funding of the education sector (Hall, 2013). Stakeholders should ensure that the government is pressurized to play its part.

5. Strengthening accreditation process:

Those who are charged with the responsibility of accreditation should have the will power to impress on the institutions to put the required personnel, programmes and facilities in place before granting approval for the accreditation of such programmes. The issue of window-dressing for accreditation has done a lot harm to the quality of programmes because after accreditation, the borrowed items and the borrowed personnel are returned and the programmes return to the status quo.

6. Security consciousness: One of the cardinal responsibilities of any government to her citizens is the protection of life and property. The government should take drastic measures to combat the security challenges and create enabling environment for peaceful coexistence of citizens, thereby alleviating the security threat. Institutional heads, staff and students as well as stakeholders should be security conscious and adopt internal security measures like community vigilante` group in order to strengthen personal security, while the rest is left to God.**7. Reduction of absolute political interference:** It is a well known fact that he who feeds the piper dictates the tune. However, Educators are professionals who are worth their salt. They should not allow themselves to be used to destroy their very profession because of political interest, but should tell their political godfathers the true situation. Sometime they may listen and learn. It is ridiculous to appoint someone who has not attained the peak of educational attainment by rigorous training, research and community service to be appointed as

Chairman of Governing Council in any University to preside over Professors and intellectuals of substance. This author opines that henceforth, only those who have attained the rank of a Professor, and have been certified by Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) should be appointed as Chairmen of Governing Council of tertiary institutions. If this is done, it will be a contest of professionals taking the destiny of qualitative education in their hands.

Conclusion

Education is not only an instrument per excellence for national development, but also an important criterion in determining the national identity and a country's position on the global scale of civilization. From this perspective; education does not just confer some benefits on the individual but also on the community. Therefore, it is incumbent on the government and all the stakeholders to do everything possible to redeem the seeming destruction of education in Nigeria. Posterity will not forgive those who themselves benefitted from qualitative education, delivered by seasoned experts in Nigeria, gained scholarships/sponsorship from this same country, Nigeria to study abroad under perfect enabling environment, who have stake in the educational curricula design, implementation and quality assurance, but cannot replicate similar educational setting in which they studied here in Nigeria. Stakeholders should not fold their arms and sit on the fence while education system in Nigeria is gradually being destroyed. We all must be accountable to God for entrusting the young and less experienced to our care in order that they will be nurtured in character and learning, to become not just being employable but also to

become employers of labour. Therefore, there is urgent need for stakeholders to critically examine the issues at stake and chart a course for challenging the challenges of this societal monster using functional education and collaboration to equip the youth with functional knowledge, skills, attitude and values for sustainable technical and vocational education and training (TVET).

Suggestions

The following suggestions, if implemented, would go a long way to strengthening educational delivery that is sustainable:

1. The Federal Government should develop a sustainable framework for the adoption of e-learning at all levels of education in Nigeria. This framework should include the procurement and distribution of functional laptops to teachers, robust capacity building for lecturers provision of well equipped laboratories for practical skills acquisition.
2. Alternative source of funding education should be emphasized through collaboration with the private sector and donor agencies locally and internally.
3. The various levels of government (federal, state and local) should play their part by contributing their quota to sustainable through appropriate budgetary allocation.
4. Those charged with the Supervisory Agencies like the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Council for Colleges of Education (NCCE), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), Federal and State Ministries of Education, Education Boards, Local Education Authorities and all other supervisory agencies should ensure that educational standards are met by ensuring the

engagement of the right quality of staff, provision of facilities and adequate supervision of instructional delivery at all levels.

5. The federal government should take adequate steps to combat the security challenges ravaging the country, with its attendant negative impact on education.
6. Government should also ensure that educational matters are not politicized, as a nation with well educated citizens is likely to produce good leaders and followers.
7. Learners on their part should take advantage of available online facilities to enhance their knowledge and skills acquisition in order to align with the global workplace demand.

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